Questions & Responses

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:34:54

Welcome back, everyone. We'll begin again with about fifteen minutes of meditation, lightly guided, now that you're all meditative pros.

Take a comfortable, alert meditative posture. It's helpful to start with a couple of deep breaths to settle into the body, relaxing, softening the eyes and the shoulders, the chest and the belly.

Beginning again, if it's helpful, with that frame: there is a body. Feeling the body sitting. Sit and know you're sitting. Simply notice what's being known moment after moment. It might be sounds. It might be the sensations of the body breathing. Let the mind be receptive, just receiving whatever appears with clarity and with precision.

You might become aware of other bodily sensations. Sometimes they're quite predominant and they call the attention. Other times you could settle into the awareness of the whole body and just be receptive or open to whatever subtle sensations there may be throughout the body. Perhaps there's a sense of slight warmth or coolness, softness or tightness, maybe a subtle kind of vibration. There's no need to look for these sensations. Sometimes just sit in the awareness of the whole body and be receptive to whatever might show itself, whether very predominant or happening on a more subtle level.

Stay mindful and alert for whatever thoughts or images may appear in the mind. Sometimes thoughts or images slide in. They're not as impactful as a sensation or a sound, so often we miss the arising of them. Simply notice when in their process you become aware. Is it after it's over and you remember that it was there? Is it in the middle? Sometimes we do become aware of the thought or image just as it's arising. Simply notice this. See how the thoughts or images also arise and pass away, just like sounds.

Notice the quality of your mind, the mind state or the mood. Is one of the hindrances present? Is there boredom? Is there interest? Is the mind concentrated or restless? Just notice the basic quality of the mind, making that the object of mindfulness as well. These are also passing states, arising and passing just like thoughts, just like sounds.

Sometimes repeating the phrase in the mind—"there is a body"—just as a way of reminding yourself to settle back into the awareness of the whole body, the posture of the body sitting.

When you're ready, you can slowly open your eyes and become aware of seeing.

Before getting into the many interesting questions you sent in, I want to tell a little anecdote about the value of practicing being mindful of seeing, because it's not something that's talked about a lot. It actually can have tremendous benefit and implications for how we're living in the world.

This goes back quite a few years. I was on retreat at the retreat center at IMS, and I began to notice that whenever I would go into the dining room for one of the meals, my mind would simply have a comment or a judgment about everyone I saw. What they were wearing, how they were moving, they took too much food, they took too little food. It was ridiculous. But that's what my mind was doing.

As I saw this each time I would go into the dining room, at a certain point I became interested: Why is this? Why are these thoughts coming in the mind? They're so clearly useless. As I looked, I really learned something very important. All of those thoughts were arising because I was not being mindful of seeing. The seeing was happening, but I was not noting "seeing." Because of that contact with visible objects—namely all the other people in the room—that's what triggered, for whatever reason of conditioning, that whole plethora of thoughts.

It was amazing. As soon as I started noting "seeing," which I did then, as soon as I would go into the dining room, that's all I would note. I wouldn't note anything else.

Just seeing, seeing as I went for the food, seeing as I sat down at the table, seeing. It was amazing. It eliminated about 95% of all that useless mental activity.

And I realized, as I think I mentioned earlier, that for many of us—perhaps most of us—the predominant sense experience we're having is visual. It's like we're living in the world of what's being seen, for those of us who have eyes in working order. And yet we're not mindful of that, because it doesn't impact us in the same way as a sudden sound might, or a sensation. So we easily become unaware, not mindful of seeing. And then we're living in this world of what's being seen with all the automatic reactions to what's being seen. We're caught up in that cycle of reactivity.

The remedy is very simple, if we can remember to do it: just practice periodically. Whether in walking meditation or in your daily activities, periodically spend some time—even for a few minutes at a time—reinforcing the noting: seeing, seeing, seeing. We're becoming more conscious of this very predominant sense experience that mostly we are not mindful of.

I wanted to share that with you because the impact was so striking and beneficial. It really just eliminated a lot of useless judgmental thoughts.

Okay, so now I'll get to the questions you sent in.

One question was: Could you talk about how to bring together the conventions of basic communication—which includes the mind, "I am," and self—with the deep understanding that there is no self? And then a somewhat related question really had to do with squaring selflessness and metta

meditation. Basically, if one embraces selflessness, then to whom or what is one wishing happiness, safety, and peace? May your non-self be happy?

I want to emphasize that we can have—and it's a deepening part of our practice and realization—this exploration of the terrain of selflessness: not mine, not I, not myself. But at the same time, we can be easy about using conventional language. That's fine; there's no problem. It's really working on the different levels I talked about the other day: the relative level and the more ultimate level.

In the metta meditation, the loving-kindness practice, we are dealing not on the ultimate level but on the relative level—with the concept of beings, of individuals, and you could say of selves. But this is all the relative level, and that's fine. We live a lot on this level. There's no problem with engaging with it, especially if we understand that yes, this is skillful on this level, and we also understand from our meditative experience, or just our wisdom, that on the more ultimate level, it's really selfless.

But can you imagine doing the metta meditation: "May your five aggregates be at peace"? It doesn't quite ring right. Not that helpful.

So there's no need to make this a problem. There are two different levels. Doing the metta and engaging on the relative level in a skillful, wholesome way is beneficial. We're cultivating wholesome states of mind. And then in vipassana, in insight meditation, that's when we drop down to this other level and really understand and experience that what we're calling self or an individual is just this flow of changing phenomena moment after moment.

There's no problem engaging on both levels, and we need to engage on both levels because we're living on both levels. And as I said, the deeper our understanding of selflessness is, the more freely and easily we can engage on the relative level skillfully and with wholesome mind states. So they really work together. There's really not a problem.

Okay, so next there were a couple of questions about right effort. What are the characteristics of right effort? How strong is right effort? How much effort is there in right effort? One person wrote, "I have a pretty good idea that struggle is not helpful." And another question was, "What is the practical benefit of integrating right effort into my meditation practice? I had a hard time understanding specifically what that looks like in any given meditation session."

First, it's important to understand that right effort is one step of the Eightfold Path, and it's a crucial step. It might also be interesting to know that when the Buddha described the list called the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment...

This is an expanded list from the usual seven factors of enlightenment. The list of 37 factors is comprised of many different lists, like the spiritual faculties, the factors of enlightenment, and the Eightfold Path. These are all put together in this list of 37. In that list, right effort appears more often than any other factor. So that may give you an idea that it's really essential. In one description, it says that right effort is

the root or the source of all accomplishment. Without right effort, we don't get anything done, whether it's in the world or in our practice.

So then the challenge is: what makes effort right as opposed to wrong effort? This is a very delicate investigation, and it's a lifelong investigation. It's not that we play around with it a little bit and then think, "Oh, now I have it. This is the perfect balance of right effort." No, it's like balancing on a high wire. I've never walked the high wire myself, but it's not that the person finds the balance and then just walks across. It's a constant adjustment, as far as I can tell from watching it, a constant rebalancing on a very subtle level. Well, that's how we have to engage with right effort in our practice.

The Buddha gave a very simple example to one of the monks who was over-efforting. He used the example of tuning the strings of a lute—it could be any musical instrument. Obviously, if the strings are too tight, it doesn't work; it doesn't produce a beautiful sound. And if the strings are too loose, it's the same situation. But the strings constantly need tuning. It's adjusting, a continual adjusting to find the balance in any particular situation.

So we need to learn how to check in with our practice and just see: are we getting too tight? Are we efforting? That over-efforting is a kind of struggle. So that means we need to loosen the strings a little bit; we need to relax, settle back a bit more. On the other hand, you may be sitting or walking and find your mind is all over the place—not at all concentrated, kind of restless. Then the effort may be too lax and we really have to up the effort a little bit, pay attention to this. After a while, this adjustment can become very intuitive, once you play with it and learn about it.

I'll offer a few frameworks that I have found helpful over the years for managing this question of right effort. One little phrase that I used a lot is: relaxed but not casual. Relaxed means that we're settling back. We're not leaning forward into experience. We're not caught up in expectation or wanting or the three papañca. We're relaxed, settled back—but not casual. By casual, I mean half-hearted. It's a meditative mind state which I call "more or less mindful." We're kind of there, but not really, not fully. When you notice that, it means you're too much on the casual side. If you feel like you're getting tight, that means you need to relax more. So again, that could be a little catchphrase you use: relaxed but not casual.

Another element of right effort—or kind of polarity, too tight versus too loose, but in a slightly different frame—has to do with what I call the skillful use of yes and no. By "yes," I mean being open and receptive and accepting of what's happening. We're not caught so much in judgment or aversion or contraction. Discomfort comes—yes, it's okay, let me feel it. Or there's some difficult mind state—yes, let me feel it, let me open to it. So we're saying yes to experience. But there are also times to say no to experience. I'll relate one example from a retreat I was doing, and again, this goes back quite a while.

but it's very vivid in my mind. I was just caught up in a lot of lustful desires—very seductive fantasies in my mind. And my mind was just getting seduced by them. I tried noting, I tried this and that. I went down the whole list of remedies. Nothing was working. My mind kept getting caught.

So as the final remedy, I just said, "Enough. Joseph, enough. Cut it out."

And it was like an emphatic *no* to this happening in the mind that was not skillful. It was an unwholesome state of mind that I was indulging and couldn't seem to extricate myself from. Sometimes, just as with a kid who's doing something harmful and you say, "Don't do that, don't do that," and finally, "*No*, don't do that"—sometimes we need the strength of that no.

But one cautionary note: as you play with yes and no, particularly with the no, it can be very skillful, but it needs to be done without aversion. That's an important point to watch. You could almost do it with a sense of humor, where you see that the mind is just getting lost in this unwholesome pattern, you try all these different remedies, and finally—no. But it's possible to smile at the antics of one's own mind.

I recommend that because what I found is that a sense of humor is a huge ally in this whole meditative path. As one meditator once said in an interview—they came in reporting their experience, and their big insight was: the mind has no pride. Meaning it'll do anything. It'll create all kinds of things. Some are beautiful and wholesome, but some are like these endless, useless fantasies that were going on in my mind.

So it's helpful just to be able to smile at one's own mind and still take the appropriate action in response to what's happening, so that we're cultivating the wholesome and, one way or another, letting go of the unwholesome.

A question came in: Does thinking about and doing things for the benefit of one's future self, at the expense of being in the present moment, qualify as a form of conceit? There were some other questions similar to this about how we plan for things without it being caught in the conceit "I am" in the future.

It's really quite simple. It's noticing the difference. For example, if planning is arising in the mind—either in meditation or just in the course of your day when planning is needed—notice the difference between a plan coming up and the mind being *lost* in that whole future scenario. It's as if we're living in a mind-created world of the future. If we're lost in that world, if we're not aware as we're in it and in the planning mode, then very likely the "I am" is being strengthened.

However, the planning can be done and we can be mindful of it as being thoughts in the present moment. Even though the content is about the future, the thought itself is happening now. So if we stay mindful—planning, thinking, whatever note you give it—then you're not lost in the scene, you're not lost in the scenario, but you're still planning if it's needed. You can still use that function of mind, but you stay grounded in the understanding that yes, this planning is happening now. It's not that I'm living in the future. I hope you see that difference. And it's very helpful.

One thing you might keep an eye out for, which is a very common tendency that is not that helpful, is

obsessive planning—where we go over the same thing again and again and again, out of either some anxiety or fear or whatever the cause is behind it. When you're planning out your move for the fifteenth time, you might ask yourself: Is this helpful? Is this useful? And probably by the fifteenth time, it's not. So pay attention to that aspect in planning as well, because it is a fairly common tendency. The mind can get a little obsessive about the planning, and then we are caught up. It's as if we're living in the future with the anxiety about it, and that's just causing this run of thoughts.

Generally, with planning thoughts or with other kinds of thoughts too, that question—*is this helpful?*—can be a very effective way of really paying attention. Is it helpful or not? And if we see that it's not helpful, it becomes much easier to let it go because we are being conscious and mindful about it. If we don't ask that question, very often we're just caught up in a whole run of unhelpful thoughts, which doesn't help anything.

So again, I hope you see that whatever our mind is doing—whether in a skillful way or an unskillful way—we can learn from it.

And that's where, as I think I mentioned yesterday, the importance of interest comes in. If we take interest in what our minds are doing and then investigate—and this is the great role of mindfulness and wisdom—we investigate and see: Is this furthering the wholesome in some way or not? Am I just getting caught up in something that's unskillful, an unskillful pattern of mind?

So we can see this. It's not with judgment. It's really just taking an interest in our own mind and seeing what creates more suffering for ourselves and what leads to more peace. Because as I think you all know by now, it's not simply a question of believing what somebody else is saying. We have to see it for ourselves. And that's the beauty of this practice. It's providing us the tools, the technology for this investigation of our own hearts and minds. Because it's only when we see these things for ourselves that the transformation happens.

Okay, so this is a fairly simple question: What is your feeling about whether it's skillful to write synthesized notes while on retreat? The comment before that was that often, in hearing dharma talks or even in the meditation session, there might be some insights, some understandings that we want to remember. And so there's the impulse to make a note or write it down. And that's fine to do. I wouldn't interrupt the sitting for it, but you could make a mental note or remember this, and then at the end of the sitting write it down. There's nothing wrong with that, and it could be helpful.

Over time, then you can see whether, having done this for some period of time, you ever go back and look at them or not. Because I have a drawer full of notebooks of all my brilliant insights. And they've been in the drawer for years and I haven't opened them. But there are times when it can be helpful.

And there was another question—I don't know exactly where it is in this list, but I remember the question: Is there a time when we can actually use the thought process just to explore and investigate some dharma

point that we find interesting? And is there a way of thinking in that way, skillfully?

So there is. And it can be very useful and very creative dharmically. It's as if we devote either a particular meditation session or part of a session where we seed the session with a particular thought or idea that we want to explore a little bit, and then allow for reflection. So we're not just cutting them off as being thoughts, but we're actually allowing the mind to creatively explore whatever that dharma point is. And I've had some very interesting understandings come about through that.

I think you'll notice if you do that, that actually generally we stay pretty mindful in that thought process, because it's not just random thoughts passing through and we get carried away by them. This is a more conscious act of reflection. And I found that because of that, there's a fair amount of mindfulness as it's happening. So you might well play with it if this is of interest.

I'll just give you one example, which I think I referred to the other day. Again, this goes back a few years. But I was just reflecting about the second and third noble truths—craving is the cause of suffering, the end of craving is the end of suffering. And as I mentioned, for a long time I thought this is a far-off goal. But then at some point I realized, no, we can actually practice this in each moment. And we can kind of come to the end of craving, even if it's just for a few moments, but we get a taste of that freedom.

And so my mind was just kind of excited by this, because it brought the practice, the depth of the practice, right back into the moment. It wasn't postponing it for some future big enlightenment. And I remember my mind really was reflecting on that, and it was very beneficial. I learned a lot from doing that.

One guideline for it, though: because it can get to be a little too much, or we can start over-reflecting, we want to pay attention to that. I don't know how many of you have had the experience of chewing sugar cane, but especially in tropical countries, you just buy a chunk of sugar cane and chew—it's very juicy and very sweet. So you put it in your mouth, you chew, and you get the really delicious sweet liquid. But quite quickly it becomes dry pulp, and then you just kind of spit it out.

Well, our thoughts, these kinds of reflection thoughts, they're juicy for a while. But once you find the mind just going over and over, repeating the same insight again and again and again—that's the dry pulp stage. So then you realize, okay, enough. Let me come back in a more focused way.

So you can play with it, but play with it skillfully.

This next question is, I think, an important one, and it can be challenging. "Could you please speak about the emotion of shame? I noticed that I'm stuck in this emotion for many years. It's a very painful emotion, letting me believe that I am unworthy of love and belonging."

How do we deal with an emotion like that, one that is really deeply conditioned within us for whatever reason? I want to share a story about an analogous mind state. It wasn't shame itself, but something related. What I learned from that experience, I want to offer as a suggestion for you to see whether you

could apply this to shame as well, because I think it could be very effective.

At one point—and again, I've been practicing for so long that these stories come from a wide range of how far back—but this was quite a while ago, and it was very impactful. What I learned from it has stuck with me all these years. I was on retreat and I was just remembering something I had done, and I was feeling tremendous guilt about it. It had been an unskillful act, and so it was coming up very vividly. My mind was just feeling so guilty, with all the thoughts and feelings associated with that guilt.

This went on for quite some time. I felt really caught. And guilt is very self-lacerating—we're cutting ourselves with guilt, or it might be shame. I think there's some analogy here that will serve.

So I was noticing this, and I was really in the suffering of it for quite a while. At a certain point—and I think this is one of the gifts of the practice—when I'm really caught in suffering, it begins to pique my interest. What is going on here that I'm so caught in? Because there's always a reason. It's not just happening gratuitously. There's something my mind is doing which is keeping me stuck in this. And when I looked more carefully at the guilt, when I was very interested in what this was that was causing so much pain in my mind, I saw that guilt is an ego trip. It's really reinforcing the sense of self in a negative way. "I'm so bad because I did this."

The seduction of guilt, and the reason it has so much power—for example, in this situation—is because I actually did do that thing. It was an unskillful act. So it's not like it was made up. I actually did it, but my mind went to guilt because of it. And because I'd actually done it, it kept feeding the guilt. It was just this loop.

But when I saw that guilt was really an ego trip, strengthening the "I" in a negative way, it was amazing. As soon as I saw that, it was like one of those moments—"Mara, I see you." It was almost as if I was personifying the guilt as Mara coming to seduce me into believing it. "Mara, I see you." And the guilt really fell away in that moment.

What replaced it—and this is really an important part—was what I call the feeling of remorse. In the way I'm using that word, in the remorse that I felt, there was acknowledgment of what I had done. It wasn't pretending that I never did it. And there was the understanding: yes, this was unskillful. But unlike guilt, with remorse I was seeing it, taking responsibility for it, learning from it, but also seeing it as part of this selfless flow of change that is our life.

Built into that deep understanding of impermanence is also forgiveness. We can forgive ourselves. We do harmful things out of ignorance. So we see it, we take responsibility for it, and then we let it pass through.

So I would just see if there are any elements of this that would apply to shame. It may be that the feeling of shame is not coming from any particularly unskillful thing we've done. Perhaps it was just some situation that was not unwholesome on our part, but an unfortunate situation of one kind or another that led to that feeling. But still, if we're caught in the shame, there is that same reinforcement of the "I." And so if we

can see that—"Oh, Mara, I see you"—then it might be possible to just drop back into the whole experience and put it in some frame which sees it as part of the flow of changing phenomena. We're not congealing that particular experience into being who we are.

That's the element of Mara and *māna*. It's like we identify with it, creating that self of "Oh, I am this," and then all the attendant feelings about that. So there's really a great possibility here if we see it and understand it in the right way. It's not pretending we're not feeling it, or even trying to block out whatever might have been the cause of it, but we're holding it in a very different way. We're not reinforcing the "I am-ness" of it. We're seeing it more as this non-personal process. "Oh, because of this, this arose. Because of this, this arose." And we just see it as part of the flow of our lives, letting it pass through.

I would really encourage a careful investigation of this, because often—and I think the question mentioned being stuck in this emotion for many years—this is not uncommon. People do get caught up in particular unskillful patterns. But what I love about Dharma practice, when we have this investigative mind, is that there's always a key to unlocking the sufferings. Because the suffering is always how we're relating to experience. The suffering is not the experience itself. The experience may be painful. It may be unpleasant. But just as we can learn to be with painful sensations in the body and it's okay—it doesn't make it pleasant, but it's okay, it's just an unpleasant feeling which is there and then it passes—so it's the same thing with these emotions. The suffering aspect is not inherent in the unpleasantness of it. The suffering aspect comes from how we're relating to it.

The talks of these last few days on *papañca* would be a very good template as a beginning investigation. "Well, am I relating to it in one of these ways? Is it *māna*? Why not?" So there is a way, I think, with this kind of investigation to actually free ourselves even from long-established patterns. I would really encourage you to do that.

Could you speak to the technique of naming or noting? Take, for example, the following: I crave some pleasant experience. I then note that this is craving—a saying in the mind, "craving." Is this saying not just more thought? Should I then note my noting?

Well, you can see, I think, clearly that that would lead to an infinite regression. I want to explain a little bit about the function of mental noting. This is a skillful means. It's a tool. The note is not the essence. The essence is the actual being mindful of what's present. And the noting, for some people—for many people—can be helpful. So you have to see for yourself: is this helpful or not? But it has to be used in the correct way. It's true that noting is just a thought. That is just another thought.

But it is a conscious thought. When we are actually being mindful, in a very active noting, we are being mindful that we are noting. So it's a skillful use of thought in the service of mindfulness. You definitely don't have to note the note. If you would note a craving, or the breath—in, out, rise, fall—that's sufficient.

This may be getting a little technical with respect to what's actually going on in our minds, but perhaps it'll be of interest to you. One of the conditions for mindfulness to arise, or we could say a supportive condition for mindfulness to arise, is another quality of mind called perception. In fact, perception is one of the basic five aggregates. Perception means that quality of recognizing what it is that's present. This is the naming function. We recognize a craving, or we recognize in-breath or out-breath. Perception is that faculty of recognition.

In the teachings, it's said that this quality of perception, when it's in balance with mindfulness, actually serves and strengthens it. If mindfulness is not present, that's when we get lost in the world of concepts. We're living a lot in the world of our perceptions, of how we recognize things and navigate the world through them. If we're not mindful, then very often we're just lost in this world of concepts. But if it's balanced with mindfulness, then the perception or recognition—craving, or in-breath, out-breath—serves like a picture frame around the picture.

What's the purpose of the frame? It's to focus our attention on the picture. The idea is not for us to be looking at the frame. Although we'll be aware of it and take it in, that's not its function. Its function is to focus attention on what's within the frame. Well, that's how the noting can serve mindfulness. That's how perception is a support for mindfulness. We recognize what it is—craving—and then the mindfulness actually helps us enter into the experience of it. Oh, craving is like this. Craving feels like this. We're exploring the actual experience. But having noted it, that sets the frame and helps us engage in that further exploration.

I hope you get some sense of the possibility that's there with the noting technique. For those of you who have been practicing a while, you may have some experience of it and can see for yourselves whether it's helpful or not. For those of you who may not have used it very much, I would suggest just practicing and seeing. Take a sitting or part of a sitting or walking where you just practice, moment after moment, soft. The noting has to be very soft, like a whisper in the mind. You don't want the note to overshadow the painting, what's being seen. It's just enough, that recognition—oh, there's this, there's this, there's this.

Play with it and see whether it supports your practice. For many people, it becomes a vehicle for really developing stronger concentration and continuity of mindfulness. Because if you're practicing with the noting for some time and then you go through a stretch where you're not noting anymore, that will be a signal to you that you probably got lost in some train of thought. For some people, however, it's not the right tool. They tried it and practiced with it for a while, but it doesn't seem that helpful. So keep in mind, it's only a tool, it's not the essence, but it would be worth exploring to see for yourself whether it's helpful.

This next question is one that I think we can all relate to, because it's just part of our lives. "Compassion to oneself for having cravings as part of being human seems to give me a nudge in the direction of indulging in them. I am not sure what to make of this."

I think we can all recognize that in the course of a day, we have lots of cravings. Lots of different arisings

happen. Desire for a cup of tea, or desire to go for a walk. Lots of things, and sometimes bigger things, more impactful things. So desire and craving is going to come up, and if we're paying attention, we'll see that it comes up a lot.

The question then is, particularly as laypeople living in the world, we are living in the realm of sense pleasures. It's all around us—we're just being exposed to lots of things that might trigger desire and craving in the mind. And this is just part of our life in the world.

are somewhat different for lay people and for monastics. Monastics really are on a path of renunciation, which is very powerful—I'll talk about it a little bit more. But as lay people, that may not be the primary aspect that we're practicing.

So these desires or cravings will arise. The question then is, how do we navigate this in a skillful way that's not deleterious to our well-being?

There are a few things we could watch out for. One is to really hold the precepts in mind, because the precepts are like guardrails. With the different cravings that may arise, if they would lead us to an act that breaks one of the precepts, then the precept would say, "Maybe we don't have to do that. This is going too far. This is leading to something quite unskillful with unhelpful karmic results." So the precepts, having them in mind and really exploring what each of them means for you, is very helpful. It helps us navigate the world with integrity and with safety. They're a great protection.

Another aspect worth paying attention to, even when the desire or craving is not leading to breaking a precept, is to see: are they becoming obsessive? Is this just taking over the mind, and we're obsessing about it? Then again, it's becoming too much. It's out of control. It's not just part of our ease for life in the world, enjoying the sense pleasures appropriate to us as lay people. It's really causing suffering in the mind. If we watch out for that, if it's become obsessive, that's a time to really step back and investigate. Okay, what's going on here? Why am I so driven by this?

Even in the enjoyment of ordinary sense pleasures, which are really fine for us as lay people in the world—we do enjoy lots of pleasant things that arise in the course of a day—what I've found helpful, and in a way it's fun (well, it might not sound like fun when I say it), is sometimes just during the course of a day, I'll have some small desire. Let's just say for a cup of tea or a cup of coffee or a piece of cake—something really simple, relatively harmless. But then, really for fun, I'll just periodically say, "No, I don't really need to do that."

So it's like a mini moment of renunciation. The desire is there, the craving is there, the wanting is there, but this would be the skillful, interesting use of the "no." Remember I was talking about yes and no? So instead of saying yes to it, just occasionally, when you're so inspired with a desire that's coming up: "No, I don't need to do that."

What I find is that those moments are actually very important. They're impactful for a couple of reasons.

One, it feels like in that moment it's a little victory over Mara. Remember, I described one meaning of Mara as this being who wants to keep us all enmeshed in the world of pleasure. That's his function. It's interesting that in the Buddhist texts he's called "the evil one." Usually in the Western world, we think of that as some kind of hell being. But in the Buddhist understanding, no—it's this being who wants to keep us enmeshed in pleasure. I find that interesting.

So these little moments of renunciation—"No, I don't need to do that"—feel like a momentary victory over Mara. In addition to that, because in that moment we are cultivating renunciation, even though it's not our major path as it might be for a monastic, it's still a tremendously powerful strength in the mind. We have that ability not to be continually seduced by the desires, by the cravings which will come, but we see, "Oh no, there's this place in the mind, there's this strength in the mind, there's this kind of resilience in the mind that could go with it or not go with it." We're developing that muscle of the mind of renunciation.

My experience in those moments is that it's energizing, because there's a kind of feeling of strength that comes from the ability to do that. So I would play with that. And again, not obsessing about it, but just bringing it into the day somewhat. "No, I don't need to do that." And then go on and see for yourself what it feels like, exploring the difference in your experience of your mind when you do go to fulfill the craving and desire and when you don't.

So all of this is a learning about another possibility for navigating this world that we're living in.

Now, here's a very easy question: Is it permissible to share portions of the recorded replay of the retreat with others? That seems fine to me.

Next question: How to deal with obsessive thoughts that arise because of childhood trauma? This is a really important, deep question, and there are various ways to begin to understand it.

Sometimes, especially on retreat, for people with a traumatic background, their mind and heart open up and actually in a way regress back to the situation, now reliving the trauma. This is a very delicate situation in practice, and it's really helpful to have some guidance with this because you need to deal with it quite skillfully. Basically, it's about taking it slow. Sometimes people have this attitude of "I'm going to get in there and deal with this and finish with it." That's generally not a good idea. It's really about approaching it very slowly—touching a little bit, then backing off—so we learn to integrate it bit by bit.

There are some people who have really worked a lot with trauma and meditation. I want to recommend a book called *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness* by David Treleaven. It's a very skillful book about how to apply meditation to the situation of reliving trauma. We will be sending out in the next day or two some of the books I've mentioned, and this could be a real help in navigating this.

But sometimes the thoughts that are arising are not because we're reliving the trauma, but we're remembering it and it's just producing a lot of obsessive thoughts. That's a different situation because we're not going back into the trauma itself, but we are remembering and thinking a lot about it.

I want to share another experience I had from a retreat many years ago. It's analogous—it was traumatic in its own way. I was on retreat, a two-month retreat, and I did something in an effort to ease some back pain I was having. I did something that made it infinitely worse. It was really terrible—as if my whole body went into shock and froze in this contracted state. It was painful and contracted and frozen. And then my mind just started blaming myself. How could I have done that? Why couldn't I just leave well enough alone? Why did I try to fix something?

The phrase that was so seductive—I don't know whether you'll be able to relate to this or not—but the phrase that kept coming up in my mind was, "How can you have been so stupid?" And then my mind would just be lost, really lost in anguish, in all these judgmental, self-recriminating thoughts, because my body was really in a bad situation. It turns out it lasted for a couple of years, so it was not a small thing. But on retreat, this happened after the first month, so I was still there for another whole month trying to deal with this mind state of anguish and obsessive thinking.

After a while, there was so much suffering—over and above the pain and discomfort in the body, my mind was just in this terrible state of anguish and obsessive thinking. And I realized that I could not give these thoughts any airtime at all. Because if I even let that first sentence go by—"How can I have been so stupid?"—I was gone. That was enough to just take me away for half an hour on this train of thought. The thought was so seductive because I believed it. "How could I have been so stupid?"

So I realized: no thought. I can't give it any airtime. I kept watching just for the arising of the beginning of that thought.

So instead of letting it play out—"How can I have been so stupid?" and then on and on and on—when I saw in my mind just the first few words, "How can I..."—I just took out the sort of wisdom sword. "Okay, no." That's where a very definitive "no" came in.

An image that came to mind was from amusement parks, where you're shooting at balloons to break them and then you get a prize or something. That was the image in my mind. Every time the beginning of that thought came, I'd just knock it out of the sky, knock it out of the mind.

Again, I want to emphasize, this can be done—and I started doing it—with a sense of humor. Because if we do it with aversion, it's just going to be feeding it. So this is really important. We can have that very strong "no"—this is not skillful, I'm not going to let this thought continue at all—but not with aversion. Just coming out of a place of understanding and wisdom.

And it was amazing. When I didn't allow the mind to keep rising, not feeding that whole obsessive thought process, it really diminished, because I just was not allowing it to take over my mind. With this forceful "no," it made a huge difference. The body still was going through its trip, and it took a while, as I said, quite a while for it to heal. But my mind got much, much better. I was much more able to sit back and just relax into what the situation was. So you might apply this.

The time goes really quickly. There's a lot more questions here. One asks: "Can you please explain a bit more how to do the walking meditation from a beginner's perspective?"

I want to address this because the walking practice is so helpful, so valuable. I mentioned the other day that probably more than the sitting, the walking meditation and the mindfulness we develop through it will carry over most into our lives. Because we're practicing being mindful of the body moving, and just in the course of the day, we move a lot. So the walking practice is fantastic.

You can do it in different ways. Basically, it's finding a path where you're walking back and forth, which is really helpful. It could be ten steps, fifteen steps, five steps—it depends on your circumstances—but ten to fifteen to twenty steps would be a good length.

You can practice at different speeds. As you begin, you might be walking at more or less a normal pace, or slightly slower than normal, where you're just aware—as I was talking about yesterday with the elements—just the moving and touching, moving and touching, feeling rather than watching. So it's really simple. Just taking a step and you feel the movement, you feel the touch. Another step, feel the movement, feel the touch. It's really that simple. And you could practice using the noting and see if that helps.

Then as the mind settles into being mindful of that walking—moving and touching—you could begin to slow down a little bit, and maybe begin to break the step up into different parts. So the first thing might be "lifting, placing, lifting, placing." Or even in three parts: lifting the heel, so you're lifting, and then moving forward, and then placing as the foot comes down and touches. So: lift, move, place. Lift, move, place. Feeling it rather than watching it, and staying very relaxed.

The question I talked about yesterday—"What's being known moment after moment?"—you could just hold that in the mind so that as you're noting the lift, move, place, you're actually connecting with the felt experience of that. In the lifting, what are you actually feeling? Moving forward, what are you feeling? In placing, what are you feeling? So that's basically it.

And then of course, the mind will wander. When you notice that, just become aware and come back, take another step. This is worth doing, and I would devote some time to it—not just doing the walking meditation for five minutes, but really giving it time and developing it, because you're developing that habit to be mindful of the body in movement. At a certain point, that becomes so ingrained that it becomes the default. As you're moving about in the world, you'll find yourself naturally being much more mindful of the body and your activities.

Now, there were a few questions about this. Basically: what is doing the knowing? One person wrote, "I think I get pretty out of the picture in knowing or noticing arising experience, but still wondering what is knowing arises. Am I hopelessly lost in dualism?" And there was another question: "If there's no I, me, or mine, if there is no self, then what or who is observing movement, whether there is taste or there is movement?" And another one: "I have a question regarding being known. When I tell myself, for example,

chewing is being known, my mind immediately asks, known by whom?"

So you see, these are all related questions. Just a couple of things to say about this. One is that a more helpful question rather than "being known by whom" might be "known by what"—because already if we're using "whom," we're positing a who, a self, an I doing it. And then it gets confusing. Well, who is this mysterious who? Of course it's difficult, because it's not there in the first place. So "who" is not exactly the right question. But we could ask, things are being known—well, known by what?

Different Buddhist traditions have different ways of explaining this, and I just want to mention a few of them. Then you can see what actually fits your experience.

So basically, what is knowing? That knowing is the definition of consciousness. In other words, consciousness in the Buddhist context means that which knows. It's the knowing faculty of mind. We know a sight or know a sound or know a thought—that's the function of consciousness. And consciousness in itself is not I, it's not mine. It's just another non-personal aspect of this mind-body process with its own particular function, which is to know the arising object. So consciousness equals knowing. That's what knows. It's consciousness that knows.

How can we begin to really explore the nature of consciousness? This gets really interesting. In some Buddhist traditions, it's explained that what we call self—this flow of changing phenomena—what's happening is there is a pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. That's what the unfolding is. In each moment, each object has its own moment of consciousness which knows it, and both the knowing and the object are arising and passing away in each moment. This is the flow of life.

In meditation, we usually start with mindfulness of the object because it's more tangible. But as the practice deepens, one of the insights is the recognition that what's happening at every moment is knowing an object. We begin to experience the knowing aspect and the object aspect—knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. This gives us quite a clear understanding of the experience and the function of consciousness in the moment: that it's a process also arising and passing away in each moment with each new object. So that's one framework for understanding how consciousness functions.

In other Buddhist traditions, there's another interesting approach which reveals another aspect of consciousness. There's a Zen story which highlights this. Sometimes people hear the story as a kind of Zen witticism, and they chuckle at the end. But don't hear it like that. There's actually a profound teaching in it, so don't miss it.

A seeker came to see Bodhidharma, the great master who brought Buddhism from India to China.

This seeker came to Bodhidharma and said, "I'm suffering so much. Please, help pacify my mind."

Bodhidharma replied, "Show me your mind and I'll pacify it."

The seeker said, "I've looked for it everywhere. I've looked for this mind everywhere and I can't find it."

And Bodhidharma said, "There—it's already pacified."

This points to one aspect, one way of approaching our understanding of consciousness or knowing. It's like we look for it, but there's nothing tangible to find. And yet the knowing is happening. We can't find it, but it's still functioning. This is the mystery of consciousness. But in the not-finding—"I've looked everywhere and I can't find it"—something interesting happens in that moment of recognizing the unfindability of it. The mind is already pacified.

I've used this little story and that phrase frequently. If my mind is caught up in some struggle of one kind or another and I'm just in it for whatever reason, and I see that, I'll often use this phrase. Because I'm so familiar with the story, all I have to do is remind myself: "Already pacified." Because I already know what precedes that. It's like, oh, there's nothing to find. And in that nothing to find—already pacified.

Again, these approaches come from different traditions. The descriptions are not the point. The point of all this is what frees the mind from clinging, what frees the mind from attachment, what frees the mind from papañca. I wouldn't get so caught up in which of these is right. They're both right, because they're both skillful means, and we want to see them as skillful means. Any model is a skillful means for freeing our hearts and minds. So that's the test: which skillful means actually helps you come to that place of greater freedom?

Let me address a few more questions. One asks about the four brahmaviharas, which arise as a result of letting go of the papañcas. "How does one aim to reach these qualities while setting boundaries around people close to you who are mean-spirited?"—and in parentheses, "usually as a result of their own suffering."

This is a very practical question. How do we cultivate these brahmaviharas when we're in difficult situations with people who are really difficult, mean-spirited, doing harmful things?

It is perfectly fine in these situations to set boundaries. Loving-kindness or compassion doesn't mean that we just roll over and let people walk all over us. No. If a boundary is appropriate, we set it. However, can we do it with kindness rather than with anger or aversion?

Ram Dass's guru, Maharaji, had this one teaching: do what you do, but don't throw anyone out of your heart. I really appreciate that, because sometimes we do need to set boundaries or say, "No, this is wrong." We're responding to a difficult situation. But are we doing it without throwing that person out of our hearts? Are we doing it with kindness?

The Dalai Lama had a beautiful teaching. He said, "Practice kindness whenever possible. It's always possible." That's really important to remember. It is always possible, because that's up to us. It has nothing really to do with the other person. It's our capacity. We can practice it and cultivate it. So kindness does

have the strength to be there in these very challenging circumstances where we take action, where we respond—but from a place of kindness, from a place of caring, from not throwing them out of our hearts.

One more brief clarification. Someone noted that I said once a being becomes fully awakened, they have no more defilements of thinking—and the question goes on from there. But that was a slight misinterpretation. It's not that all thinking necessarily stops.

It's that defilement stops. There's no greed or hatred or delusion. But the thinking function can still be there. I just wanted to clarify that point.

Another question concerned using the phrase "things being known" in practice, noting that repeating it continuously—sight being known, sound being known, thought being known—makes for a very busy internal monologue. You don't have to do that. Use that phrase of "things being known" just perhaps right at the beginning, to set the frame for how you're going to be holding experience. It's simply a reminder: "Okay, I'm going to spend the next period of time in this framework, settled back and simply watching for, or being aware of, what's being known moment after moment." It's not that you have to repeat that phrase each time.

So we're coming to the end of the retreat. Roxanne will be leading the closing session this evening with the dedication of merit. I just want to mention that I've really enjoyed being with you all, even though I can't see you. I can't see you with my physical eye, but I feel like I'm seeing you with my mind's eye. As I'm talking into the camera of the iPad, the iPad disappears, really. It's as if we're here together. And so I've really enjoyed this time with you. I hope it has been helpful.

Now I'm going to do something I almost never do, which is to give a little plug for my book, *Mindfulness*. The reason is that this is a substantial book—over four hundred pages—and it comes out of a series of forty-seven talks I gave at the Forest Refuge about the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse on mindfulness. The book goes into quite a lot of detail about many of the questions you asked, so it could be a resource for you if you still have questions or want to further explore some of the topics I responded to. There's a lot in the book about many of the subjects you brought up through your questions. If you're interested and inclined, you might take a look at that.

Thank you very much for being here. Thank you for your presence. I hope it's been valuable for you.

Let's sit just for a minute or two and let everything resolve and settle.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.