Questions & Answers about Papañca 1

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:22:31

Welcome back. We'll begin again with a 15-minute sit. It's just a way of settling into the practice before we address the many questions that you sent in.

Find a comfortable, relaxed, alert sitting posture. Settle into the awareness of the whole body. There is a body. Sit and know you're sitting. Be mindful of the body breathing. Keep it very relaxed—a simple, natural process of breathing. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

Notice where in the body you feel the breath most clearly: the air passing the nostrils, the movement of the chest, the abdomen, or throughout the whole body. Simply feel the sensations of each breath as it presents itself. Settle back, receptive, allowing.

If other bodily sensations arise and call your attention, open to the feeling of those sensations. They might be pleasant, might be unpleasant. Notice what happens to the sensation as you're aware of it. Notice its changing nature. Does it get stronger or weaker? Does it fade away or disappear suddenly? Simply notice.

As soon as you become aware of the mind thinking, when the mind is lost in a thought, simply notice "thinking" and then reconnect with the body sitting, with the sensations of the breath or other bodily sensations.

When you're ready, you can slowly open your eyes, become aware of seeing, reconnecting with the world around you.

Thank you all for sending in the many questions that you did. They were very intriguing. I probably won't be able to respond to all of them, but I did group questions together that had similar themes, ones that felt related to me.

I'm going to start with the very easiest one, which was: How do you spell *papañca*? Carlita mentioned that she put that up on the resource page of the retreat homepage, so you can check that out.

Now for the first more complicated question: "Though I can tell myself that my felt sense of self is false, it's hard to believe that's the case when society and lived experience reinforce the opposite. How can we convince ourselves that there's no self?"

There were quite a lot of questions about self and non-self, but this one may set the foundation for

addressing many of the others. First, I want to say that it's not a question of convincing ourselves that there's no self. It's really a question of investigating our experience so that we are realizing from the inside what non-self means.

It can get confusing because, as the question mentioned, this is not something that is commonly understood or reinforced in society or just in our conventional, regular life. There's one framework that I think is really helpful in addressing this question of understanding the conventional use of self, the conventional experience of it, and the deeper Dharma understanding of selflessness. That is the framework talked about in various Buddhist traditions of the two truths: relative truth and more ultimate truth.

Relative truth is the experience we have of just our ordinary, conventional reality of self and other, subject and object. It's simply how we go about through the day. So in that sense, on the conventional or relative level, we could say, yes, there is some experience of self. We distinguish ourselves from others. We look in the mirror and we recognize ourselves. That's all on the level of relative reality.

More ultimate reality takes us to a deeper level where we begin to see that what we're calling self is really a concept, and that there are more underlying realities in constant change. We begin to see the insubstantiality and the flow of impermanence.

Take a very simple example, which may give you a sense of how there can be two levels of truth, two levels of experience. I'm holding up this cup. On the relative level, it's a cup. We drink out of it, it's useful, and we can describe it as a cup—its shape, its style, and all of that. So on that level, cup exists.

On another level, if we looked at that cup under a high-power microscope or under an electron microscope—seeing a very subtle level of reality—we would see that cup disappears. There's no cup at all on that level. It's just the molecular level or the atomic level or whatever it is; it's a very different experience of reality.

When we touch into that more ultimate reality of the very rapidly changing nature of the elements, that doesn't negate our experience of cup.

We still use it, we still drink from it. But to the degree that we've had some experience of this more underlying reality—the more ultimate reality in which cup really doesn't exist—we can operate on the relative level with less attachment, less clinging, because we realize that in its very nature, it's insubstantial.

Self, the notion of self, the concept of self is like cup. It does refer to what we would call Joseph—a recognizable, distinct individual. We do live, and live largely, on that level. But through our practice, we can have the very direct experience of going beyond the concept of self on the conventional level, and begin to feel this whole mind-body process quite differently, where it's just a very rapid flow of changing elements.

The benefit of this understanding is that the more we see this for ourselves—and again, it's not about trying to convince ourselves of it, not on the idea level that there's no self, but the direct experience of this more ultimate level of reality—the more freedom we have. We're using our minds in the same way we might look through a high-power microscope. We're using our minds to explore the nature of this mind-body on a different level. And we do have the experience of the whole solidity of the body and the mind disappearing, revealing just a very rapid flow of mental and physical elements.

Keep in mind that we operate on both these levels, and one does not negate the other. If we can experience both with clarity and awareness, it helps us negotiate the relative level of our lives—all the interpersonal relationships and interactions—with much more freedom, because we're not attached, we're not clinging. We haven't solidified or reified some sense of permanent self.

There were a few more questions which this framework of the two truths might help illuminate. One was about wrong view being the belief in an underlying, enduring being at the center of our being. The questioner noted that personality has a genetic component along with environmental influences, and personality is relatively enduring and slow to change. How do we reconcile the fact of personality being difficult to change with wrong view?

In the same way as before: yes, on the relative level, there is a personality, and distinct personalities. As the question noted, personality doesn't change as rapidly as when we're on the more ultimate level seeing elements arising and passing very quickly. But if we understand that personality is the pattern of elements arising, and we see that based on our understanding of the more ultimate level—where things are changing very rapidly and we're seeing the selfless, empty nature of it—then on the relative level, we're not quite so identified with our personality. We don't think of or claim the personality as being self. Rather, we see: yes, this is the conditioned pattern of our emotions, our thoughts, our way of being.

To the extent that we have some experience on the more ultimate level, the personality does become a little more malleable. We can begin to see which aspects of our personality serve us, are helpful or conducive to our happiness, and which aspects cause suffering. If we have that flexibility that comes from understanding the deeper level—that there is not a fixed core being—and we see personality just as a pattern of thoughts and emotions, we can be quite creative with our personality. Over time, by choosing more skillful ways of relating to ourselves and to others, our personalities can change. People can become kinder, more loving, more generous. This is all through seeing that there is not a fixed self and there is not a fixed personality. It's all a dynamic process.

Another related question arose which I think is really important, especially in these times: Would you speak more about conceit, *māna*, and identity? The questioner was thinking in particular about people with identities that are marginalized in our society, and how we work for justice. Claiming "I am" for those on the margins can be a radical act and provide a sense of freedom.

This is a really important point. On the relative level, we do have certain identities, and certain identities

have been marginalized in our society. Part of the healing of that is acknowledging the identity on the relative level—whether it's racial identity, or identity of gender, or sexual orientation, or many other kinds of identities. We want to honor that place in us, our multiple identities. We don't want to use the teaching of selflessness to ignore the relative level of our interactions and relationships in society. On the relative level, there is an identity, and we want to understand, respect, and honor that. This is empowering for us as we move in society.

But again, if we have some experience on the more ultimate level where identity really disappears—on the level of subatomic particles, there's no identity—and there is an equivalent in our meditation experience of being somewhat analogously on that subatomic particle level, experiencing this mind-body process in that way, then we see that on that level, there is no fixed identity. We can then operate on the relative level understanding that it is the relative level, but an important one, because this is the level on which we operate a lot in the world. We can engage with it without so much attachment, without so much fixation. This actually makes us a lot more creative in our response to the challenges that may arise with regard to our relative identities.

I want to emphasize how important this is. This issue has come up a lot. In the recent teacher training we just finished at IMS—a training that very much emphasized training teachers of color—the issue of identity came up frequently. How do we understand its importance while also understanding that on another level, the notion of identity disappears?

How do we integrate these two levels? It's just the same as the example I used with the cup—understanding that on the subatomic particle level there's no cup, and yet I drink from the cup. This is really the maturity, I think, of spiritual practice, where we learn how to integrate and harmonize these two levels.

There was another somewhat related question: Are there examples that can be shared of knowing when and if to move beyond awareness and acceptance and into response and action? And how does the Dharma experience suggest developing that skill? This tied in also to other questions about the practice being about allowing, and yet when do we act?

Again, it goes back to an understanding of the two truths. When we're on the level of more ultimate truth, we're really in just the experience of things arising and passing. We're in that flow of the rapidly changing elements. Then there's no cause to act based on that level. But at the very same time as that's happening, we are living in the relative world and we have to respond.

One way of understanding the response—and when a response is called for rather than simply allowing things to come and go—is when some harm is involved, some harm to ourselves, some harm to others.

Just as an example, a slightly perhaps amusing one: years ago when I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya, it was a small Indian village, but it was the place of the Buddha's enlightenment—an important

spiritual place. In the village, one of the great landowners had a working elephant, so we'd often see the elephant walking on the streets. Not infrequently I would be walking into the local bazaar for something, walking down the road, and the elephant would be coming towards me. At that point, I wasn't just saying, "seeing, seeing, seeing," thinking, "Oh, this is all empty." I stepped out of the way, because clearly if I didn't, a great deal of harm to me would have been done.

Understanding the more ultimate level of just the rapidly changing flow of elements doesn't negate the necessity of responding on the relative level to the circumstances that we find ourselves in. Particularly in cases where harm might be done, we need to respond, whether it's harm to ourselves or harm to others. That's when action is really called for.

We may come back to some elements of this with other questions, but I'll move on now. Another question was: Can you explain what reincarnates or endures through lifetimes, which is not self?

Given the Buddha's teaching on many lives, this is a question that often comes up. There's no self who goes from life to life. This ties in a little bit to what I mentioned yesterday about "who" being the wrong question. It's really about *what* goes from life to life.

This points to a bit of a difference between the term reincarnation and rebirth. Many people confuse these two terms or conflate them, thinking they're synonymous. They're not exactly the same. Reincarnation is generally understood to imply some being that goes from life to life. In ancient India, it was called the Atman, or the soul—something, some "who," which goes from this life to the next life and is carried over.

The Buddha had a very different notion of this whole process. Instead of calling it reincarnation, the term used is rebirth. I'll explain the difference with an analogy, which may give you some sense of this whole process and understanding how there can be rebirth without a self.

Think of a river. We all know what a river is. We go and perhaps stand by the side of a river and we see the river. But the real question is, what *is* the river? The river is the flow of water. The river is not something in and of itself different than the flowing water flowing according to the topography. "River" is a concept. The word, the term "river," is a concept—a designation for that process of the flowing water. But river as a thing in itself doesn't exist. It's just a concept, a useful one, as many concepts are. A concept that is a designation for something. And what is it the designation for? The flow of water.

Self is the same thing, the same level of understanding as river. Self is a concept that we use as a designation for the flow of these mental and physical elements that are arising and passing very quickly, which we can see for ourselves in meditation. But there's no self apart from the flow of changing elements. It's not that this mind-body process belongs to something apart from it.

The term *self* or *Joseph* is simply a way of designating the particular flow of these mind-body elements. And it's this flow which goes on from life to life. It's not that there is something, some being, which is carried over from this life to the next. Rather, it's just a continuation of the very same process that is

happening in this life.

So I hope you get some sense of how we can use the term *self*. We can use the term *Joseph* and *I, me* and *mine*—use all of those as concepts. They're useful as designating certain processes. But they do not exist as some substantial entity independent of the process. The concept is simply pointing to it.

And just to further the analogy of the river, we might think of rebirth from life to life as the river flowing through different terrains. One life might be the river of life flowing through meadows and grasslands. Then maybe it flows through a different kind of terrain. We might think of each life as being a particular terrain through which this river of life processes is flowing on.

I hope this was more clarifying than confusing, but I hope it illuminates the fact that we can use the concepts if we understand that they're concepts and not a substantial reality in themselves. When we look to what the concept is pointing to—so the concept of self is pointing to this mind-body process—then through our practice, we drop into that more ultimate level of the experience of it. We experience for ourselves the flowing, impermanent nature of all of these elements. There is nothing fixed. There is nothing solid.

This understanding then has tremendous implications for how we live our life on the relative level, on the conventional level. Because to the extent that we understand the selfless nature of this process, the changing nature, we begin to weaken the very deeply conditioned habit pattern of clinging, of grasping, of holding on. To the degree that we are really experiencing the changing nature of things, that insight into impermanence on a very subtle level begins to decondition the very strong habit pattern of grasping and clinging. And the less we cling to that which is changing, the less we suffer.

So it all comes down to—I think I mentioned this yesterday—when the Buddha was asked what he teaches, he said he teaches just one thing: suffering and its end. Everything we're talking about, even these more subtle levels of understanding the more ultimate reality and the selfless nature of things, are all in the service of freeing ourselves from those causes and conditions that create suffering in our lives, for ourselves and for others.

Another question arose: What advice or practices might be offered to teachers of young children? How can we have the most impact within our classrooms or with our families to teach in a certain way that would not perpetuate the cycle of conditioning around "me, me, me," so that children get at an early age an introduction to these concepts? How can we foster this awareness from the beginning rather than later as adults, working so hard to undo the unconscious social conditioning placed upon us throughout our lives?

This is, I think, a really important question, especially for those who have children or are working with children. Obviously, it's not going to work to give a philosophic analysis of self and non-self. That's completely inappropriate in this situation. But what can be conveyed is to emphasize those ways of being,

those practices and behaviors, that weaken the sense of self in their very nature.

For example, teaching and modeling—probably even more important than any words we use—teaching and modeling generosity. Generosity is the act of letting go, of non-clinging. Modeling kindness rather than selfishness. Modeling inclusion rather than exclusion of people around us. All of this, in just modeling wise behavior, is actually weakening the manifestation of self-centeredness.

And I think that term, *self-centered*, is really a good entranceway or doorway to understanding selflessness. Just in our common parlance, most people understand what self-centered means. They don't necessarily think of it on the deepest level of self, but it's easily understood as being more concerned with oneself than others. So it's pretty easy to understand: How can we teach children to be less self-centered? This is not necessarily some abstruse philosophical Buddhist doctrine. It's just a way of modeling skillful behavior in the world that has deep transformative power as it becomes more integrated in the lives of both children and ourselves as adults.

Just one example of a change in patterns of behavior was very striking to me. This happened maybe forty or forty-five years ago and really stuck in my mind. At the time I was practicing in India, in Bodh Gaya, and in a time between retreats, there was a group of us Westerners staying at the Burmese Vihara. We were just having a little social gathering one evening among friends. There was one woman there who was a musician, and she said she had written a song about each of us, highlighting each person.

And I, and perhaps the others too, just assumed that it would be a kind of humorous roast, where she would pick out our foibles and create a song about that. But it turns out she didn't do that at all. What she did was highlight what she saw as the really good qualities, the beautiful qualities in each of us. And she wrote a song about that. So instead of a roast, it became a toast to each of us.

It was so surprising to me because it was so not what I expected, but it was tremendously uplifting. Everybody felt really good. And of course, this way of relating to people is the very foundation of metta practice, of loving-kindness practice, where it's said we develop metta towards beings by focusing on their good qualities.

And yet it would be interesting just to notice: what is our pattern? When we're with people, either people we know well or those we've just met, what is our first response or way of relating? Is the mind focusing on the difficult aspects of their personality, or are we focusing on their really good or beautiful qualities, even as we see the other part? So it's not having some Hallmark vision of people and pretending that everything's all beautiful and all good. No, people are complex. We're all a mix. But can we direct our minds to emphasize the good in people?

And of course, just as I felt when this woman was singing this toast to us all and felt uplifted, when we focus on the good in others, that's a beautiful foundation for relationship, for relating, for inclusion rather than exclusion. And all of this can be taught to young children, right from a very early age.

Another question: "How does one act consistently when not lying—telling the truth—produces harm or pain? Am I responsible for another's response to a truthful statement?"

This, I think, is a really important question as we explore what right speech means in the context of our path. And I just want to emphasize that I find speech to be an enormously fruitful arena for meditation practice. It's one step on the Eightfold Path—right at the center of the Eightfold Path—right speech. And given how much of the day we spend talking, it's really important to bring mindfulness to our speech.

Just as a little aside, I'm reminded of another question that was asked about how we can become more aware of volition and intention, that it seems very subtle and hard to catch. Well, it's pretty easy to see intention before we speak. If we're mindful enough, we can be aware that we're about to say something. Can we really be mindful of that intention to speak, that "about to" moment before the words come tumbling out, and then see: is this wise speech or not wise speech? So right there, we can get a very clear sense of the experience of intention and volition. It's that "about to" moment before the action takes place.

Going back to the original question, one guideline that the Buddha gave for right speech, which very much addresses this, is that we should speak only that which is true *and* useful. That's an important addition. Because something might be true, but it may not be the right time. It may not be the right place to actually express that truth. And if we're aware that we're about to say something, we want to consider: is this going to be useful? Is this going to be helpful to the other person?

If it's both true and useful, then it should be spoken, even if it causes some discomfort to the other person—because at least in our assessment, in our judgment, we see that this could be a useful time to say this. But if something is true and it's not a useful or skillful time, then it's not wise speech to give voice to it. Then we want to restrain, refrain from that, and wait till a more appropriate time. So you can just keep in mind this very simple guideline: wise speech is both true and useful. That, I think, can really help guide us in when to speak and when not to.

So another question, which is really quite big, and I can just touch on it a little bit: "Can you please expand a bit on what the Buddha said is so harmful in the belief in a core, unchanging, underlying self at the center of our being?"

If you remember, I think I mentioned yesterday that the Buddha talked about how wrong view is the most dangerous of all the defilements. And in the context of yesterday's talk, I was referring to that aspect of wrong view—the wrong view of self. But right view and wrong view as part of the Eightfold Path is much bigger. It has more components than just the view of self. The view of self is just one aspect of wrong view. So I'll be interchanging wrong view and right view, but realize that in our investigation, by understanding one, we naturally will understand the other.

So the Buddha talked about two different levels of right view. And this, in a way, relates to the framework of the two truths—the relative truth and the more ultimate truth. Buddha talked about mundane right

view, or worldly right view, and then what he called noble or liberating right view.

Mundane right view, worldly right view—there are many particular, specific aspects of it, but they all in a way revolve around the right view of understanding that actions have consequences, which is really an expression of the law of karma. This understanding is interwoven into all of the Buddhist teachings: that actions have consequences. Wrong view would be not understanding that, or not believing it, or not paying attention to it.

Now, the reason this wrong view is so harmful is because if we don't believe that our actions have consequences—both in the moment and long-term in terms of karmic results—then we may not be that motivated to engage in an active way with discerning which of our actions are wholesome, which of our thoughts are wholesome, and which are unwholesome, which are unskillful. If we don't discern that, then we're just going to be playing out whatever the particular conditioning of our lives happens to be. And so we'll probably be doing a lot of unwholesome actions which bring about suffering—suffering to ourselves, suffering to other people. This is one reason why wrong view is so dangerous: if we don't understand the truth of the law of karma.

And it's not some mystical thing. It's really just the understanding that everything we do—actions of our body, of our speech, of our mind—has consequences. It brings results. Every action is like planting a seed. If we plant an apple seed and expect a mango, we're not going to be very fulfilled. We want to understand what seeds lead to what results. The Buddha was very clear about this. And the beauty and the power of his teachings is that he understood with such clarity this basic law of nature. When Vruni was speaking yesterday about the refuges and refuge in the Dharma, meaning the lawful nature of things—this is one aspect of that. One aspect of the lawful nature is this law that actions have consequences. So this is mundane right and wrong view. And I think you can see that without this understanding, we will get caught up, just out of habit patterns and conditioning, in a lot of unwholesome actions that will bring about suffering, because we haven't really internalized this strong understanding of right view that actions do bring results.

On the level of noble right view—what you could call the level of right view that actually liberates us—this is not only what gives us guidelines for actions in the world that bring about worldly happiness. The liberative right view, the noble right view, is what actually leads to freedom in the mind. And this noble right view has many different aspects as well, but one foundational expression of this liberative right view is an understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

Understanding or realizing the truth of dukkha—sometimes it's translated as suffering, as unreliability, as things being ultimately unsatisfying simply because nothing lasts, everything is changing. So even though we experience many pleasant things in our lives that are not suffering, even the pleasant things are unreliable as a source of lasting happiness, precisely because they don't last. This understanding of the first noble truth of dukkha is really important, especially as we explore the second noble truth, which is

the cause of suffering. What is the cause behind the suffering, behind this dukkha? And the Buddha highlighted the essential role of craving or clinging as being the source of suffering in our lives.

This all fits together because in this noble right view, we are seeing—and through our meditative practice we're seeing—the impermanent nature on a very microscopic level, although we can see it on any level that we look at. Change is pervasive on all levels, but when we see it on the microscopic level in our meditation practice and we're experiencing this whole mind-body process as just a very rapid flow of elements, that very seeing deconditions grasping, deconditions clinging. And yet when we don't have this liberative right view of the truth of dukkha and the cause of dukkha and the way to free ourselves from the cause of dukkha, then we just go on in the ordinary flow of our lives, getting caught up in clinging to the pleasant and having aversion to the unpleasant. We just get further enmeshed in this whole samsaric unfolding.

So this is another way that wrong view is very dangerous—because it keeps us locked in to the very causes of suffering. And noble right view, liberative right view, frees us from those causes. We begin to feel for ourselves, even in momentary ways perhaps, or over time for longer and longer periods, that we really can taste the third noble truth, which is the end of suffering.

I'm reminded just in this moment of a really important realization I had. This goes back not to the beginning of my practice—maybe fifteen years ago or something like that. I was sitting, and for some reason I was reflecting on the Four Noble Truths and about the third noble truth being the end of craving. Craving being the cause of suffering, the end of suffering is the end of craving. The Buddha was very explicit about this. After his enlightenment, he said, "Realized is the unconditioned, achieved is the end of craving." A very explicit statement about what frees and liberates the heart and mind.

But I had always held that understanding of the third noble truth as some far-off goal. It made total sense to me. But I thought, yeah, maybe in twenty years or thirty years or five lifetimes or however long, I'll come to the end of craving.

And so I was practicing with that as a goal far in the future. As my sweatshirt story revealed, I think there's still a little way to go to come to the final end of craving.

However, in that sitting I'm talking about now, I had a sudden change of understanding. It was about realizing that yes, the complete uprooting of craving is probably some way off. But we can experience the end of craving for a moment—in this moment. In the letting go, we let go of the craving, the wanting, the clinging. We can experience the mind that is free of that kind of desire. And in that moment, for those moments, even if it's just for a few moments, we are actually tasting what we could call the peace of temporary nibbana, the end of suffering.

It's not the final end. There's still more craving in there. But for that period of time, we have a real taste of it. And this became tremendously energizing for me in the practice, and in a way highlighted what the

practice is actually about.

Yesterday I was speaking about one kind of craving—the craving for becoming. We can see this in our meditation practice, where very often we're practicing for this or that experience. We want to become in that way. But highlighting the fact that we can practice the end of craving in this moment reminds us that the practice is really not about getting some new experience. The real heart of the practice is letting go of that wanting. We can actually do that and experience it for ourselves. As I say, it might just be for a few moments, but it's a genuine taste of that possibility of freedom.

So I hope this answers in some way the question of why wrong view can be so dangerous—it just entangles us, often without our even understanding why or how, in suffering. If we don't really understand that actions have consequences, then we're not paying attention to whether our actions are skillful or unskillful. When we don't pay attention to our exploration of the Four Noble Truths—of suffering or dukkha and its causes, and the end of dukkha through the end of craving—then we just stay enmeshed in the patterns of our conditioning. This is why there's so much danger in wrong view, and so much potential and possibility of freedom in right view.

Right view is really reminding us that this whole path is a path of happiness. That's what the Buddha was teaching—all the different kinds of happiness, both worldly and mundane, and also the happiness of liberation.

This is just a brief summary of right and wrong view. If you'd like to explore it further, I'd recommend, if any of you happen to have a copy of my book *Mindfulness*—a rather large book—I have two chapters on right view where I go into much more detail about the different aspects of it.

So there were a few questions, all related. One was: Could you speak about spiritual bypassing?

Here's another which is related in a way: "I am noting flooding from an interaction with my daughter and feeling resentment and hurt. How do I work with this in practice? How does anatta, selflessness, pertain to this?"

And then there were a few others. One said: "In your example of losing mindfulness at retreat and responding by letting go of your sense of self, you might have gone the other way and experienced fully how terrible you felt about yourself. Comment on these two apparently opposite ways of responding."

The last related question was: "I often wake with horrible thoughts about what I did or didn't do as a young mother. My children are now in their forties, are beautiful people, and don't hold resentment towards me or their upbringing. Now that I know a small bit about papañca, how do I work with these thoughts to turn them from self-abuse to compassion?"

In some way, they're all related—about what spiritual bypassing is and what it isn't.

A spiritual bypass is when we use a dharma concept to avoid acknowledging or feeling or experiencing

what we're actually going through. If we're having some difficult experience—it could be any of the ones mentioned—some difficult emotion, and we say, "Oh, it's all empty," and then we just dismiss it and don't deal with it, that's what a spiritual bypass is.

In our practice, letting go of those feelings or emotions or thoughts that are causing us suffering is not a question of denying them or just using a concept—"Oh, it's all empty, it doesn't matter"—which isn't going to work anyway. The practice of applying our understanding of selflessness is not on the concept level. It's not just thinking, "Oh yeah, things are selfless," and then everything's fine. No, it comes from the realization of things being empty of self. When we have, to some degree—whatever level we do—some understanding of the selfless nature...

And of the workings of māna, of conceit, of claiming things to be "I am." "Oh, I'm so terrible." Or "I'm so bad for some actions that I may have done."

We really want to acknowledge, to start with the acknowledgment of how we're feeling and actually feel it. We feel the upset. We feel the self-criticism or the self-judgment. So we're not denying it. We're not pretending that it's not there. We actually are in the experience of it, but not staying in that experience if it's simply causing us suffering. That's like holding onto a hot burning coal and thinking, "Well, I should be holding onto it because I really did do something wrong." We justify those feelings to ourselves and then think we should hold on to them. But that doesn't make sense because we're just holding on to suffering.

So once we have acknowledged, once we have embodied, once we feel what we're feeling, that's when we can begin to investigate and remind ourselves of the selfless nature of those thoughts, of those emotions. As I was speaking yesterday, just by saying, "Oh yes, this is just māna. This is just the identifying with that emotion." That's the māna. And as soon as we see that identification as being the working of that particular defilement of the mind—"Oh, that's just māna"—it really releases our grip on that particular unwholesome or suffering state.

So it's really important to begin to see this. There's one discernment that I think is a furtherance of this understanding, one example of freeing ourselves from identification with these painful states while acknowledging them at the same time. This is the discernment of the difference between guilt and remorse.

This is something, an experience I had that goes back many years, more toward the beginning of my practice. I was doing a retreat at IMS, and I don't even remember the details of the story, but for whatever reason, something had come to mind and I was feeling really guilty about it. The guilt was really strong. I was really beating myself up.

At a certain point—and I think I've mentioned this—for myself, when I'm suffering, it really piques my interest. I want to find out, I want to investigate what's causing this suffering. So after some time of just drowning in the guilt, I started looking more carefully. What is going on here? And I began to see that guilt

is just an ego trip. It was just strengthening the sense of I, of self, in a negative way. "I'm so bad, I'm so awful, look what I did." I, I, I—as I say, in a negative way, in a way that causes suffering.

As soon as I saw that guilt was just a trick of the ego, that was like one of those moments: "Māra, I see you"—this force trying to draw us into suffering. Then I began to see an alternative. Yes, I may have done something that was unwholesome, unskillful, that initially caused all this guilt to arise. But when I saw that guilt was an ego trip, the alternative is what I'm calling—people might have their own word for it—remorse.

In the feeling of remorse, there is the acknowledgment that yes, we did something that was not skillful, that may have caused some harm, caused some suffering. We see that, we acknowledge it, we make amends if possible. But we're also understanding it from a place of wisdom, of seeing the selfless nature of it. That act, that unwholesome act, doesn't define us. It was just an act that had certain consequences. In the field of wisdom and remorse, we see that, we understand, we take responsibility for it, but we also see the impermanence and the flow. And so we can actually forgive ourselves because we have acknowledged it, we have taken responsibility for it, and we're not locking it in with this feeling of guilt, which is just strengthening the ego in all of it.

I hope you see that this really is all related to spiritual bypassing and how we can be with things—either by denying them, which is not very helpful or skillful, or by opening to them, feeling them, and then freeing ourselves from our enmeshment in the suffering. This has to do with seeing the impermanence and the selfless nature of it all. I find that this discernment between guilt and remorse has really been helpful because, of course, in our lives we all do things that are unskillful at different times. And so we want some way of relating that's healthy, where we can see it, acknowledge it, and also let go and move on.

There was one question that was a little amusing to me: "When you were out doing walking meditation in the cold wind, getting lost in Hawaii dreams, what kept you from going inside and putting on a coat instead?" There was another similar question about walking: "Why didn't I just walk inside?"

Well, of course, I did have a coat on in that very cold weather. But the question brought up a quality that at times I've found really helpful in the practice: being willing to play at the edges of our discomfort. For me, even though it was this ice-burning cold—and I didn't stay out there that long—I was interested. I was just interested in experiencing that intense cold. It was painful, but I just wanted to feel it. What is this like?

What does unbearable mean? And this is not like masochistic self-torture. I was actually interested in what's the nature of the mind, the nature of awareness that knows this unpleasantness. Just being willing at times to play at these edges of our comfort zone.

And it doesn't have to be outside in the cold. It can be just in our sitting practice when we're feeling some

discomfort. It could be physical discomfort. It could be emotional discomfort. And maybe we'll see the tendency just to pull back because we don't want to feel the unpleasantness of it.

Well, an important part of the practice is when there feels like there's enough balance and interest—there's no compulsion, we shouldn't be forcing ourselves to do this—it's really playing, as I say, playing at the edges. Because we all have a comfort zone, this level of experience we're okay with, and then maybe we have some experience that's pushing at those edges where we're not relaxed, we're not open, we're not accepting of it. Can we spend a little time right at that edge seeing if we can relax? Open, let me feel it. Let me feel the pain, let me feel the discomfort, let me feel this difficult emotion. Can I come to a place of acceptance rather than pulling back into our comfort zone?

As we do this, in some way, I think this is the trajectory of our practice. When I imagine the Buddha mind—and this is just my imagination—but when I imagine the Buddha mind and the trajectory toward Buddha mind, one of the ways I think of it is this: we each have our comfort zone, we come to the edge, we relax, we open. And our zone gets a little wider. Again, wider, wider, wider. And my imagination of the Buddha mind is a mind without edges. A mind without boundaries. Where whatever arises is just arising in the field, we could say, of emptiness or selflessness or the field of wisdom. No boundaries, no edges, and therefore no fear.

I find this a useful way of understanding how our practice deepens and how it grows and how we get stronger and more inclusive of all the aspects of our experience. And we can't force it. One of the things I love about this practice is it's very organic. We don't have to force ourselves into anything. We just have to be willing to be interested—to be interested in our own experience, to be interested in times of suffering and investigating: what's the cause of this suffering? How is my mind getting caught up? How is it getting enmeshed? And of course, this is a lot of what I was talking about yesterday—those three tendencies which do enmesh us in suffering.

There were quite a few other really interesting questions, so maybe just in the next couple of days we'll have a chance to explore some of those as well.

Thank you for your attention. I hope you get as excited about Dharma practice as I do. The Buddhist teaching is just such an amazing gift to us all, because the Buddha had such clarity about how this mind, this whole mind-body process is working. And it's not theoretical, it's not philosophical. He saw it through his own experience, and the teachings allow us to experience it all for ourselves and to test it, to see for ourselves whether this is true or not.

Thank you again for your attention, and I'll see you tomorrow.

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