Liberation Teachings for Daily Life

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:10:42

Good evening to you all and to everyone online.

A couple of weeks ago, someone was asking me about my practice and what I was now finding most compelling in it. Of course, over the years this has changed—at different times, different aspects of the teachings would seem very compelling. But in the last couple of years, there was one thing in particular that has really grabbed my interest: the challenge of practicing for liberation in the context of a lay life.

It's challenging because practicing for liberation is like swimming upstream. It goes against so much of our conventional understanding of reality and of the way things are. What makes it a compelling question for me is that so much of the Buddha's teachings is directed to nuns and monks, monastics who are living a life of much greater renunciation than most of us do as lay people. But for many of us who are living the household life, we still have the aspiration—the highest aspiration—for freedom, for awakening, for enlightenment. So how can we approach this? How can we work with this challenge?

In the Buddha's time and up until now, there have been many householders who have realized and attained different stages of awakening and who are firmly and deeply on the path. So the question really is: how can we find the middle way between monastic renunciation on the one hand and being ensnared in the realm of worldly pleasures? Is there a middle way that can actually guide us on the path of awakening, of liberation, of realizing our highest aspirations?

Now, we can't avoid sense experiences even if we wanted to, because obviously inhabiting a body, different sense experiences are just part of our lived reality. But how we relate to them is completely up to us. We're going to have sights and sounds and all the different sense objects coming, with their range of pleasant and unpleasant. But how we relate to their coming—that really is a result of our training in mindfulness. Can we relate to them in a way that leads to awakening rather than just ensnares us further in this entanglement of sense delights?

The Buddha gave one teaching that encapsulates this challenge. It's a very brief teaching, but it really includes a lot. He spoke of the gratification, the dangers or the downside, and the escape or release from entanglement in the various pleasures of the senses.

We're all aware of the gratification that they provide, each of us perhaps partial to some and indifferent to others. But we know just from our daily lives the happiness and the joy and the gratification when we have pleasant sense experiences. They do bring us a kind of happiness. They do bring a certain quality of delight in our lives. They may be beautiful sights that we love—maybe we're very visual. Or we love

beautiful music and beautiful sounds, or delicious tastes, or wonderful aromas, or exquisitely pleasurable bodily sensations. These are all the common, ordinary experiences in our lives, and we feel a certain happiness and gratification in the experience of them. The Buddha acknowledged this. He acknowledged that the gratification is there.

But that's where most of us stop.

The Buddha went on to describe what he called the dangers or the downsides of relying on these sense pleasures for our happiness. If you think about it, to some extent—or perhaps to a large extent—that's what we're doing in our lives, in our pursuit of happiness. Very often we frame it in terms of just accumulating as many pleasurable experiences as possible as being the source of our happiness. But the Buddha pointed out that because of their fleeting nature, they are inherently unreliable as a source of lasting fulfillment. He didn't deny that they bring us pleasure in the moment, but if we're looking for a sense of fulfillment or completion in our lives, they are not going to provide it, precisely because they're very changeable, very impermanent. And we know this. How many sense pleasures have you already enjoyed in your life? Countless. And yet you're here. So on some level, we already know that as delightful as they may be, they don't provide the essence of fulfillment or the deepest, highest kind of happiness.

Another downside—and perhaps the word danger is more appropriate for this aspect—is that in our experience of the pleasures of the world, when we experience them unmindfully, they are simply strengthening the tendency of the mind towards greed, towards wanting more. It just lands us in the cycle of always wanting more and not being satisfied, going for more, not being satisfied. The tendency in the mind, the wanting mind or the greedy mind, gets strengthened when we don't bring mindfulness to these experiences. What's really surprising is that besides strengthening the habit of wanting, we still buy into it even when the consequences are unpleasant.

I'll give you a few examples of this phenomenon, and it's quite remarkable that we keep going after things in anticipation of them bringing happiness when they actually bring us suffering—and yet we still want them.

The examples are probably endless, but what first came to mind was simply the tendency of overeating, enticed by initial desire and anticipated pleasure. We often find it difficult to simply let the desire pass, even when we know that overeating doesn't feel good. Quite quickly, it doesn't feel good. So it's quite surprising that rarely do we simply let the desire come and go, or if we do start eating, to know when to stop.

I just had a recent experience of this in Barre, on the other side of town. There's something like a farm store, quite a nice place, and they sell their own ice cream. The ice cream is really good. Their child-size portion—the smallest they serve—is already way too much. This is somewhat typical of our culture, I think, this culture of excess. And we know—I know—if I finish even that child-sized portion, it's not going to feel good afterwards. But how many of us can stop after six or seven spoonfuls of ice cream? It's hard

sometimes, because that desire, the wanting for the next hit of pleasure, that next hit of sweetness, is so strong, so compelling.

Something Bart referred to last night, which I think we're all subject to and all have experience with, is indulging in the dubious pleasure of surfing the internet—where the algorithms know exactly what will seduce us, providing us with the next link to whatever it is we're wanting to look at. Do we ever stop with just clicking on one link? No. Then another, and another, and before we know it, half an hour has gone by, lost in this dream world of the internet. This never-ending desire for completion, which never comes. It's very striking to me that even though we've all experienced this, it's very hard not to fall into that trap.

I say this just to point out why this path to awakening, to liberation, to freedom is like swimming upstream. There's strong conditioning in our minds that just wants to go after the next hit of momentary pleasure, even when we know the consequences are unpleasant. That's quite striking to me.

In one discourse, the Buddha expressed it with a wonderful phrase. He said, "Forms, sounds, tastes, odors, bodily sensations, and all mental objects—this is the terrible bait of the world." I love that phrase: the terrible bait of the world. I think of fish swimming and then biting on the bait. All of these different sense inputs are coming, and we're like fish that just keep biting on that, biting on that, biting on that. "This is the terrible bait of the world with which the world is infatuated. But when one has transcended this, the mindful disciple of the Buddha shines radiantly like the sun, having transcended Māra's realm." Māra is the embodiment of ignorance or delusion.

So the Buddha is pointing to a possible release from being entangled in the world of sense objects, sense pleasures. And again, I want to reiterate, it doesn't mean that we don't experience them, because we will. As embodied human beings, these sense experiences are going to come. But our challenge, the swimming upstream, is this: can we really see them for what they are, see them accurately, not be seduced, and then even enjoy them in the moment—but without the clinging, without the grasping, without the wanting?

This is not easy. That's why we're all here, and why it really takes practice and the cultivation of certain qualities of mind that allow for this freedom.

There's another danger in our unmindful experience of sense pleasures: these desires can often lead to very unskillful actions, which cause suffering for ourselves and suffering to others. Think of crimes of passion—people doing things driven by strong desire, strong lustful desire—or of addiction, of just basic greed for more. Think how much of the inequality in the world comes from strong greed. Our mind states have consequences not only for ourselves; they have consequences for the whole world. And we see it. We see it being played out.

So there's the acknowledged gratification—we see that and acknowledge it. There are also the dangers of this cycle of endless wanting. And then the Buddha talked about the escape, the release from these deeply ingrained patterns.

So I want to talk a little bit about the release and how to accomplish that, how to realize that for ourselves.

First, and this is something we've already touched upon, is understanding the importance of training in the precepts. In Pali, ethical behavior is called *sila*. These precepts are like the guide rails in our life's journey. Even as we're living as householders, enjoying the many pleasant experiences that come—and they do come, and we enjoy them—the precepts keep our activities within bounds. If we are really committed to following and even deepening our understanding of what the precepts really mean and how they can be applied, they act as a kind of mindfulness bell for us when we're about to do something that may be unwholesome or unskillful. They are a great protection.

Just to mention a few, which again we've discussed briefly, but to highlight their importance: we take the precept of not killing. Every being, no matter how small, wants to go on living. Can we relate to that and refrain from killing whenever possible? It usually is possible, though people do rightfully raise examples. What about killing malaria mosquitoes? Sometimes we have to weigh the consequences, weigh the options. But generally in our lives, we're not faced with such subtle choices. Generally, killing is really unnecessary. Yet it can be instinctive—the mosquito lands on your arm.

When I was in India practicing, in the summer months we would go up to the mountains and I rented these quite funky houses. The first time I went up there, there were these huge spiders on the ceiling of my bedroom. Not quite tarantulas, but big. I did not like the fact that they were there. But I was committed to following the precept. And it was quite amazing—I just surrendered. It was actually fine. They lived up on the ceiling and I was down on the floor, and we existed quite happily together. But the instinct, especially in this country or other Western countries, is to take out the spray of Raid. Something you don't like, kill it. So the precept serves as a guard for us to refrain from these unwholesome actions.

Another huge arena, which we'll probably discuss more toward the end, is the *sila* of right speech. This is a vast area of our lives. How often do we pay attention before we speak to what we're going to say? Probably not so much. I've noticed how easy it is for words to just come tumbling out. Mostly they're probably harmless, but sometimes they're not. There's an acronym that serves as a very helpful reminder—I love this one. The acronym is WAIT. It stands for: Why Am I Talking? I love it because sometimes there's no good reason.

Sila also frees our mind from remorse. It really allows our mind to settle. And it is the gift of fearlessness to everyone else. If we're committed to *sila*, that's basically a statement that no one need fear us. We're not going to harm anyone with our actions. That's a powerful gift to be giving to everyone we meet in our lives.

When you consider that we take the precepts at the beginning of a retreat, it's much more than a formality. It really is the bedrock of the whole path. And it allows us to settle more deeply into concentration.

When our mind is not agitated by thoughts of unskillful, unwholesome things we've done, it can settle much more easily. And the pleasure of concentration turns out to be much more pleasurable than the happiness of sense pleasures. We may think we're giving up some sort of delight, but actually, as our mind gets concentrated, we experience a kind of happiness that is much more fulfilling and more complete. It's still not enlightenment—it's not awakening—but it's a much more wholesome and deeply satisfying experience than the things we usually look for to make us happy. So sila helps us tremendously in concentration.

Sometimes when we speak about enlightenment or liberation or freedom, we can get so enthusiastic about the possibility that we just want those teachings, and we really ignore the foundation of sila. My first teacher, Munindraji, used this example. He said practicing meditation without a foundation of sila is like trying to row a boat across a river without untying it from the dock. You can put an enormous amount of effort into it, but it's not going to be successful unless we have established this foundation of sila and non-harming.

I wanted to give particular emphasis to this, and I would encourage you to actually explore in your own lives how your understanding of each of the precepts can be refined. It's its own practice. Really just look: What does not killing mean in the different circumstances of my life? What does not taking what isn't given mean? Or sexual misconduct? Explore all of the basic five precepts, including right speech.

So with sila as the foundation, we can develop different meditative techniques and skills that free the mind both in the moment but also lead onward to nibbana. Nibbana is the Pali word—nirvana is Sanskrit—which describes the highest freedom, the highest peace.

As I mentioned the first morning, in terms of meditation development, we start with calming the mind and collecting the attention through some form of concentration. Now, concentration has the power to suppress the hindrances, but it's not suppression in a bad way. It's not an unskillful suppression. Rather, when the mind is concentrated, it simply makes the hindrances inoperative for that period of time. And when the hindrances—which we can talk about tomorrow morning and throughout the retreat—when these hindrances in the mind are in abeyance, that's when profound investigation into the nature of our experience becomes possible. Because if the mind is continually scattered, lost in thought and restless, it's impossible to see clearly.

We need a basic level of concentration, but it does not require some super-yogi amount of concentration where you're flying through the air and walking through walls—which can be done, not by me, but... We don't need those fantastic levels of what's called samadhi. But we need enough, just to have the mind be somewhat collected, somewhat calm, somewhat steady. A lot of what we do in the beginning of a retreat is simply work to establish that baseline of concentration.

As this develops, we have a deeper and more immediate experience of impermanence. The Buddha used one phrase in the texts to describe impermanence, which is very unusual, not a common English phrase.

That's why it really caught my attention when I first read it. He said things are always changing, "becoming otherwise." I love that phrase—becoming otherwise. Everything, every moment, is always becoming otherwise, which is just another way of saying that things are continually changing. But I like that phrase because, at least for me, it suggests the inherent instability of experience. We think we've landed someplace, but it's always becoming otherwise.

Generally, we're not paying attention to this, even though it's happening all the time. This is the nature of how things are unfolding. But usually we're lost in mental proliferation, in our stories and our dramas—everything we're all very familiar with—and we simply overlook it. We're not paying attention to the fact that things are continually becoming otherwise. But this is what we see very clearly as the mind becomes somewhat more concentrated.

This truth of change can be seen at every level of magnitude. It's such a universal characteristic of all phenomena. Think of the birth and death of galaxies, of stars. The sun, in another four and a half billion years, is going to either collapse or explode, depending on its size. The rise and fall of civilizations. The change of climate and weather. And the momentary change of our lived experience. At whatever level we look, this becoming otherwise is continually happening.

So how can we tune into this in a very immediate and personal way, from wherever we are in the practice, even from the very beginning? There is a very simple exercise that will give us this immediate experience of how change is happening. I would suggest sometimes when you're outside—it could be done any place, but I've found it most helpful outdoors—doing walking meditation or just going for a walk, and holding a very simple question in mind for maybe five minutes.

So it doesn't have to be a long extended time, although it could be. The very simple question to hold in the mind is: moment to moment, what is being known? That's all. What is being known?

When I do this while going for a walk, what is being known? Oh, a sight. The feeling of the air on my face. Touching my foot on the ground. A thought. A sound. Another sight. So quickly, if we're paying attention carefully to each moment's experience—what is being known—it will reveal to you immediately how rapidly our experience is changing. Just moment after moment, it's one thing and another thing and another thing.

We can see in some way that our meditation practice is, in part, a refinement of the perception of change. Of course, we could go up to anybody on the street and ask them, "Do things change?" And everybody would say yes. But we don't live that understanding. Because if we really, deeply, fully understood it, we would not be holding on to anything that we realize is continually changing. We do know it on some level, but in meditation practice we are immersing ourselves in this perception of change, right there in the momentary experience of it. The question I just suggested is a beginning way of tuning into that, of seeing the rapidity of this change.

Now, this direct experience of the rapidly changing nature of all our experience leads to an understanding of what in the Pali language—the language of the Buddhist texts, closely related to Sanskrit—is called *dukkha*. It's a very important word in the teachings. For those of you new to the practice, the most basic formulation of the Buddhist teachings are called the Four Noble Truths, and they all revolve around this word *dukkha*. The first noble truth is the truth of *dukkha*. The second is the cause of *dukkha*. The third is the end of *dukkha*. And the fourth is the path leading to the end of *dukkha*.

So what does *dukkha* mean? It's often translated as "suffering," and that's relatively easy for us to understand. But it has a broader meaning than that, because as the Buddha said, all conditioned things are *dukkha*. When we're having pleasant experiences, we don't experience them as suffering particularly, but they're still *dukkha*. Why? Because in its expanded meaning, we understand *dukkha* to mean the inherently unsatisfying nature of experience. And it's inherently unsatisfying because it's continually changing.

This is really important to understand. Through the development of *sīla*, we lay the foundation. From *sīla*, we develop a modicum of concentration. As the mind stabilizes a little bit, it allows us to see the momentary flow, the momentary change of every aspect of our experience. The more deeply we're immersed in that, the more deeply do we understand in our bones that these changing phenomena will never result in a lasting sense of fulfillment or completion. All of the deepest insights of the practice unfold in this very natural way.

Most people can easily understand, at least on some level—maybe a superficial level at first—but the idea of impermanence is not hard to understand. People can relate to that. And even *dukkha*: the suffering that comes in life is obvious, the painful experiences. But also, with a little thoughtfulness, we can appreciate the fact that changing phenomena will not bring lasting satisfaction.

But the most challenging aspect of the Buddha's teachings is not particularly impermanence or *dukkha*. It's the understanding of not-self, of selflessness. This really seems counterintuitive. Our whole lives have revolved around the sense of self, of "I am." And here the Buddha comes and says that's just a mistaken understanding, a mistaken view.

The Buddha summed up this understanding in one phrase found very frequently throughout the discourses—a phrase that truly encapsulates the non-self way of relating to all experience. He said that things should be seen with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

That's the understanding we need to bring to the unfolding experience of our lives. Whatever arises—a thought, a sensation, a moment of hearing—this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself. This phrase encapsulates the meaning of not-self.

But of course, the great challenge is: how do we actually experience that? It's not as obvious as the truth of impermanence or the truth of dukkha. And so, returning to what I find most intriguing these days, I'm

really exploring whether there's a way in our practice as lay people—living the household life, engaged with the world—to tap into the experience of selflessness in the midst of our lives. Whether on retreat or in daily life, are there ways to gain an immediate sense, an immediate experience—even if not yet complete—of what the Buddha meant by non-self?

As I've engaged with this question, based on my own interest and exploration, I've found there are many ways to do it. I want to share some of them with you because they've been very impactful in my own practice.

One arena of practice we often overlook is mindfulness in daily activities. We give so much emphasis to sitting. Some emphasis to walking, though not quite as much as sitting. And our daily activities run a distant third. This is a huge mistake. It deprives us of an arena of practice that we can bring directly into our daily lives. You don't have to be on retreat to do it—although if you practice it here, it will be easier to continue when you're home.

The text I've shared with you begins with the word "bhikkhu." Bhikkhu is the Pali word generally for a monk, and bhikkhuni for a nun. But Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, explained that bhikkhu in its more general meaning refers to anybody walking on the path. In that sense, we're all bhikkhus. We're not monastics, but we're walking on the path.

So: "A bhikkhu is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning, when looking ahead and looking around, when bending an arm or straightening it, when eating, drinking, consuming food and tasting, when defecating and urinating, when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, when talking and keeping silent—one acts with full awareness."

I'd like you to paste this up on the door of your room, so every time you go out, you take a look at it. Just to remind you that each of these ordinary activities of our lives—the things we do every day—can be done with full awareness.

Let me share an example. One of our teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, was a Burmese monk, a very fierce and demanding teacher. He first came in 1984 for a three-month course—a very rigorous retreat. My colleague Sharon Salzberg was the queen of slow moving. It would take her an hour to cross the dining room. But it was interesting: when she would go for an interview with Sayadaw, she'd go in, do her bows, and then he'd ask, "What did you notice when you combed your hair?" She hadn't paid any attention to that. She didn't have an answer. And that was it—end of interview. The next time she goes in: "What did you notice when you were brushing your teeth?" Nothing. She didn't notice anything. He kept on like that until she was actually fulfilling this teaching.

So can we do that?

Can we pay careful attention?

You may already know the answer to this, but it was only a few years ago that I discovered it for myself. What's the predominant experience you have when brushing your teeth? You don't need to answer now, but just think of what it might be, then pay attention and see if it's accurate. Because I was surprised—it wasn't what I thought it was. I won't say any more. You have to see for yourself. And maybe it will be different for you, but for me it was surprising.

There's one common feeling which is like a mindfulness bell telling you that you are not being mindful in your daily activities. If you keep an eye out for this feeling, it will be a tremendous help—just stopping for a moment, settling in, and re-engaging with awareness. That feeling is the feeling of rushing.

It's such a common feeling. When we're rushing, we're ahead of ourselves. We're energetically toppling forward. It's as if our mind is already where we're going or what we think we have to be doing, and we're not settled back in our bodies. We are not being mindful. But it's such an apparent feeling. If you set the intention to pay attention to when you're feeling rushed, you can just stop for a moment, recollect yourself, and then start moving at whatever speed is appropriate—because rushing has nothing to do with speed. You can be walking slowly and be rushing, and you can be walking quickly and not rushing.

You will be amazed, even here on retreat where there's all the support and suggestions for you just to be mindful of what you're doing, at how often you will find yourself rushing through the day. And it's actually very noticeable. I'll give you an example. The bell rings after breakfast for the 8:45 sitting. Notice how you and others are coming into the hall. It's like being pulled in there—not everyone, of course, but not uncommonly. It's like we're rushing to get to our seats so we can begin meditating. Why not meditate with each step?

It makes a huge difference, and you will feel so much more fulfilled, really. It's such a more easeful and relaxed way of moving when we're settled back into our bodies and really mindful of each step, each movement. There's a line from a short story by James Joyce—I think it's from *Dubliners*. The line is: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." We spend a good part of the day living a short distance from our bodies. So pay attention. It will be of tremendous help in your practice and also in living in a much more satisfying way.

There are a couple more exercises that we can do to actually touch into the experience of non-self, of selflessness, in the midst of daily activities—and in that I'm including also the walking, because I've learned a lot in the walking about how to explore this teaching. In Pali, the word for selflessness or not-self is *anattā*. It's possible at any stage in the practice to really get some glimpses of what the Buddha is talking about.

One of the easiest places to see how the sense of self is being conditioned is by paying attention to how often we're lost in thoughts of past and future. I think you'll notice that most of the thoughts of past and future—guess who's the star of the show? We are the subject of most of those thoughts. They're completely normal thoughts. We all have these thoughts of what we were doing in the past, what we hope to be doing

in the future. Totally common and natural. And just as thoughts, conventionally speaking, they're fine. But we're missing the fact that unless we really understand them as being just thoughts, we are unconsciously strengthening this sense of being the subject, of the "I" in the center of it all. So it's just to watch that, to pay attention to that.

Part of this exercise—and this was tremendously illuminating for me—was seeing, especially in the daily activities and in the walking, how often I was lost in unnoticed thoughts. Brief ones, not problematic, not dramatic. They didn't cause any agitation, just the usual random thoughts that go through the mind. But at one point I was on a self-retreat, going for a walk, and for some reason I just started noticing how frequently that was happening. I'd take some steps and then just be lost in a thought for—it could be five seconds or ten seconds or fifteen seconds.

But they didn't really register because they weren't problematic. There was no big drama or anything. But as I just said, most of these thoughts had the "I" as a subject.

It's really illuminating for each of us to see how frequently this is happening, because mostly we're not aware of it. And the more we begin paying attention to the fact that this is happening a lot, it makes us a little more wakeful in the experience, and we become a little more quickly aware that these thoughts are there and not so lost in them.

There's another exercise that takes us to an even more profound level of understanding selflessness. And it's something that can be realized doing anything, any kind of activity at any moment.

For example, in walking, even as we're being mindful of the movement—we're walking and we're feeling the movement, we're feeling the touch—in this situation, we're not lost in our thoughts. We're really there. But very frequently, there is a subtle overlay, and it can be really subtle, of some image or idea of foot or leg or body as we're walking. We're feeling the sensation, so it's not that we're disconnected from that, but it's like a translucent image that gets overlaid on the direct experience. It's a concept of foot or leg or body.

Now the problem with not seeing that—and it takes real effort to see; it's not easy, you really have to have an intention to explore this—is that it's such an easy step to go from foot or leg or body to *my* foot and *my* leg and *my* body. This just happens automatically. This is how we think. A foot and leg and body—don't you have one? Yeah, it's my foot and my leg and my body, not even realized. And in a conventional way, of course, it's totally okay. But for the purpose of awakening and for the purpose of liberation, this is what imprisons us in a world of concept and the world of self. I, me, mine.

The Buddha addressed this tendency in a discourse to his son, Rahula. There's a very interesting story. The Buddha was going for alms round into the village, and his son Rahula, who was at that time a novice monk, was walking behind him. Rahula, looking ahead to the Buddha—and the Buddha was said to embody physical perfection, great beauty of form—was reflecting, "Oh yes, I'm the son of the Buddha, and I'm somewhat similar." He was having a little pride. Needless to say, the Buddha knew what was going on

in his mind and turned around. And he gave him a teaching to counteract that tendency.

The teaching he gave, which I'll go into in some detail because it's something we can apply for ourselves, was on meditating on the elements. It's easy to skip over these teachings because the language and framework that the Buddha used can seem a bit theoretical and even archaic, since it's not the language we use. What was common at the time was describing the elements in terms of earth, air, fire, and water as the four primary elements. To us, this may seem overly simplistic, given our understanding of chemistry and physics. When we hear of the elements earth, air, fire, water, we might tend to dismiss it as not being so relevant to us.

But really, those terms are simply a designation for the actual sensations that we're feeling. It's a whole different use of the term "element" than the periodic table in chemistry. It wouldn't help us so much to say, "Be mindful of carbon as you walk," or "Be mindful of hydrogen." That wouldn't be much help to us.

But if we understand what the Buddha meant by earth, air, fire, and water—earth is just the experience of hardness or softness; air is movement and vibration, pressure; fire is warmth and coolness; water is fluidity, cohesion—when we understand what these terms refer to, they provide us a very direct connection to what we're actually feeling, free of concepts.

So when we're experiencing the body in terms of the elements, we're not getting caught in the overlay of foot or leg or body. It's a very simple exercise, and it has the potential—

to be quite profound even though it's incredibly simple.

In your next walking meditation, or even just walking from one place to another, the two elements that are predominant in walking are the air element—movement—and the earth element—touch.

Some time ago, and this is fairly recent for me as I didn't really use this earlier in my practice, but in the last number of years I really saw how powerful it was. I simply started noting in the walking for a while: "air element" as I was moving, "earth element" as I touched. Air element, earth element. And then perhaps just "air, earth, air, earth."

Now the key is not just repeating the words in your mind. You have to connect the word to what you're actually experiencing in the movement and the touch. But the value of experiencing it in terms of these elements is that it's very unlikely the mind would go from "air element" to "my air element," or from "earth element" to "my earth element." We would not tend to do that as we would with foot—"my foot"—or leg—"my leg."

So when we're directly experiencing just the basic elements of what is happening, there can be quite a vivid experience of: that's all there is. And it gives us a taste, a glimpse. It's a taste of what selflessness means. It's not I, me, mine. It's just the very experience we're having of walking—a common experience. But we've dropped down into the level of the selfless experience of it. Just air element, earth element. Air,

earth.

Does this seem clear? It's really simple, but it's dramatic because we're not used to dropping beneath the level of concepts. We live most of our lives in the world of our mental proliferation.

One last piece. The experience of the elements not only illuminates the truth of impermanence, because it's always changing, but it also illuminates another aspect of anattā, selflessness—which means that things are ungovernable, not subject to our will. Everything is happening according to certain laws. You could put the kettle on the stove and wish, "May the water boil, may the water boil." No, you have to turn on the flame. It's going to follow its own laws. And everything is following its own laws.

When we understand the laws governing phenomena and we're in harmony with them, then we can guide things in a certain way. But it's not because we want it to be that way. It's because we understand the laws that make certain things happen. This is an important understanding of selflessness, of non-self—the ungovernableness—because the elements are continually becoming otherwise, and sometimes in ways that we don't like. Growing older, getting ill, dying, death. This is not what we would look for, but it's not under our control. The elements of the body and of the mind and of the whole world are following their own laws. These are some of the laws of nature—that things have the nature to grow old, to get sick, and to die.

Seeing the elements in this way and appreciating that they are following their own laws again highlights their selfless nature, that they're not subject to our will. This in turn leads to a deepening understanding of dukkha, because things are ungovernable.

My favorite description of dukkha—I just came across it recently, someone had written it, and I thought, "That captures it." They defined dukkha as the inevitability of unwanted experiences. I love it because it is so true. We don't like to acknowledge it. It is inevitable because things are always becoming otherwise and following their own laws.

Do you see how all of this ties together? This is what's so beautiful about the Buddhist teachings. They're just so consistent. Every aspect of it—the understanding of impermanence leads to an understanding of dukkha. The understanding of both leads to an understanding of selflessness, not-self. As we understand not-self, it increases our understanding of impermanence. It's just this flowering of insight and understanding which leads to the highest peace, the highest happiness—what the Buddha spoke of as the experience of Nibbāna, the freedom of the mind, the mind basically free of greed and hatred and delusion.

I want to close with a teaching from a Tibetan teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. He said: "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your own mind and experience."

From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect

on you or actually do more for you than yourself.

The Buddha said, "I have shown you the path to liberation. Now liberation depends on you."

This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you.

So that's what we're doing here together. We're really embarking on this path—this path of freedom, this path of peace.

Let's just sit for a couple of minutes.

May our practice be dedicated to the welfare and happiness and liberation of all beings everywhere.

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