Q&R

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:03:39

So, Joseph asked me to look through the questions and read them out. I already know we're not going to get to everybody's questions. Thank you so much for your questions, and we'll get through as much as we can. May it be of benefit to all beings.

Okay, ready?

"I'm flying directly from a month of retreat to a four-day social event—Four Seasons in Costa Rica. There will be lots of indulgent food. My āsana will be both uccha and mahā. How should I practice, especially regarding sense pleasures, craving, and renunciation?"

Good luck.

Well, in one way, you could kind of see it as the final exam for the retreat. Because hopefully all the work that you're doing here, that we do in practice, enables us to live more skillfully in our lives. Rather than seeing going to a big social scene—or just regular daily life, which is challenging enough—as leaving the retreat behind, really see that as much your practice as what you're doing here.

I was recently teaching a retreat with a few teachers, one of whom was Will Kabat-Zinn, and he was giving the closing talk at the end of the retreat about bringing the practice back into the world. He reframed it in a really interesting way, which I think could serve you. Usually we talk about how do we bring the practice into our daily life. He reframed it: how do you bring your daily life into your practice?

I thought that was a beautiful, different way of understanding. Because if we really reflect on that—how do we bring all the experiences of our lives into our practice—and we really cultivate that understanding, it's like we're making the baseline of our lives our practice, and then we bring all different aspects of our lives into it. Rather than think about daily life being the baseline and practice as something we do on the side, trying to bring the practice into our lives.

So I think entering into that kind of social whirlwind, which will definitely be challenging—if you could remember, even occasionally, "Okay, how do I bring all of that, whatever is going on, how do I bring it into my practice?" That will be a good reminder for you of settling back, of opening up, of being as mindful as you can.

One undervalued aspect of the practice—and I don't know why this is so, but it was really not emphasized much in all our time in Asia; it was mentioned but not emphasized—and yet I feel it's a really important aspect, especially when we're out in the world: mindfulness of seeing.

For people who have working eyes, the visual field is the predominant sense field of our lives. We are moving through our life, through the world, of what's being seen, predominantly. Of course, the other senses come into play, but it's mostly seeing that is so predominant. And yet there's not much emphasis on retreat. Perhaps on this retreat there has been, but I know in the retreats that I've been teaching with the team, it's not emphasized that much.

I found that by really consciously practicing, at times, mindfulness of seeing, it's quite amazing the change in perspective that brings from the world that's being seen. Instead of just being lost in all the concepts and interpretations and projections and likes and dislikes and everything that happens in the world of what's being seen, we become mindful that we're seeing—in the same way that we're mindful of hearing or sensing things in the body. It's the same process. And it allows the mind to settle back into a kind of open spaciousness, an open non-reactive spaciousness.

I'll just give one example of an immediate effect that can come from mindfulness of seeing. This goes back years. I was doing a retreat at the retreat center, sitting myself. And I noticed that every time I went into the dining room, my mind had a judgment about almost everybody. I had a comment about how people were walking, what they were wearing, how much food they took. It was ridiculous. I was watching my mind do that, and it was just ridiculous. But that pattern was deeply conditioned for some reason—just all these judgments.

I began investigating: why are these judgments happening? They were all happening because I was not mindful of that moment of visual contact. The contact of seeing, seeing consciousness—when we're not mindful of it, then the mind can spin out in all kinds of reactions to what is being seen. And so I started going to the dining room, and from the moment I entered, all I did was note "seeing." Seeing, seeing—as I saw the people, seeing, saw the food on the table, seeing, seeing.

It was amazing. Something as simple as that, and perhaps ninety-five percent of those judgments were gone. So it's powerful, because we get engaged in what's being seen so automatically and reactively.

When you're in the midst of a big social gathering and all the food is there, I would suggest dropping in some periods of time where you practice doing this. It will connect you to the mind space that is available to us all the time—one that can more easily navigate the whirlwind while staying balanced in it, rather than being reactive in one way or another. So it's bringing your daily life into your practice rather than the other way around. And if you're interested, even while you're here, you might take some time out in nature, in the midst of all its beauty, just noting "seeing, seeing." We become aware of that process. I found it tremendously illuminating.

Another question: "What have you found helpful for working with spiritual craving—wanting pleasant meditative states, wanting to become wise, wanting to be done with the path?"

There's often a lot of confusion that results in questions like this because of language. The word "desire" in

English has many different meanings. There's the desire of greed, which we're all familiar with. In Pali, there's a mental factor called *chanda*, which is the desire to do. It's ethically neutral—just that energy in the mind to initiate action or to accomplish something. Whether it's wholesome or unwholesome depends on what we want to accomplish. But we could use the word "desire" in that way too, meaning something that is not necessarily greed.

A really important distinction, and I think this could get to the heart of some of those specifics, is to really investigate for yourself in your own experience the difference between expectation and aspiration. Both of these could fall under the rubric of desire. The desire of expectation—we want something to be happening. But in my experience, expectation in a spiritual endeavor is always a setup for suffering, because things unfold, as you all well know, not necessarily according to how we want them to unfold. The Dharma has a mind of its own and it will unfold the way it does.

But that doesn't mean we can't have an aspiration. Through our practice, without expectation at any particular time, we can hold an aspiration for greater compassion or greater mindfulness or greater wisdom—all the things mentioned in the question. Those aspirations are fine, and they are not the desire of greed. When we have an aspiration, it sets the direction for us. It's like the pole star in navigation. We have the aspiration and then we align our practice with it, align what we're doing with that aspiration.

That's very different. It's a very different emotional feeling, a very different energetic experience than the wanting of expectation. Even when I say the word, I can feel a certain clenching. When I say "expectation," there's a tightening, a trying to get something. Do you see the difference between that and still holding an aspiration for the things that we value? There's no contradiction there. It's seeing the difference between the two. And as I say, often there's confusion because many English words have multiple meanings. If we're not clear about the particular meaning—for example, of the word "desire"—then it can get confusing, because in English it can mean so many different things.

Here's a short question, so you might miss it if you don't listen carefully: "Aware of awareness. Please explain."

This comes up a lot because, as probably many of you know, in different Buddhist traditions—and even different Vipassana lineages—some schools really emphasize awareness of awareness, while in other traditions it's not emphasized as much, especially earlier in practice. Although in all traditions, it comes in eventually.

I think it's helpful to have a certain framework for understanding the momentary process. This is in the discourses themselves, but it's elaborated even more in the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology. One of the early insights of Vipassana practice—in the various stages of insight that one can go through—is experiencing and realizing and understanding that in every moment, two things are happening. There's the knowing and the object of the knowing. There's the knowing of a sound, the knowing of a sight, the knowing of a smell, taste, touch. Our experience is really unfolding in this pairwise progression: knowing

an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.

So let's do a little experiment.

If you move your arm—I invite you to do that, just move your arm—do you know that it's moving? I hope so. This is just ordinary experience, moving our arm. We feel it. We know. We know the sensations of the movement. But it's not the arm that knows. If you moved the arm of a dead body, as far as we can tell, there wouldn't be any knowing going on.

So in this very simple example—and you could think of it in terms of walking or any of the sense doors—there's the physical matter of the body, which in Buddhism is described as the four elements manifesting in different ways, and there's the knowing, the consciousness of that experience.

I think it's helpful to explore a little bit, to understand on some level, that in every moment this is what's going on: knowing an object arising together, passing away together, arising, passing away. Now the object is usually more predominant, more tangible. The knowing aspect is much more subtle because it's immaterial. So for most of the practice, or a good part of it, the emphasis is given to being mindful of the object, because it's easier to be mindful of. It's a more tangible experience. But both are happening.

Even when we're mindful of the breath, or a sensation of walking, the physical sensations may be predominant, in the foreground, but the knowing is always there—the knowing of the object arising and passing in each moment. You can think of it as foreground-background. Depending on what we choose to pay attention to, or what unfolds naturally in the course of practice, the foreground and background can switch back and forth. Sometimes it's the object that's really predominant, but one could choose to turn the attention more to the knowing of it.

Now it starts to get interesting, because when we're looking at the knowing, at the awareness, there's nothing to find. It's immaterial, not a tangible experience. Another exercise I've done in my sitting sometimes, as a way of exploring all this: I might be sitting, and if there happen to be some sounds arising, I'll ask myself the question, "Can I find what's knowing the sound?" I know that I'm knowing it because I'm hearing—I'm hearing the sound, so clearly there's awareness of the sound. But then I turn my attention, asking that question: Can I find what's knowing the sound? And there's nothing to find, yet the knowing is happening.

This gets into the mystery of how we experience consciousness. It's understanding that yes, the knowing is there, but there's nothing tangible to find that is knowing. This is important because sometimes you may hear the instruction, "Become aware of awareness." Unless one understands this, people often struggle, trying to find it. How do I become aware of awareness? Where is it? How can I put my finger on it? But when we realize that there's nothing to find and yet the knowing is happening, then we relax back into—I don't know, you could call it the mystery of knowing, the mystery of consciousness. And you're very aware of its knowing, the capacity of the mind to know.

There's one Tibetan expression I like a lot. I didn't really come across this in the classical Theravada teachings, but it resonated deeply with my experience. The phrase was, in talking about awareness, "the cognizing power of emptiness." I love it because it combines that understanding that there's nothing to find, and yet there's this cognizing power of the mind, the power of the mind to know. For me it was a nice frame for that experience: the cognizing power of emptiness.

Now I'm going to suggest something that definitely is not in the texts, but I was just playing with it on my own retreats and having a lot of fun with it. Don't report me.

I was on a self-retreat, sitting and walking, and I did this particularly in walking practice. I did a sequence of things. First I was walking back and forth, and then I simply framed the experience, languaged it to myself: "Okay, just walking through space." At that point I was not narrowing the focus on the body or the feet or the legs—it was just the whole body walking, but walking through space. Somehow that space became the context in which it was happening. There was really that feeling of expansiveness, the space becoming foreground and the experience of the sensations becoming background.

I did that, and it was fun because it makes the experience quite expansive—just walking through space. Then the second thing I did was framing it as walking through the mind. That was really interesting because it highlighted the knowing aspect. Just walking through the mind, and so the whole experience of the body moving—

was seen or experienced as being an appearance in the mind. Because it's the mind which is knowing it. And so that's another way of beginning to get a sense of, or being mindful of, aware of awareness—when in one way or another, we bring the awareness component of what's happening into the foreground rather than into the background.

Did that make any sense at all? I was having fun with this.

So I'll just say one more thing. I don't know if I should say this—I'll probably mess up your practice. But for me, one of the things that has kept me motivated—I've been practicing a long time now, fifty years, sixty years—what's kept the energy up for me in all these years has been just the quality of interest. Because this whole mind-body process is so interesting. And the quieter our mind gets, the more facility we have just for investigating, taking interest in exploring.

So that little exercise I just mentioned was just my way of playing, of exploring. Okay, well, what would it be like doing this or this? Now, the hesitation in my mind about saying this is that sometimes people can go overboard with this kind of investigation—oh, let's play this way, that way—and it just gets confusing and you're kind of losing your concentration. So I just say, when it's done skillfully, when it's done in a wise, appropriate way, this quality of interest or just playing—playing with our experience and how we're understanding things—I find very energizing for the practice. So that it doesn't just become mechanical: okay, I'm doing this, this, this.

And I'll say that for some people this may resonate and for other people not. For other people it's good to have a very structured way of practice. So I'm not saying one is better than the other. See what works for you. Just putting this out as another possibility.

Basically, have fun. This is an amazing process of discovery, so you kind of enjoy it—even when it's hard. Sometimes it's hard.

Question: I have long wondered if exploration of the jhānas was required or optional in following this path to its end?

Okay, so this is an easy question because it's definitely not required, and it's clear in the texts. There are suttas in which there are arahant monks—and it doesn't refer to the nuns, but I'm sure it's the same situation—where people have become fully enlightened without having experienced the jhānas. So it's definitely not required.

At the same time, when you read the suttas, the Buddha talks a lot about it. The jhānas are mentioned in many, many suttas. But it's also important to realize that different teachers have very different interpretations of what the jhānic experience is. Some teachers' understanding of jhāna is something that is really quite accessible to many people, and there are powerful experiences that happen. Other teachers understand jhāna as being a higher level of absorption and concentration that is not so easy, that really takes quite a lot of practice. So even in using or asking the question about jhāna, teachers have very different views on what that means—just to understand that.

Basically, the stronger our concentration, the easier the whole deepening of insight happens. So concentration is a key factor to develop in our practice. And it does develop when we're just doing vipassanā practice. Even when we're not doing a formal concentration practice, the concentration will develop. You're probably familiar with the term momentary concentration, which is the mind concentrated on changing objects. Jhāna is the concentration that comes when the mind is on a fixed object. So we're not—that's why it's not vipassanā. We're not in the process of seeing change. In jhāna practice we're trying to keep the mind steady on a single object. So it's just steadiness.

And as I'm sure you've experienced, at least at times, sometimes the mind is quite steady and sometimes it flickers. The image for concentration that's in the texts is like a candle flame in a windless place. If there's no wind, the flame will be steady.

And if there's even a little bit of wind or breeze, the flame will flicker. Well, our minds can flicker a lot. But both in vipassana, through momentary concentration, and in the one-pointed concentration of jhana, the mind does get increasingly steady. As that steadiness develops, it can lead to really deep states of absorption. So as I said, the more powerful our concentration, the more effective a tool it becomes for deepening insight.

One of my teachers used this example: if you want to cross a big lake, practice without jhana is like

swimming across. You can do it, but it takes considerable effort. For people who have developed a high level of jhana, it's like taking a boat across the lake—much easier.

However, depending on one's background, conditioning, paramis—all the factors that shape how our minds are now—for some people concentration comes really easily. They just have a natural affinity for whatever reason. Other people, like myself, certainly when I started my practice, had no affinity for concentration at all. I would just sit and my mind would think all the time. And I loved it! It was interesting and the hour went quickly. But I definitely wasn't getting anywhere. So people differ. There are some natural yogis, but that was not me.

For some people, even though a boat gets you across the lake more quickly, it will take longer to build the boat than to swim across. This is to say that concentration is a very valuable development across the whole spectrum of practice. These days, some people call it "light jhana" and "deep jhana"—different interpretations of it. But at whatever level, concentration is a good thing to deepen. And it also deepens naturally in the course of vipassana practice. Momentary concentration will lead to deep states of samadhi.

So I hope this puts some frame around it. Jhana is not necessary. But for those who either have the interest or the affinity for developing it, it's a very helpful thing to do.

The next question has a beginning, but then extends further. The essential question is: What are some approaches for learning to discern the wise balance of relative and absolute in practice? For example, being with phenomena as they arise and dissolve, as opposed to being the space into which the phenomena dissolve. The questioner shares that early conditioning in childhood of Hindu devotion and spiritual leadership, attachment trauma, a husband's early death, aspirations of wanting to have a child, needing to provide financially, grief, and fire for the Dharma have pointed them to a mix of Tibetan and Theravadan practice side by side. Recognition of emptiness is available often now, as is profound suffering at the relative level. How to balance the density with the space?

I'll use one simple example of the difference between ultimate reality and relative reality, to convey what that's really referring to.

There's a cup. And this cup happens to have water in it, so I'll try to be mindful. We all know what a cup is. We use it, we take care of it, we wash it—all of that. But if we looked at this cup under a high-power microscope, there would be no cup. There would be a whole other level of reality.

Recently I've been reading and listening to some lectures about quantum reality, and one lecture was so good that at the end of it I was under the illusion that I understood it—which I don't—but it was so clear. And that quantum reality is nothing like the cup. It's a completely different order of reality.

So the question is, how do we hold both? Because it's not that the cup is here, the relative reality, and then ultimate reality is over there. It's the same experience seen at different levels.

And this is what was happening in our practice.

We could think of the relative reality—like having a body—just like the cup. We have to take care of it and relate to it in skillful ways, in helpful ways. But to the degree that through our practice we understand the more ultimate level, something shifts. In our meditation, what that means is when the concentration and mindfulness begin to develop and get stronger, we don't experience the body as something solid. We begin to experience the body really as a changing energy field, and we're experiencing this on a more and more microscopic level. The whole solidity of the body disappears. Even the notion of the body disappears.

I remember one time I'd been doing a long retreat and I was sitting, just in that place of—you might say—an energetic field of rapidly changing sensations. And I couldn't tell whether I was sitting or standing because the whole form and the whole level of concept was gone.

So in our practice, that's analogous to the more ultimate level, the microscopic level or the quantum level of reality, when we're getting beneath the conventional understanding of really discrete objects, things that are solid and more or less fixed in certain ways.

What's helpful in terms of navigating the conventional relative world—our personal interactions and the story of our lives, all of that on the relative level—what makes navigating all that even when it can be challenging at times, is the experience, if we have a deep experience, of the more ultimate level. This momentary process of change of mind-body elements, everything just changing so quickly all the time, no solidity, nothing to hold on to—to the degree that we've integrated that experience at least to some extent, the wisdom of that experience or realization, we can then apply it at the relative level. We're navigating this more ordinary level of reality but with much less attachment, because we know from our own experience that on another level none of this is even really happening. On the relative level it is, and that's why we have to deal with it skillfully.

And it's really interesting. Different Buddhist traditions highlight the dangers of getting attached to the relative level, which happens a lot in people's lives. We get attached to things being a certain way. But they also point out that people can get attached to emptiness, to the more ultimate level. And that takes the form of, "Oh, it's all empty, so nothing matters." So that's the danger on that side. We can either get too stuck on the relative level or too dismissive of the relative level.

This is—talk about balancing—the toggle between the two. We have to integrate the wisdom that comes from the deeper understanding of emptiness. Emptiness of solidity, and really the heart of the practice in a way is emptiness of self. As we have more experience with that, as I say, then we can be with the circumstances on the conventional level with just a lot more spaciousness, or ease, or less attachment.

So that's one big piece in terms of the balance. I'll just give one example that came to mind. When I was practicing in India in Bodh Gaya—it's a small village, but it's the place the Buddha was enlightened, so it's a very powerful place—in the village there was a working elephant. You could see the elephant going up

and carrying stuff. So one time I was walking from the monastery where I was staying into the village, into the bazaar. I was walking in and noting: seeing, seeing. And then I saw the elephant coming. Well, I didn't just go on saying "seeing, seeing, seeing." I got out of the way.

That's the union of the relative and the absolute. We have to employ the appropriate level depending on the circumstance.

One last thing for dealing with the suffering on the relative level. This is where we suffer a lot—the relative level of concept of self, concept of I, attachments, grief, all kinds of things happening on this ordinary level of reality. There's one phrase that I've been using a lot in the teachings lately: Don't waste your suffering.

Let me back up a minute. I came across the best definition of *dukkha* that I've encountered. *Dukkha* is the first noble truth, generally translated as suffering, but it's much bigger than suffering, because the Buddha said all conditioned things are *dukkha*. But that's an aside.

The definition of dukkha that I came across was "the inevitability of unwanted experiences." I love this because it just lays it out, and it's what the Buddha pointed to—that in this conditioned realm of existence, unwanted experiences are inevitable for everybody.

So then the question becomes: what's the skillful way of relating to unwanted experiences? And here's where "don't waste your suffering" comes in.

The Buddha didn't waste suffering because he didn't rest with the first noble truth. He investigated: what's the cause of dukkha? And then the third and fourth noble truths: what's the end of suffering, and what's the path to that end?

In not wasting your suffering—for the most part now, when my mind gets into some kind of distress, some unease about whatever, when I find my mind in that kind of state, it piques my interest. It's like, "Okay, what's the mind doing that's causing the distress, that's causing the suffering?" Because usually we either have a lot of aversion to it and want to get rid of it, or we're drowning in it, getting lost in the whole turmoil. That to me is wasting the suffering, because neither one is productive.

But if we take an interest, if we really look at our minds—okay, what am I holding on to? What am I pushing away? What am I not accepting?

There's one statement that many people have a hard time with, but I find tremendously empowering. I don't know where you all are going to fall with this: we are one hundred percent responsible for our suffering. This doesn't mean that we're responsible for the different and sometimes terrible things that can happen. We're not responsible for that. But we are responsible for how our minds are relating to it.

I find this so helpful because it's reminding us that we have agency in the face of suffering, in the experience of suffering. It's not that we're just helpless in the face of that. We have agency with regard to

what our minds are doing, how our minds are responding.

So this is a powerful way when we are on the relative level, with all the turmoil that can bring—we can look, we can investigate, we can take interest in our own minds to see how they're creating the suffering for us in the face of those experiences.

So there are these two aspects: the toggle between the ultimate and the more relative, and "don't waste your suffering."

I think maybe we could leave it there, if that's okay. Or we could take one more? One more is okay? Sure. You'll be a bit late for your soup. That's inevitable suffering.

Okay, this is a two-part question. I felt like it would be good to finish with: "Any advice to support working with this challenging and dark time on our beautiful planet would be welcome. And specifically, as a lifelong activist, I'm experiencing a good deal of anger arising as I witness events unfolding in the world, and maintaining equanimity has been more difficult. When can anger be useful, if ever? Can anger and equanimity coexist?"

Thanks. So this links into what I was just saying about how we have agency with regard to our mind states. And we have agency in two ways.

First, we have agency when we see the difference between being identified with what's arising and simply being mindful of what's arising. For example, we see all the terrible things that are happening in the world, the injustice—and there's so much. In seeing that, it could easily call up the response of anger about it all, or reactivity in one way or another. So the first question is: are we being mindful enough of those mind states that are arising so that we see them in a meditative way? Are we being mindful of them rather than lost in them and identified with them? This is our basic practice of mindfulness.

But then—and this is another aspect of having agency with regard to our own mind states—we have the ability to actually choose what mind states to settle into. I think of it this way: you know how, not here of course, but at home, you're sitting watching TV maybe at night, you don't like the channel, you take out the remote, you change channels. We all have an inner remote. If we see an unwholesome mind state arising and we're mindful enough to see it rather than simply being carried away by it—take out your remote. Just click. Change the channel. You could change to a compassion channel.

You could change to a metta channel. You could change to a generosity channel. You could change to the concentration channel. There are many wholesome mind states that we can shift our attention toward.

Let me give you one quick example. This goes back many years. I had gone to Burma to sit for a few months with Sayadaw U Pandita, and a good friend and colleague, Steve Armstrong, was a monk at the time in Burma and had been there for many years already. He'd been there three or four years when I arrived. So when I came, of course, he was so still and kind of radiant from all of that practice.

At first, the channel my mind was on was the comparing channel. You know—how well he's doing, and I just got here, filled with all my stuff. But pretty quickly I said, "Well, Joseph, get it together." After I saw that unhelpful mind state, I just changed channels to mudita. And I thought, "Oh yes, may your practice continue to deepen. May you become fully enlightened." It was amazing. It didn't take any effort or any length of time. As soon as I changed channels, it brought a lot of joy to see this good friend in that wonderful state.

This is such a good example. We don't have to stay locked into mind patterns that are not skillful. But we have to be mindful in the first place that they're arising, and then realize or remember that we can simply switch to a wholesome state.

Then there's the question about whether anger is ever helpful. Again, this might not be the ultra-orthodox Buddhist answer, but for me it has a practical application. Sometimes I see the response of anger to certain things—if we witness a lot of injustice in the world, or people doing terrible things—and our first response might be anger. I see the arising of that anger as the messenger that something is wrong here, something that needs to be addressed.

But then the question becomes: do we stay in the anger mode, which is not productive and not sustainable? Or can we take the message of it and say, "Yes, this is a situation that, if I can do something about it, would be good to engage with"? We take the message of the anger, but then can we fuel our response from a more wholesome state—like compassion, compassion for the suffering that's being caused?

Compassion is a beautiful state, and it can motivate us in a much more sustained way for continued action than anger could. So I see there is value in that first, perhaps reactive moment, highlighting that this is a situation we really need to understand and if possible do something about. But then we shift the motivation so it's not anger that's fueling us. In these situations, compassion is the obvious wholesome state. We feel compassion for the suffering that's there, and we want to alleviate it. That's how they can work together.

This was wonderful. I don't come here that often anymore, even though I'm just up the hill a little bit. But every time I come, I'm simply amazed. Even coming into the hall—you're probably very aware of it, although maybe you've gotten used to it—just walking in, it is really still. It's very interesting: even when we were building the place and just locating different buildings, before the hall was even built, almost everybody felt the stillness here. We had different feng shui consultants, and they pointed out the energetic lines in the earth. But this is a really special place in terms of that stillness and quiet. It was that way from the beginning. And I felt it just coming in this evening.

So... I could live here. It's really nice. I'm sure you are enjoying it, and I hope you continue to do so.

Thank you.

Q&R

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