Exploring Nibbāna: A Conversation with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:31:40

Welcome everyone. My name is William Edelglas. I serve as Director of Studies here at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts, next door to the Insight Meditation Society, IMS.

Before I introduce Joseph, I'd like to give you some sense of how our time together will unfold. After my introduction, Joseph will lead a short meditation, and then we will have a conversation exploring the question of Nibbāna. That conversation will be grounded in the article that Joseph published in the Insight Journal, the BCBS Journal last fall. Then we are going to invite questions from participants to join the conversation.

I think for many of you, Joseph Goldstein does not need an introduction. He is the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, IMS, and also the co-founder of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. There are many ways of telling the story of Buddhism in North America from the 19th century when immigrants first brought Buddhist practice and ritual from East Asia. But many ways of telling that story of Buddhism in America would include Joseph for his role in founding these institutions that supported the teaching and practice for so many in the insight meditation tradition, and for his own teaching over the last five decades, which has had such a profound influence on so many teachers and practitioners of insight meditation in the West.

Thank you, Joseph, for all of that and for being with us tonight. Maybe I can hand it over to you now to lead us through a meditation.

Thank you, William. We thought to just sit for a few minutes, a chance to settle in and settle into a Nibbāna-friendly mood preceding our discussion.

Sit and take a comfortable posture for meditation, whatever that might be, and close your eyes if that's how you usually sit. Start by taking a few deep breaths, just as a way of settling into the awareness of the body. Then let the breath find its own natural rhythm.

Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. It's really that simple.

Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise, but an exercise in awareness. We can allow the breath to follow its own natural way. No need to force it or manipulate it or change it in any way at all.

When sounds appear, simply be aware of hearing. If there are other strong bodily sensations, you can open to the feeling of those sensations, making them the object of your mindfulness. Feeling them, noticing them. And notice what happens. Do they get stronger? Do they get weaker? Do they disappear? When no longer predominant, settle back into the awareness of the body breathing.

Particularly be aware of any thoughts or images that arise in the mind. As soon as you become aware that the mind is thinking, you might make a soft mental note of "thinking," or "seeing" if it's an image. And notice what happens to the thought or image in that moment of awareness.

Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes, re-engaging with the world around you.

So, Joseph, maybe to start our conversation, you can say why you choose to use the word Nibbāna?

We hear a lot about Nirvana in Buddhism and also beyond Buddhism. What's special about the word Nibbana? Why use Nibbana?

I use the word Nibbana quite consciously. For those of you who may not be familiar with it, Nibbana is the term in the Pali language, and Nirvana is the term in Sanskrit. There were two reasons I wanted to use the Pali term.

The Sanskrit term Nirvana has really entered into our English lexicon in a way. There are Nirvana restaurants and rock bands and coffees and perfumes. The term Nirvana has taken on a kind of significance in our culture that is somewhat removed from its Buddhist meaning. In the course of conversation, we might refer to some experience as, "Oh, that was Nirvana." It's as if it were some ultimate fulfillment of sense pleasure or desire, the best of something in that realm. Of course, that has nothing to do with the real meaning of Nirvana. So I wanted to use the Pali word to separate us out from the colloquial usage that is now current.

The other reason is that Nirvana or Nibbana can refer to different things or can be understood in different ways in some of the major Buddhist traditions. In the Mahayana tradition, which often uses the Sanskrit term Nirvana, there are subtle differences of understanding than in the usage in the Theravada tradition, which uses the Pali term. I wanted to make clear that in the discussion, both in the essay and this evening, I'll really be talking about it from within the context of the Theravada tradition. In the later traditions of Buddhism, the term Nirvana has taken on some different nuances and meanings. So we'll be talking about it within the context of Theravada Buddhism.

The way we use the word Nirvana reminds me of how we might describe a chocolate cake as divine—which is quite different from an almighty divine being who might create the universe.

Exactly.

In my experience, we don't hear the term Nirvana used very often in Western convert Buddhist dharma centers. It's there, but it's not explored too much. I'm wondering if your teachers talked much about Nibbana, and at what point in your own practice Nibbana became something important for you to think about deeply.

My teachers definitely talked about it and referred to it. It is true that in the West, especially with Western teachers, it's not talked about that often. In reflecting on this, two reasons came to mind why it's not discussed as much as perhaps it should be.

First is the psychology of many Westerners who practice. Sometimes—and this is a generalization, but over fifty years of teaching I've seen it a lot—the Western mind, as we get into practice depending on how it's presented, can really get caught in a kind of unhelpful striving, a misunderstanding of what it means to have a goal. There can be a lot of expectation and striving in a way that really keeps the mind unbalanced. Very often, I think, in the way we present the teachings, we try to minimize that tendency of over-efforting. So I think that's one reason.

It is really important, and this would be a helpful distinction for people to make: it is possible to have an aspiration without an expectation. To have an aspiration for the practice—for that reason, I think it is helpful to talk about Nibbana as setting the direction for where our practice is going. But it gets tricky if it becomes an expectation and a wanting.

The other reason is that teachers who may not have yet experienced Nibbana may be reluctant to talk about it because it is still outside of their experience. But I think that for anybody in a teaching role who has quite a lot of experience on the path, whether or not a person has experienced Nibbana, if we're familiar with the teachings of the Buddha, even on a conceptual or intellectual level—if we have a clear understanding of them—in the teaching role it's actually possible to guide people even to places beyond our own level of realization.

There are stories of this even from the Buddha's time. There was one monk who was not realized, not enlightened, but he had a very clear understanding of the teachings. It's said that he led many of his fellow monastics on to full realization, to arahantship, even though he himself was not realized. In a way, this points to the importance—not only for teachers but for all of us who are interested—to engage in some study of the teachings, because it broadens our understanding beyond our personal experience.

Just as a little plug for the study center here, this is very much what the study center is holding, trying to convey the teachings in their breadth.

For myself, I did actually have a glimpse of Nibbana early on in my practice. So for me personally, it has been the pole star of my practice almost from the beginning. It's always been the central point of understanding of where the practice is leading and what needed to be done to really actualize it fully.

So for you, there's a way in which it functions as an aspiration—

perhaps, but it's something that's grounded in your own experience and might be different from having an aspiration without having that experience.

It is true, and it probably is different. And yet there are people who have not yet had the experience who, for whatever reason—just their paramis, their background—for whom the possibility of awakening, the possibility of liberation, is the driving force. That is why they're practicing. And in understanding Nibbana as coming to the end of suffering, I think that can be a motivation for all of us.

Sometimes we can have an experience of a kind of expansive equanimity, a mind that feels spacious and non-reactive. I think that's something that is relatively common for people on retreat. Is that a glimpse of Nibbana, or is that something else? How would we know if we had a glimpse of Nibbana?

That is something else, because there are many beautiful states of mind that can arise in the practice. Sometimes in the beginning, it may be just a glimpse of them. Deeper in our practice, we can become more stabilized, so that we have easy access to those states. But those beautiful states of mind are still conditioned phenomena. They're arising out of certain causes. The causes and conditions change, and the mind state changes, as we well know. So they are very impermanent. They're conditioned phenomena. And unlike Nibbana, they don't have the power to uproot defilements.

In a way, it's like we're taking a little rest in a pleasant mindset, but a wholesome mindset. So it's definitely a wholesome place to be. But then when we come out of it, we're still subject to the same conditioning of our mind, the working of various neurotic patterns, and the power of the defilements being activated. All that comes back.

There are just two other points to add regarding this question. One is expressing the value of these states even though they're not liberation, even though they're not Nibbana. When we're in a state of profound equanimity—and this is itself a particular stage of Vipassana called mature equanimity about all formations—it is said that when we're in that state, before realization but when our practice has reached that level, we're getting a taste of the mind of an arhant, the mind of a fully enlightened being. We don't want to confuse ourselves and think that it is that state, but it's a taste of that because the stillness and the equanimity and the clarity are so profound. So it's a meaningful experience, even though it's not yet realization.

And then on the other side, it's important to point out that there are many exalted and powerful states of mind that have not uprooted defilements from our mind stream. One famous example from the Buddhist tradition is the Buddha's cousin, Devadatta. He was a monk who had deep concentration and had developed all kinds of psychic powers, but he was very jealous of the Buddha and committed many really unwholesome, unskillful acts. This points to the fact that even exalted states of mind or great powers of mind do not imply purification of mind. And that's the particular power of Nirvana.

This leads us on to perhaps trying to get at what Nirvana is, as opposed to these other states. In your essay, you talk about a couple of different methods—one you describe as the Sutta method and one as the Abhidhamma method. Maybe to start, what is the Sutta, and what is the Abhidhamma?

This will be an extremely brief clarification of these two terms. As most of you probably know, the Suttas refer to the Buddha's discourses. In the course of his long life, he would meet with many different people, individuals and groups, in a lot of different circumstances. The Suttas are an account of his exchanges in these situations. When we read the Suttas, it's all expressed in very conventional language, in ordinary usage. The Suttas refer to our ordinary way of perceiving things and people—men and women, self and other. These are the conventional ways we speak, and that's the language the Buddha used.

In the teachings in the Suttas, again expressed in very ordinary language that anybody can really understand, he laid out the path of practice as being the path of ethics, sila, of concentration and mindfulness, and of wisdom—the wisdom that develops through seeing the impermanence and the unsatisfying nature of impermanent things. All of this is not difficult for us to understand conceptually, which is what makes the Suttas so powerful. They're very accessible.

The Abhidharma approaches experience in quite a different way. It does not use this conventional language to describe our experience. Rather, it employs very philosophical, we could say technical language—more universal in the sense that it's not language appropriate to a particular time and place, but rather a very detailed analysis of the constituents of what we call man or woman, self or person. It's really looking at what, in Buddhist understanding, are called the more ultimate realities—not the conventional way of understanding, but rather what are the constituent elements that make up experience.

For example, there's a very detailed exploration of the physical elements, describing the sensations and how they interrelate to one another. There's a very detailed description of what are called mental factors—all the different qualities of mind that arise in different combinations along with every moment of consciousness, like greed or hatred or love or compassion or concentration or delusion. All of these are the mental factors or mental qualities which color consciousness. The Abhidharma has this list of fifty-two mental factors, so it's very specific and very detailed, using this philosophic or technical language. And then there's an explanation of consciousness itself and all the different kinds of consciousnesses that may arise.

For me, I studied philosophy in college, and so my mind has a philosophic bent. I'm not by any means an Abhidhamma scholar, but my first teacher Munindraji was, and he presented the teachings a lot through that lens of Abhidhamma. I found it really helpful because, for example, just having the framework of the different mental factors that color our consciousness and naming them really helps us recognize them in our own minds and see them as being impersonal, non-personal—which helps us not identify with them when they're arising. Of course, this is the whole path leading to Nibbana, leading to freedom.

So these are really two different levels of description, and people may be drawn to one or the other or both. Certainly people get enlightened without any knowledge of the Abhidhamma at all. And for other people, it may be the doorway to greater understanding. But I think it's helpful just to know that there are these two big baskets of the teachings in the tradition: the discourses, the suttas, and the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology.

Question: As a philosopher myself, I really appreciate the way you framed Abhidhamma. With that as a background, do you want to say a little bit about what you mean by this distinction between the Sutta method and the Abhidhamma method in your essay?

It's not so much a difference of method but a difference in description. The Abhidhamma way of understanding really analyzes in a very precise way, almost on a mind-moment level, all the various stages of insight that we go through walking on the path, and how the mind is functioning moment to moment as it goes from our usual mundane experience of the world to that moment—it's talked about as crossing over to the supermundane, or to the experience of Nibbana. So the Abhidhamma description really talks about it on that very fine, granular level of what's happening in the mind.

In the Sutta method, it's much more general. It doesn't really talk that much about the mind moments and how they're unfolding and conditioning one another. The suttas talk more in general terms about, for example, the factors of enlightenment—the seven factors of awakening, those qualities which, when developed, become the ground out of which the experience of Nibbana can arise. So it's really just different ways of describing what it is that's happening. One is more granular and one is more... what's the opposite of granular? Larger. Gross.

Question: One of the things you say on page five is that we need to distinguish between Nibbana itself as unconditioned from what would be a conscious experience of Nibbana, which is conditioned. That sounds like it could be confusing. I'm wondering if you could flesh that out a little.

Yes, it is confusing. It can be confusing. So I want to give an analogy that came to my own mind in this experience. It's really what popped into my mind just at the moment, just afterwards. The thing that popped into my mind was: this was the experience of zero.

Now, just as a little sidebar here, much later I came across a book called *The Nothing That Is*. The title totally intrigued me because it reminded me of a description of Nibbana—the nothing that is. But the book is actually a history of the number zero. I only got past the first few pages because it started to get very mathematical in its discussion. But the first few lines of the book really captured my interest. It said—this is a bit of a paraphrase, but it's mostly how it was written—"When you look at zero, you see nothing, but look through it and you see the world."

And so the experience of Nibbana, we could think of as the experience of zero. That is, in Buddhist terminology, it's called the stilling of all formations—the cessation of becoming, the cessation of this

process of change.

Now, going back to your original question, the knowing of zero is a conditioned phenomenon. That's part of, or within the realm of, our knowing, of our awareness. So we know zero. But zero itself—there's no knowing in zero. There's no knowing in that stillness. So it's the mind, the conditioned mind of knowing, taking zero or Nibbana or the unconditioned as its object.

This is the difference. That knowing is called supermundane consciousness. For those of you who are aspiring Pali scholars, the terms are *magga-phala*, which refers to those kinds of consciousness that are supermundane, because it's not taking a usual object like a sight or a sound or a sensation as its object. It's taking Nibbana as its object. It's taking what is unconditioned as its object. But the knowing itself is still within the realm of conditioned phenomena.

So the question I have for you now is this: did this make it more confusing or less confusing?

In order to have the awareness of the unconditioned, there are certain conditions—the aggregates or senses, a certain amount of learning, a certain amount of practice. So those are all conditions of the consciousness in order to have the consciousness of that which is unconditioned.

Yes, yes. Another way to put this—it's actually in the texts where it says, you know, if we want to reach a mountain as our goal, and we walk along the path to the mountain, the path doesn't create the mountain, but it leads to it. And so in the same way, all the conditions that we develop in our practice are like the path to the mountain or the path to Nibbana, but the path does not create the mountain, and the path does not create Nibbana. It just creates the conditions for us to experience it, to realize it, to reach it.

A lot of the language that we use, and you referenced some of it in your essay, for describing Nibbana is essentially negative—unconditioned, unarisen. There's something paradoxical about language, in that on the one hand it ensnares our minds and we get attached to conceptual frameworks that make it hard to open up to that which might be unconditioned. On the other hand, it is necessary as part of the path to the unconditioned to teach. There's a text attributed to Nagarjuna, the Indian Buddhist philosopher, where in the text, the Buddha articulates this paradox, and then thinking about the paradox, the Buddha laughed. He laughed with all his might. There's something funny about this idea that it's beyond language, and yet he has to teach using language.

Well, I think that's one of the reasons that when we read the texts, we find Nibbana described in two different ways. One is, as you say, using the negative: unformed, unborn, uncreated, unconstructed. And that is a very powerful reminder for us in the practice. It's expressed in what I think is a classical description from some ancient Indian philosophical paths that use the expression: not this, not this, not this, not this. And so using the unborn, unconstructed, unfabricated can be a reminder to us not to get attached or cling to or be identified with that which is constructed and which is born and which is fabricated. So it's really pointing us in the direction of Nibbana, of what Nibbana is. It's not that. It's not

that.

But then in the discourses, there are also some very beautiful descriptions in the more positive sense, like the highest peace, or an island—an island of refuge, a shelter. And it goes on. There are many, many synonyms for Nibbana in this very positive sense. And that language I think is very useful because it's very inviting. When we begin to relate to the positive descriptions of that experience, it sounds very appealing, very worthy. I mean, who among us would not like to experience a place of safety, of refuge, of peace? So that description can really be quite leading, quite beckoning. Whereas the other description is reminding us, we might say, of how to get there, which is not being attached to anything which is constructed or formed. So both kinds of descriptions I think are really helpful.

Speaking of who wouldn't want to experience this, reminds me of your story in the article about your teacher, Dipa Ma, and how she was able to enter into a fruition state when she sat down in her airline seat. Do you want to say a little bit more about that, and maybe what the distinction is between a fruition state and a path state?

So this is a distinction that's made in both the Suttas and the Abhidhamma, but they have slightly different interpretations of those terms. For the purpose of this discussion, I'm going to use the Abhidhamma model.

Path and fruition, as I mentioned before, refer to those supermundane states of consciousness that take Nibbana as their object. Now, the path moment has the power to uproot defilements in stages from the mindstream so they don't arise again. That's a very powerful function of Nibbana—it actually uproots the causes of our suffering. The fruition stage is like the enjoyment of that peace, but it has no uprooting function.

According to the Abhidhamma description, there's a path moment—just a single moment—for each of the four stages of enlightenment. At each stage, one path moment uproots or weakens certain defilements. Immediately following the path moment is the fruition state. This happens to everybody, at least for a moment, who experiences the path. But for those who have very high concentration, deep concentration, strong concentration, they have the ability to re-enter into the fruition state for what can be long periods of time.

And Deepa Ma, our wonderful teacher from India—she's just an incredibly inspiring being for me. She had this amazing level of realization, both of awakening and also of her depth of samadhi and everything that came with that. She had the ability to go into the fruition state for many hours at a time. In that state, as I mentioned in the essay, the couple of times she came to America, she would get on the plane, settle into her seat, go into meditation, into this fruition state of ultimate peace, and then emerge just as the plane was landing, completely refreshed and happy. It made me quite—dare I say—envious, having suffered through some very long flights to India and back. It just shows the power of certain minds that can do that.

But it's important to realize that it's the path moment that has the uprooting function. The fruition moment is the enjoyment of that.

Just one more point: I don't want to get into it now, but for those who would like to pursue this a little further, in the essay I do go into a description of the Sutta way of understanding path and fruition, which is slightly different than what I just described. For those of you who might have interest in that, you can read the essay where I explain it in some detail.

Another approach to Nibbana that I discussed in the essay is the Thai forest approach. It's not so much a different approach as a different description of the experience, because those practitioners in the Thai forest tradition are also rooted, to some extent or other, probably more in the Suttas than the Abhidhamma. But I think they understand their way of describing this experience of Nibbana and liberation as being rooted in the Suttas. So this is not separate from that.

One of the differences in description—and it's one of the differences that in some way motivated me some years ago when I wrote the book *One Dharma*, and also in writing this essay—is that the description some Thai forest teachers use seemed, on the surface, quite different than what I understood from my Burmese teachers and from the Abhidhamma way of describing things.

One of the key differences, at least on the surface, is that in the Thai forest tradition there's often a description of Nibbana as being an unconditioned awareness. There's an awareness outside of our usual sense consciousness, an awareness that is unconditioned. That's how Nibbana is sometimes described in the teachings of many of the great Thai forest masters.

In the other traditions, awareness is always considered a conditioned phenomenon, even when it takes Nibbana as its object. So this was always a little confusing for me, because one tradition seemed to be saying Nibbana is awareness—an unconditioned awareness—and the other seemed to be saying Nibbana transcends awareness.

This became a source of real struggle for me in understanding. For many people, it might seem like just a philosophic subtlety that doesn't have much meaning for them. But for me, in the throes of my practice, being so committed to a practice leading to liberation, it felt like a koan: Is Nibbana awareness of some kind? Does it transcend awareness? It felt like here I'm devoting my life to the experience of this—how do I reconcile these apparent differences?

One of the reasons there can sometimes be confusion as we read descriptions of the path and realization from different traditions and different teachers is because the same word can refer to different things. Just as a mundane example, and something that comes up a lot in Dharma discussions: when we talk about the path of practice as becoming free of desire, people will often ask, "Well, what about wholesome desires? The desire for enlightenment, the desire to become more compassionate?" It's the same problem, because the word in English—desire—means different things.

Sometimes it means the desire of grasping and clinging and greed. And sometimes desire means the aspiration to something—I have the desire to do something—and that could be either wholesome or unwholesome.

So Nibbāna, and this took me a while to understand, the term Nibbāna can refer to two different things. It can refer to what I call zero—the nothing that is. And I want to emphasize the is-ness of it, even though it's a nothing that is, because it's precisely because there is an is-ness to it, that is, there is a reality to it, that's why it has the power to uproot defilements. If it was merely nothing, it would have no particular power; it would just be like a blank, but it would not have any particular effect on us. But Nibbāna has a profound effect. It transforms our stream of consciousness, uprooting the kilesas. So there's a power to zero. That's the is-ness of zero.

One meaning of Nibbāna, one thing it refers to, is this unconditioned, unborn, unformed reality. The other meaning of Nibbāna refers to the mind that has been freed of defilements—the mind that is free of greed and hatred and delusion. We could describe the state of a fully enlightened being, in whom these defilements have been completely uprooted, as free of all greed, free of all hatred, free of all ignorance. So that mind itself can be described as Nibbāna, and people experiencing Nibbāna in that way. One meaning is the mind free of defilements, and the other meaning is that which accomplishes the freedom from defilements.

As I read more and more about the Thai way of describing things, I came to conjecture that when they're speaking about Nibbāna as being an unconditioned awareness, they're really talking about the second meaning—that is, the mind unconditioned by greed and hatred and delusion, which could be called Nibbāna. This is a different perspective or a different angle than using Nibbāna to describe the actual experience of zero, of the unborn.

So in a way, even though the descriptions are quite different and initially caused me some confusion—how do I reconcile this? Does Nibbāna transcend awareness? Is it awareness?—this just seemed a way of really holding both. They're not contradictory. And that was really helpful, because this points to another aspect of the teachings which I think has been tremendously helpful for me.

That is to see all of the teachings—whether it's the suttas, whether it's the Abhidhamma, whatever tradition it comes from—to see all the teachings as skillful means for liberating the mind, rather than taking them to be metaphysical truths. Because if we're taking the teachings to be metaphysical truths, then if there are teachings that seem to be in contradiction to one another, we immediately go, "Well, who's right and who's wrong? Which one is correct, which is incorrect?" But if we take the teachings all as skillful means for liberating our hearts, liberating our minds, then we can really assess: Does this teaching help to free my mind from craving, from grasping, from clinging? Does this teaching help to free my mind from those forces? Even if they're saying different things, even if they're saying contradictory things, if they serve that function, then it's helpful. We're moving forward on the path.

The famous image for this is the image of somebody pointing to the moon. If we want to see the moon, we don't keep looking at the finger. The finger is just pointing to it. And there are many fingers, many hands, which can be pointing to the moon from a lot of different places on this planet. It would be quite foolish if we said, "Oh, that finger is correct and that finger is incorrect." It's more: Are we using it to look at the moon? I think that's a very helpful way of understanding the teachings—understanding them as skillful means for liberation, skillful means for non-clinging.

Before we turn to the questions, I want to just do one little summing up, very briefly. We talked about it, but I just want to bring it all together—why this whole discussion of Nibbāna, or the experience of Nibbāna, is so important. It's not just Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha often characterized his teachings by saying he teaches just suffering and the end of suffering. He wasn't teaching a philosophic system.

It was a very practical teaching. All of the Buddha's teachings are geared to understanding the truth of suffering, which is the first noble truth, along with its cause, its end, and the path to the end.

So what is the cause of suffering? Fundamentally, the cause of suffering in our lives are the different defilements that arise—greed and hatred and ignorance and desire, and all the manifestations of those three basic roots. It's very obvious, I think, that we can't control all the circumstances of our lives. However, we are in control in a very fundamental way of how we're relating to those circumstances. That's up to us. That's not about trying to necessarily change the conditions of our lives in terms of freedom, but changing how we're relating to the conditions of our lives. That's where the freedom lies.

Understanding it in this way, and understanding that it's the defilements in the mind—the forces of greed and clinging and grasping and anger and hatred and fear and ignorance—understanding that it's these forces in the mind which create suffering for us, then we can see and appreciate that the uprooting of these forces in the mind leads to our happiness, leads to our peace. And it's precisely the experience of nibbana which has the power to uproot these tendencies. It's only the experience of nibbana which has that uprooting power.

So that's why this is not just a theoretical philosophical discussion. It has tremendous practical import in terms of our own happiness—which is why we could say enlightenment has been described as the highest happiness, the highest peace. That's the reason we're even engaging in this discussion. It has a lot of meaning in our lives. It's not just Buddhist philosophy—though Buddhist philosophy is pretty good also.

One of the questions that arose concerns the relationship between compassion and nibbana. To me, this is one of the most enriching aspects of understanding the path—to see the intimate connection between wisdom and compassion, between understanding and compassion.

It's helpful to understand how compassion arises in our hearts and minds. It arises when we're willing to come close to suffering. If we're protecting ourselves from the suffering in the world, whether it's our own or that of people around us, if we're avoiding or denying or just not willing to see it, not willing to come

close to it—that really caps the wellspring of compassion within us. Compassion arises when we actually open to the suffering that's there.

One of the things that helps us open to it is when we become somewhat less self-referential, less self-centered in our lives. If we're only concerned about ourselves, then we may be more likely just to not want to deal with the suffering that's out there. The realization of nibbana, even the first glimpse of it, uproots what in Buddhism is called the wrong view of self. We have really seen the selfless nature of this whole process. We've come out of a self-centered life to a life where that's not at the heart of things. And there's much more engagement and responsiveness to the situation around us.

One of the great Tibetan masters, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche—a Dzogchen master of the last century, very renowned, an amazing being and amazing teacher—wrote something which I really love because it expresses this so well. He said, "When you realize the void nature, the empty nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others will dawn uncontrived and effortless."

I love that because it really points to the fact that the less self-centered we are, the more responsive we are to the suffering that's in the world. For me, I've come to appreciate the description of compassion not only as a particular feeling or emotion, but as the quality of responsiveness. For example, we see somebody who's hungry, and the natural impulse might be to offer them food. The less the notion of self is at the center of our understanding, the more responsive we are. The experience of nibbana has uprooted the view that there is a self at the center, and so it really just strengthens our compassionate response in beautiful ways. Compassion and wisdom I see as really very interrelated.

Well, I think there's a lot in that question and some very important implications. As I mentioned briefly, enlightenment within the Theravada tradition is described as happening in stages. There are four stages of enlightenment, and at each of the stages, different defilements are either uprooted or significantly weakened.

What's important to realize is that even after that first glimpse, certain of the defilements are uprooted at that point. The most significant ones include the view of self, because there has been the experience of the zero center at the heart of things. There's not a self center at the heart. It's that experience of the zero center which uproots the notion, the view, that there is some core self at the center.

One of the other defilements that's uprooted at that first glimpse is doubt—doubt about the path, doubt about where the path is leading—because we've experienced it for ourselves. As Bhikkhu Analayo used the example, if you've had the experience of having your hand in fire, even for a split second, you know what it feels like and nobody can tell you it doesn't feel like that, because you've had the experience. That's why even at that first stage, it is said that people become independent in their understanding of the Dharma, because it's based on a personal experience of Nibbana, of the Unborn.

However—and this is what's so important for all practitioners to understand—there are still many

defilements left. There's still aversion, there's still anger, there's still fear, there's still desire, there's still restlessness. This first glimpse, even though it's hugely significant, is not in any way the end of the path. In fact, we could almost think of it as the beginning of the path.

But this is where some people get in trouble. If there's not a clear understanding of this, people might have a genuine realization and then think they're done, think that everything's finished, not recognizing that there's a lot more work to do. Sometimes they can get into justifying behavior that's perhaps not that skillful because they have this notion that they're fully enlightened, so anything they do must be okay—not realizing that their glimpse might not actually have been genuine, or that it was genuine but still incomplete. There's a lot more to do.

This certainly resonates with my own experience. There's a lot more to do.

So that can help us understand why there might be a teacher who could have profound realization, could have deep awakening, and yet act in ways that, for lack of a better term, we would call problematic—certain kinds of abuse, or that there might be a misunderstanding of what happened.

I'd like to clarify that point a little bit, because I think there is a line here. After a genuine moment of realization, even the first glimpse, certain egregious behaviors cannot happen. Even though there's still desire, there's still aversion, they have been weakened to a certain extent. They're still there, so they will manifest in ways that could be construed as unskillful behavior, but they don't cross a line.

I'm trying to think of a clear way of describing what that line is, but just to use some general terminology, there would not be egregiously harmful behavior. And it's said that if the realization is genuine, even as one may be manifesting aspects of desire or greed or aversion, there's not a hiding of it. There's the acknowledgment: "Oh yes, I've done this, this is unskillful, there is still desire or aversion in the mind." There's just a quality of openness about it. So if the behavior is really egregious and there's no openness and acknowledgment of it, that would make me question whether the realization is genuine or not.

That's a pretty clear criterion that could be applied to a number of people who have been thought of as really helpful teachers for some.

One of the questions posed was about the way in which Nibbana is sometimes framed as extinction, and that it feels like something that might be fearful. In some ways I've already addressed this as the highest happiness, but there's more to say.

I think that term can be understood in a few different ways. First, it's not a term that I would often use, but one does come across it in the texts in some translations. One way of understanding it would be that it's the extinction of the defilements. That's easier to understand.

The problem with using that word to describe the zero of Nibbana is that there's an implication that there is someone becoming extinct. The whole tenor of the Buddha's teachings is that there's no one there in the

first place. All that's happening is this ongoing flow of mind-body phenomena, mental and physical phenomena arising and passing away in each moment. There's no one to whom it belongs. What we're calling self is that flow of changing phenomena. It's not that there's a self who owns it or who has it or to whom it belongs.

If we understand that—that there's no self behind it all, that the reality of our experience is the very rapid rising and passing away of the six sense objects—I find this also, as a kind of interesting aside...

We think our lives are so complicated and confusing, but really, only six things are ever happening. There's sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations in the body, and mind objects—thoughts, emotions, perhaps images. That's all that's ever happening. Yet out of that, we create an enormous story about ourselves and the world, which are just more thoughts. That's just one of the six objects.

Sometimes I like to think of the experience of our lives as a six-piece chamber orchestra. It's just sights and sounds and sensations and thoughts and emotions. Sometimes the music is harmonious, sometimes it's really discordant, but it's just that.

So there's no self behind it. That's a little background.

Through the Vipassana practice, through our practice of mindfulness in a really sustained and profound way, we come to experience this whole mind-body process as a flow of changing phenomena. And we're seeing the change very, very rapidly. There's nothing that really lasts more than a moment. It's just continuing—a flow, like a river. There's nothing static at all.

When we see that, we can have another understanding of the first noble truth, which is often translated as suffering, dukkha. But "suffering" is a limited description because much of what's happening in this flow may be pleasant, and we don't experience it as suffering. However, through the experience of the radical impermanence of all experience, we begin to really see the essentially unsatisfying nature of this constant flow of arising and passing, arising and passing. Nothing lasts for very long. It's a very quick process of change.

As a little exercise, which I've found very helpful in showing how we can get ensnared and seduced by the flow—and what kind of insight will help us release from being seduced—think back to all the beautiful experiences you've had in your life. There are many; most of us experience lots of pleasant things. But when we look back at the past, where are they now? They were pleasant in the moment, but they're completely gone. Completely gone.

And yet, when we look ahead in our lives, we're always living in anticipation of the next hit of enjoyment of one kind or another. It may be sense pleasures, it may be emotional states, whatever. We are always looking forward to the next hit of experience that somehow is going to fulfill us—forgetting that we've already had endless numbers of these experiences, which have not been ultimately fulfilling. They are fulfilling in the moment. I'm not saying they don't bring a certain kind of happiness. But they're not

ultimately fulfilling because they're constantly changing.

So when we have really dropped into this flow of experience and are experiencing it through the lens, with the understanding of what is a very basic teaching in Buddhism—the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfying because of impermanence, and non-self—then we realize that in this flood, there's no rest. There's not really any peace.

When we absorb that fully—which takes time, because this goes against our conditioning; we're swimming upstream in terms of the conditioning in our minds—but as we understand this and experience it in a very profound way, then, as I mentioned earlier, the cessation of becoming, the cessation of this continual flow that doesn't belong to anybody... So it's not the cessation of a self. There's no self in the first place. All it is, is this endless arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing of phenomena.

The cessation of that flow is really the experience of peace—you could say the highest peace or the highest happiness. And a point which I'll make now, but explore in more detail in the essay, is that this experience of the cessation of becoming is its own reality. It is a reality. It's not simply an absence. It's its own reality, which has power. It has the power to uproot defilements. It's to appreciate the nothing that is—but there's an is-ness to it.

Of course, we can talk about this, and hopefully it's of interest, and even more hopefully perhaps helpful. But it's really important to understand that this whole discussion is for the purpose of inspiring us to experience it, because then we know for ourselves. It's not believing anything. You don't have to get into "I agree with this, I don't agree with this," or some intellectual debate about it. When we know from our experience, that's when real faith arises. So I just want to emphasize the practical, experiential nature of everything we're talking about.

So maybe there'll be another opportunity. But we are coming to the close of this time together. And Joseph, I'm wondering if there's a question that you wish you'd been asked, or anything else that you feel would be helpful to say about Nibbāna before we close?

I think I've made a lot of the points that I would like to make, but this is just maybe by way of summing up. Especially given the prevalence now of mindfulness being taught in a secular context—which is tremendously valuable and helps people a lot—it's really missing this piece. Nibbāna is not often talked about as mindfulness is being taught in the secular context.

So I just want to emphasize that the Buddha laid out a path. I'm sure most of the people listening are familiar with the Eightfold Path. It's one of the core basic teachings of the Buddha. And it's a path that leads somewhere. It's not just these eight different things that we practice with and they help in our lives, which they will do. So it has that function. But it's more profound than that, because the Eightfold Path is a path, and the path leads to the experience of Nibbāna. The Buddha was very explicit about this in his teachings.

And so I would say, for those people who may have an interest or be inspired or have an aspiration for this level of practice, for this depth of practice, I would encourage you to really investigate more thoroughly each of the steps of the Eightfold Path. You could really do some study with this, and then really see how you can put each of those steps into practice in your life. This is really a way of transforming one's life into the path. And it's the path that leads to Nibbāna, it leads to awakening, it leads to freedom.

Maybe this could just be a moment to give a plug for the Study Center. Institutions like the Study Center play this very valuable role in the transmission of the teachings from one culture to another, acting as a container, as a preserver of the teachings, and a space for discussion and exploration of the teachings. And the Study Center also depends on support from all the people who benefit from it. So I would just encourage you—this teaching tonight has been offered completely freely. But if you're so inspired and would like to be supportive of the Study Center, it would certainly be appreciated because it helps to support everything the Study Center is doing.

And I would love to have further discussions about this. Quite happily, I'm about to begin my own self-retreat now for hopefully three months. So maybe upon emerging, I'll have some new understandings to share.

Thank you. It's really been a pleasure exploring all of this with you.

Thank you so much, Joseph. And thank you, everyone, for joining us.

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