Questions and Responses

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:05:54

It's really nice to be with you all, masks and all. This is my first time in the hall with yogis since we closed for COVID, so it's kind of exciting.

There were a lot of questions, and it's doubtful that we'll get through all of them. There were a few which were similar, so I thought I would just read them together.

"For someone with a tendency to over-effort, being simple and easy can be not simple and easy. Any tips?" "How does one stop thinking about the end of the river and put their paddle down? In other words, how do you stop making so much effort?" "Do you have any advice for how to relax into and trust the unfolding of the process?"

These are not uncommon questions. And as I'm sure most of you know, the Buddha gave a lot of emphasis to exploring exactly what right effort means. You're probably familiar with the example he gave of tuning the strings of a lute. If it's too tight, you have to relax. Too loose, you have to tighten the strings a bit. So this is an ongoing adjustment that we all make in our practice in monitoring the quality of our effort. And it's not like we find the right balance and then we have it. We'll find ourselves going through cycles where we were over-efforting or we were just too relaxed and spacing out.

Most of these questions were more on the side of what to do when we're making too much effort—what I call "efforting," or struggling in the practice. This actually points to a deep understanding of what the practice is about, which we often forget. And it's highlighted in one line that is found often in the suttas, in the discourses. It's a line that in the discourses, when people would hear it, they'd often get enlightened. Or sometimes they said that line is an expression of their enlightenment. So this is your big chance. Listen carefully. It's so simple that people really miss it.

Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

I had read that a million times, and it just seemed like an obvious statement of impermanence. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. But a couple of years ago I was on retreat, doing a self-retreat, and that line came into my mind. Because I was on retreat, rather than just reading it in a book, it landed very differently. Instead of being an intellectual appreciation of "oh yeah, everything's impermanent," it kind of settled right into the midst of my unfolding meditative process. I was on retreat, I was sitting intensively, that thought came—whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away—and so I actually applied that understanding in that moment.

Of course it's not hard to comprehend that. It's easy to understand and it's even easy to apply if we

remember. But then my mind did something really interesting which had quite a profound effect on my practice.

So I'm sitting. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And then my mind went to: therefore there's nothing to want.

I'm talking now within the meditative process. Because if whatever arises is also going to pass away, therefore there's nothing to want. Whatever it is that I might be wanting in my practice will also pass away.

And it was really interesting what happened in that moment with "nothing to want." I could feel my mind drop back from what is a very common leaning into the process. This is really common. I see it in myself and with many, many yogis. We're with this moment *in order to* get to the next moment. It could be something as simple as the in-breath in order to take the out-breath. Or it could be with the breath in order to get concentrated. Some kind of "in order to," some leaning into.

And then in that moment—there's nothing to want—the mind dropped back from any leanings. It was so vivid and not complicated. It was just this very simple little thing.

And then I reflected a little bit that right there is the essence of the practice. And this is what I think, for myself and many people, we miss. The essence of the practice is non-craving.

When you consider the Four Noble Truths—the truth of dukkha, the cause of dukkha is craving, the end of dukkha is the end of craving, and the path—right in that moment of "there's nothing to want," you feel the mind drop back from wanting. Right there we have a taste, even if it's just momentary, of the Third Noble Truth. We've experienced, to some extent, but a profound extent, a touching of the liberative potential of the mind, which the Buddha pointed to: the end of craving.

I just find it interesting that even for experienced practitioners—and I see this in myself and, as I say, with many others—we're often practicing *for* some experience rather than for not craving. Do you see the difference? That's where we can get caught up in this over-efforting. If we have some idea of reaching for an experience, wanting our meditation to be or to have a certain quality, that's a wanting in the mind. It's a craving in the mind. When there's nothing to want, there's no craving, and the mind is really at peace.

So one thing you might try, if this resonates with you at all: when you're in your practice and you feel like you're in somewhat of a flow of experience, see what happens if you simply call to mind, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. Therefore, there's nothing to want." But not as an intellectual exercise—actually applying it in your practice at that time. Then notice whether you can feel what I'm describing as that dropping back rather than leaning into. It really changed my practice a lot because it was such a powerful reminder of what the essence of the practice is. The end of craving—that's what we're practicing.

I'll say one more thing about over-efforting that just came to mind. I'm not sure, because I haven't been here to hear the instructions, so you may have heard this already. But even in just being with the breath, just a simple basic being with the breath, notice the difference between when your mind is zeroing in on the breath and when you're feeling the breath within the whole body.

I've been teaching—and maybe some of you have heard me give the instruction—of just using the phrase "there is a body" as a larger framework. We settle ourselves within that larger framework. There is a body. And then there's simply being with what arises within that larger framework without narrowing the focus. Now, there can be times when the narrowing of the focus is useful and helpful. But particularly if there's over-efforting, there's a tendency to do that more when you're zeroing in on the breath, as opposed to just allowing the breath to find its own rhythm because we're not interfering with it—because we've given ourselves a broader, larger context, namely the whole body. Is this clear?

That also made a huge difference when I started practicing in that way, and I've gotten a lot of feedback from yogis who found it helpful.

This is an interesting question: Can there be anger without ill will or aversion? In other words, can anger ever be wholesome?

There are two levels to this question, I think. First is to understand what's behind the question. Very often, anger may arise in response to injustice or something that we think is wrong. Our response, the anger, may arise as a reaction to that. In that situation, I think it's helpful to see the anger as a messenger. That emotion arising is actually giving us a message: "This is not right." But that's the point at which we can either get lost in the anger, identified with it, and maybe vent it—which is not skillful—or understand that the emotion is arising as a message in response to a certain situation.

And if we can understand the message and let go of the anger, then our minds have a greater possibility of actually addressing the situation with more skill. If we're just caught up in our own reactivity, that's generally not the most skillful way of dealing with the situation or trying to address it.

In contexts like this, I think it's useful to see the anger as an emotion telling us something, and then we learn from it. That's a helpful way of understanding anger and the potential to transform it into something that is really effective.

Another question arose—and I had this discussion with Bhikkhu Anālayo on a walk because it's come up before. I asked him whether, in that context, we could think of anger as not being unwholesome. He responded in a way that reflected the classical Buddhist teachings: anger is always unwholesome, always unskillful.

For me, I think it's possible to hold both of these perspectives. I don't think we have to choose. We can understand, based on the Buddha's teachings, that anger is always unwholesome—and there's a little footnote to this also. At the same time, until we are free of anger at the third stage of enlightenment, it's

going to arise at different times. So even if we know that fundamentally it's an unwholesome mind state, if we realize it is going to arise, can we understand it in a way that we are using it skillfully?

Do you see the possibility? I don't think the two perspectives have to be in opposition. One has to do with recognizing that this is an emotion that will arise in certain circumstances—how can I use it most skillfully and understand it most skillfully? At the same time, we can realize that at a certain level of enlightenment, it's not going to arise anymore, and there will be other motivations for taking skillful action. That's how I understand it.

Now, the footnote. One of the problems in communication is that people can use the same word to mean different things. Unless there's a lot of clarity about what a person means by the words they use, there's often just a missing.

As an example, one understanding of anger would include the intent to do harm. We see that certainly in many manifestations of anger—there is that intention to do harm. That to me is clearly unskillful. But then the question arises: is there some emotion that looks like anger but does not contain that energy to do harm? Something more like righteous indignation, perhaps—some other word.

This would take a very careful examination of our own minds when something is arising that we're calling anger, to really investigate. Understanding that the classical teachings use that word and say it's one of the unwholesome roots, that could actually be a motivation for us when what we're calling anger is arising to really look at that mind state, to investigate for ourselves. What's involved in this? Certainly one aspect would be the doing of harm—that would be a clear signal to me that it's unskillful. But maybe there are gradations. This is just an invitation to investigate.

As I said, there are ways to understand that even if anger is unskillful at all levels, the fact that it will still be arising means we need to ask: how can we use it skillfully and not erupt in flames?

This is important because anger that motivates doing harm is a source of a huge amount of suffering in the world. Years ago—and I was just reminded of it recently—when I would talk about sīla and the precepts, I would make the suggestion: What would it be like if everybody in the world undertook just one precept? Not to kill. Even not to kill just human beings. That's all. This world would be an incredibly different place.

The intention to do harm does harm. And so we want to watch in our own minds. Hopefully you don't have intentions to go around killing people, but we can do harm in a lot of different ways. That's something to watch for.

Some of these were similar questions: How can we explore the arising and passing away of phenomena in our sitting and walking practice? How do you know if you're in the territory of seeing the arising and passing beyond the conceptual level?

There are different levels of seeing arising and passing. There can be a very clear seeing of it for short periods of time. But that phrase, "seeing arising and passing," also refers to a stage in the progress of insight, in the unfolding of the practice, where the mindfulness and concentration really have developed to quite a good extent. The momentum of our noticing becomes very strong, very high, and there's just this tremendous clarity and lightness. The mind is luminous at that time, where we're simply in that flow of seeing the rapid rising and passing of phenomena really effortlessly because there's so much momentum. That's the classical description of the stage of insight of arising and passing away.

But I've found a way of really glimpsing that deeply, even before that stage, where we may not have built up that really powerful momentum where we're just in the flow of it. We can bring the wisdom mind—in the factors of enlightenment, the wisdom aspect is called investigation of dhammas. It's that investigative mind. This quality is very strong in my mind, sometimes to my detriment. I've been told by certain teachers, especially when I was trying to do concentration practice, "Oh, you have too much investigation." I was always investigating instead of just staying right on the object. But at other times, it's really served me, because I've discovered a lot in very ordinary circumstances.

One way of really seeing clearly the pretty rapid arising and passing of phenomena is to take a few minutes—it can be sitting, it can be in formal walking meditation, or it could be just going for a walk, or moving about the building—holding a very simple question in mind. And that is: moment after moment, what is being known? That's all. Just what's being known.

In whatever we're doing, we're paying attention, we're settled back, we're not directing the mind in any way at all. It's very receptive, very open, and we're just in this very receptive mode, noticing what is being known moment after moment. And because we're not doing anything, it's not at all difficult to become aware of a sensation, a sound, the feeling of the air on one's face, a thought, a movement—just moment after moment something is going to be arising. If we're holding that intention to acknowledge what's being known, moment after moment, you will see that these objects are coming and going very quickly by themselves.

It's not like we have to do anything to make things change. The very nature of phenomena: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And when we're settled back, not trying to direct anything, it becomes very clear, very obvious. And effortless. It's really an easeful thing to do.

What I would suggest is, if this suggestion is of interest to you, to do it just for five minutes at a time, ten minutes at a time. Because if you think, "Oh, I'm going to do that for an hour," the mind's going to lose energy. It's going to get bored. You're not going to be able to do it, really. But for five minutes or ten minutes, there can be the energy behind that investigation, which I think will really spur your interest. And you will see. You will have a direct experience of arising and passing of phenomena.

This exercise has another benefit, and this goes to a deeper way of understanding selflessness, of non-self, which for many people is the hardest of the three characteristics. We can understand impermanence

easily. We can understand dukkha pretty easily. But non-self is counterintuitive. There's an intimate connection between insight into impermanence and non-self. When we're really seeing the impermanence in a somewhat sustained way, even for short periods of time, nothing lasts long enough to be self. And so we actually have a felt sense of selflessness in the exercise I just described. What's being known? Just things coming and going from all the six sense doors. When we're in that, I think you will really have a sense of the selfless, impersonal nature of the whole process. So this exercise can illuminate a lot.

Can you please talk about the difference between consciousness at the sense doors and consciousness? Sometimes in deep concentration I sense consciousness beyond the body. I become consciousness.

There are some subtle points in this question. As you know in the teachings, consciousness is not one thing. Consciousness is arising and passing in each moment. Our experience is really a pairwise progression of knowing an object. The knowing and the object arise together and pass away together. Knowing of a sight, arising and passing. Knowing of a sound, arising and passing. Knowing of a thought. And so on through all the six sense objects. So the first thing to understand is that consciousness is not one thing. There's not one consciousness which is aware of all the different objects. Consciousness itself is arising and passing.

It's a pairwise progression.

I'm going to take a little detour here—and I don't even know if this relates to one of the questions in the pile, but what I learned from my teacher Munindraji, my first teacher, was that when people would ask him questions, he would just answer whatever he wanted to answer, whether it had to do with the question or not. So I learned that from him. It's a great teaching skill.

But this is related. This is just a little sidetrack into an understanding, a description, a way of understanding what non-self means. Because as I said, it's not an easy thing to understand. Our conventional way of being in the world presumes that of course there's a self and an I and a you, and we relate to one another in that way. So what does it mean to say non-self?

One of the examples I've been using recently is that of a river. If we say we're going to go down to the river, sit by the side of a river, we all know what that means. But what is a river? A river is a flow of water. And we give a name to that flow of water: river. So "river" is a designation for something. It's not a thing in and of itself. There's no river as a thing independent from the flow of water.

Self is just like river. Self is a designation for the flow of changing phenomena. What's really happening, as I just said, is a very rapid flow of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. It's happening really quickly, and so it gives the impression of there being something fixed. But one of the insights of insight meditation is that we see there's nothing fixed. Our experience is this flow of changing phenomena, and we simply use the term "self" as a designation for that.

So when we say non-self, it's just reminding us that that term is a concept pointing to something. It's not a thing in its own right. It's a designation for something. And we can use that—it's not that we have to get rid of that word. It's very useful for communication. But what happens is we've become so accustomed to the designation that we think that the self is a something, and that somehow in our practice we have to get rid of it, or we have to—I don't know—blow it up, something. But that's because we're confusing the fact that it's just a concept, just a designation for something, with being a thing in and of itself.

Are we together on this? It doesn't seem complicated to me, but we're very conditioned to be identified with this notion, this idea of self, instead of looking and understanding: no, this is just a word pointing to a flow, just like "river" is a word pointing to the flow.

Okay, why did I get off on that? So, consciousness at the center—the flow is this knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. That's the sixth sense, as was mentioned.

The question continues: "But sometimes in deep concentration I sense consciousness beyond the body."

What can happen when the mind becomes quite concentrated is that sometimes we lose all perception of the body. All that remains is knowing. There's just the knowing. And Mahasi Sayadaw—he's kind of the grandfather of this whole lineage—particularly pointed out this time in practice. This generally happens when the mind has really settled in and is quite concentrated, where the whole felt sense of the body disappears. There's just knowing.

Mahasi Sayadaw taught and wrote that at those times this can be a very blissful state. In a way it's a relief to let go of the more gross perception of the body and just rest in awareness, just knowing. So he said that this is very seductive, that people can really delight in this. But it still is part of the flow of conditioned phenomena.

But it's a very refined state – it's just the knowing. And Mahasi Sayadaw said that at those times, one has to note, whether literally noting or simply noticing: knowing, knowing. So the knowing itself becomes the object of mindfulness.

This brings us back to that last sentence from the Buddha's teaching: "I become consciousness." That's the danger. In that very refined state, we can start identifying with the consciousness, with the knowing. "I'm the one who's knowing." And that identification is just another trap. That's where we get caught. That's where we're creating the felt sense of self – in the identification, whether it's with consciousness or anything else. That's where the felt sense of self comes about. It's when we're identifying with whatever it might be. It could be a thought, it could be a sensation, but in this case, it's with the knowing.

So it's important to be aware that these very refined states can arise in practice. But whatever arises, we have to stay mindful of it so that we're not identifying with it. Certainly in this tradition of practice, the final piece, we could say the highest piece, goes beyond consciousness, goes beyond awareness. But that's the subject of another few hours.

Another question came: What advice might you have to share around meditation and the last chapters of life? How has your practice changed as you have reached your seventies? How has your practice changed with the small and large diminishments of aging – in particular, a mind that is more vague, forgetful, with less energy?

Well, I certainly have been noticing some effects of aging. But mostly it's been good, really good. There's a lot less wanting. And I was going to say ambition – not that I was ever super ambitious. But still, when I was younger, there were things to do, things to accomplish. That kind of energy was good, and IMS is one product of it. But as I've gotten older, one can relax. That energy to accomplish has really cooled down.

For myself anyway – and I don't know whether others of you at this stage of life feel it as well – there's really just a settling back and more ease with the unfolding, just as it is now. There's also a lot more inspiration for practice, because there is the acknowledgement, to myself, that there's not unlimited time. Not that there ever is, but it becomes even more apparent as one gets older. For me, there's this wonderful combination of feeling more at ease and relaxed while also being more interested in practice.

Then there's the question about different times – whether because of physical health problems or perhaps mental diminishment in some form. One really important understanding is so helpful at whatever age one is. This is not limited to the later stages of life. And that is – and I hope you really take this in – we can be mindful of anything.

So the mind's confused. It's not clear what's going on. Confusion. We just make a big frame around it: "Oh, there's confusion." In that moment of noting, of noticing "confusion," in that moment we're not confused. We are actually being mindful of that current mind state. But it's so common to think, "Oh, I'm confused," and to assume that because we're confused we can't be mindful. That's the mistake.

Often questions come up about how to practice for dying, or being in the dying process, or being really ill. In a similar way, even before the dying process becomes a question, I find a very useful practice is whenever I'm not feeling well. I'm sick with something – it doesn't have to be a major thing. But when I remember, I take those times of not feeling well to be practice for dying. Because none of us really know how it's going to happen or the circumstances, but there's a good chance we're not going to be feeling well in one way or another. So if we've practiced beforehand, we know: "Oh, I can be mindful of this." It's not pleasant. It's not that mindfulness makes it pleasant. It's being mindful of unpleasantness.

But again, it's about creating a big frame. So instead of getting upset because we can't concentrate in some pinpointed way, or because of some idea of how our practice should be, remember that we can be mindful of anything. This is really a huge, huge help—to apply this understanding with whatever mind states or body states are coming up.

Do you know the paintings of Jackson Pollock? These massive, big paintings with swirls of paint all over

the place. At first it just seems really chaotic, chaotic energy. And if we were trying to trace it all, it would be impossible. There's just too much going on. But what happens? You put a frame around the picture, you hang it up on a museum wall, and then you can look at the whole painting from a place of ease, where you're not caught up in the frenetic energy of it. Because we have a big frame, we're seeing the whole, seeing the totality of it from a place of openness, a place of balance.

It's really helpful to remember this in practice. Whenever you have doubts about your practice—"I can't do it now, I can't deal with what's happening"—whatever form it takes, see if you can remember: Can I step back? Can I put a big frame around it? Agitation. Or suppose you have a sitting and your mind is just wandering for the whole hour. Maybe you're judging yourself, thinking your practice is no good. It would be possible just to settle back: "Oh, wandering mind. Just lots of thoughts." You're becoming mindful that that's what's happening, rather than struggling with some idea that you want it to be different. And of course, the ability to settle back and open up to whatever the experience is actually serves to settle things down.

So, Greg told us he considers his mind his best friend, and then added in parentheses, "Hope that doesn't hurt your feelings." Well, it does a little bit. He asked: Would you say the same regarding your mind? If so, can you say what that's like for you?

I think a fruit of the practice is that our minds become our best friends, but we don't often start that way. One teaching which Munindraji, my first teacher, would often say is that the mind can be your best friend or your worst enemy. I think we've all had experiences of that.

This suggests a lot to me. First, and this is part of my investigative tendency, I find it just so interesting to really look into the nature of the mind. Not particular content, but just what the mind is—this capacity to know, the capacity of being aware. And then everything we become aware of, and then all the ways we relate to what we're aware of. To see the mind as this completely dynamic, endlessly transforming energy, which can be used for the greatest good or the greatest harm.

A few years ago, there was a Ken Burns documentary on World War II. It was a very powerful series, ten or twelve episodes, really well done. I was watching it, and at first I was just interested in the historical dimensions—how it all unfolded, what happened. But after a while, because it was so many hours of watching and it was so well done, instead of seeing it that way, I began to see everything that was going on. And it was horrendous. I don't know if this figure is accurate, but something like fifty million people were killed, maybe even more. The horrors of the concentration camps—it was horrendous worldwide.

At a certain point, instead of just seeing the historical aspect, I began to see everything as the manifestation of greed and hatred and delusion. Everything that was going on was coming from those forces in the mind—the fear, the hatred, and all the actions that came from that. It was a reminder of just what the Buddha said in the first verses of the Dhammapada: all is mind-made. It all comes out of the mind.

And this is one of the really fascinating things about meditation practice: we get a front row seat at understanding the mind and everything it does. We see all of these forces within ourselves. It may not be to the point of the destructiveness of that war, but we see many manifestations of greed or hatred or fear or delusion. And we see the potential for the greatest good—when we really see in our own minds, and then by extension in everyone's mind, the potential for generosity and kindness and love and compassion and service.

There's a line from an anonymous samurai poem, and one line has always stuck with me: "I make my mind my friend." I love that. In one way, it's a wonderful description of meditation practice. We're learning to make our minds our friend. What that means is being open to the full range of what the mind is showing us, and then learning how to relate skillfully to whatever it is. When we see the unwholesome aspects, we learn to see them and let go, to let them pass through.

If we get caught up in self-judgment about these unwholesome qualities, or we hate seeing them, or hate that they're arising, we're just strengthening more aversion. That's not a skillful way. So we learn to see it all. Whatever the unskillful patterns are, we see them, we're mindful of them, they come and go. Everything that has the nature to arise will also pass away. And we see the wholesome qualities of mind and we learn to cultivate them. I think we come to a point where we can really say our minds are our best friends—once we have really learned through direct seeing and engagement, through a kind of intimacy with our own minds.

There's another question here: "The further I go in my practice, the more estranged I can feel at times from those not on this path, which leads to some delusion of separateness, yet the differences seem so real. How can I be more inclusive without disregarding my experience?"

That question would take another hour! There are so many different levels to this. A few things are coming to mind.

One is something I've heard the Dalai Lama say very often, a kind of bottom-line foundation of his understanding and his way of responding to the world: acknowledging that everyone wants to be happy. Whatever practice one is doing, or non-practice, however they're living—even when they're doing things that seem really terrible—it's coming from, sometimes a misguided place, but everyone wants to be happy.

If we can understand that, then it's possible first to appreciate the different ways that people go about seeking happiness. There are many different wholesome ways of doing it, and we can appreciate that in other people. They may not be on this path, but they're following their own path for finding happiness in their lives.

And when somebody is doing something we really understand is not leading to happiness, is harmful—instead of anger, we can have compassion. It's like seeing somebody heading toward a cliff through their unskillful actions. Especially when one understands the law of karma, the fact that our

actions bring results—if we see it in that broader context, do we get angry, or do we feel compassion and just want to try to help? Sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't.

I want to share one little story here. You may be familiar with Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest in L.A. who has done remarkable work with gang kids there. He started a whole organization that's become hugely successful. His books are quite amazing—like a transmission. He's right there in the middle of it, dealing with horrendous violence. These gangs are killing each other and killing bystanders. It's terrible. But he's right there, and he's done remarkable, remarkable work.

He's written two books. The first is called *Tattoos on the Heart*. If you haven't read it—it was a transmission for me. It really transformed something. The essence of his philosophy is: love no matter what. Just love no matter what. That doesn't mean condoning what people are doing. But love no matter what.

At the time I read it, I was in the midst of a rather intense interpersonal conflict that had gotten pretty convoluted—one of the most difficult things I've been through interpersonally. I was right in the middle of this when I read the book. Love no matter what. Suddenly it touched me. Okay, with this other person, the "problem person"—love no matter what. It doesn't matter. And then my mind would rush right back to being the lawyer arguing my case, why I was right and they were wrong, all of that. No—love no matter what.

As I sat with it and let it really enter in, there was a real transformation when I realized that the space of love no matter what was so much more open and free than being caught in being right within the conflict. It's like: okay, do I want to just stay being right, in the imprisonment of that?

It was a contraction, and it was very upsetting—not a pleasant place to be. But no, it doesn't matter. Love no matter what. And just that change, that understanding, opened up a new way of being with the situation that was tremendously freeing.

Someone asked where this arose in response to—how can I be more inclusive without disregarding my experience? In some way, that phrase encapsulated for me what inclusiveness truly means. We're not caught up in the differences. And it doesn't mean we don't respond. We can respond to whatever the situation is. But where are we responding from? What's the place? Is it love no matter what? Or is it "I'm right and you're wrong"? Which I was. But it didn't serve me. And it was realizing that. That book really helped me understand this.

We could go on for hours, but we won't. Why don't we just sit for a moment or two and let all the words settle.

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