Why Meditate

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:01:22

It's really good to be with you all, even if it is via Zoom.

Today, I would like to address a very simple question, which at one point or another may have occurred to you. The question is: Why meditate? Why am I doing this? Is it about reducing stress, having greater ease in our lives, or is there something more?

In the opening lines of the Dhammapada, one of the collections of the Buddha's teachings in verse, the very first line says, "Mind is the forerunner of all things." This immediately gives us a clue as to why we meditate.

Here, mind means more than just thoughts or intellect. Mind in the Buddhist sense—consciousness—is the basic capacity to know, to be aware. It also includes all of the different qualities of mind, which in Buddhism are called mental factors. These arise in every moment of consciousness, coloring that awareness in a whole variety of ways. Concentration, love, restlessness, boredom, joy, happiness, compassion—all of these are mental factors, qualities which arise at different times, and they color consciousness according to their own particular nature.

These qualities arising in the mind are the manifestation of our own particular conditioning—what we have either knowingly or unknowingly cultivated in the course of our lives. Have we cultivated love? Have we cultivated aversion? Have we cultivated fear or joy? Our mind is the manifestation of all this conditioning, which we express in the way we live.

This conditioning sometimes manifests in unusual ways, because the same experience of sights or sounds or tastes or sensations in the body can produce very different reactions in different people, depending on their particular conditioning.

I had one striking example of this. Early on, when I met my first teacher, Munindraji, in India, he loved hot chili peppers—the hotter, the better. We would be eating together, and he would be having these hot chili peppers. Once I just tasted a little bit of one, and my whole mouth was on fire, burning. I asked Munindraji, "Do you really enjoy these? The experience seems so unpleasant." He explained that in his way of understanding, hot chili peppers were very good for health. So even though the stimulus was, to me, very painful and unpleasant, he experienced it in the context of doing something really good for his body. He was enjoying them. It struck me as such a good example of how we each filter our experience through our own particular background, our own particular conditioning.

So when we say mind is the forerunner of all things, it's more than an abstract philosophical principle.

What we do, how we feel, all of our aspirations, all of our regrets—they're all expressions or manifestations of the mind.

I was first introduced to intensive meditation practice when I went to India, to Bodh Gaya. This goes back a long time, fifty years or more. When I met my teacher, Munindraji, he said something that totally captured my interest. I was young at that time, just twenty-three years old. I knew very little about Buddhism. But when I first met him, he said something so simple: "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it."

The common sense of it was striking to me. There was nothing to join. There were no rituals. There were no ceremonies. If you want to understand your mind, sit down—or take any posture—and observe it. How else could we understand our minds except by doing that? This is another response to the question of why meditate: we come to an understanding of our own minds.

As we do this, even from the very beginning, there's one insight of insight meditation which becomes immediately apparent. So if there are some of you who are wondering, "Well, I've been practicing insight meditation and I'm still waiting for the insights to come"—you've all had this first insight.

And that is noticing how often the mind wanders. Has anybody not had that insight before? I think not. Because we give the mind this very simple object of meditation—it might be the breath or certain sensations in the body—and then very quickly, the mind hops on these trains of association. Pretty soon our mind is off in some completely other place. It's like we hop on the train without knowing that we've hopped on. And because we didn't buy the ticket, we don't even know where the train is going. After some time, by the end of that particular thought train, we could be in a whole different inner mental environment because of this wandering mind.

So again, in answering the question "why meditate?" one response might be: well, it's just to make sense of all of this. As we begin to look at our minds, to observe them and see everything the mind is doing, it can be confusing. There's so much going on. We meditate to come out of the confusion, to come out of all our habitual reactions, into a space of greater wisdom, of greater clarity. We begin to see much more clearly what actually is going on in our experience rather than being lost in it. We begin to see what it is that's shaping our lives.

The first step in this whole process is, through meditation, calming the mind and collecting the attention—really strengthening the steadiness of mind, the ability or capacity for the mind to stay steady on whatever we're attending to. When we do this, instead of unknowingly hopping on all these chains of associations, we become much more aware, and much more aware more quickly, of when the mind is lost in thought, when we're carried away by different feelings and emotions, and when we're actually being mindful of them.

Even just this very simple thing—being aware of when we're lost and then when we're actually being

mindful—really highlights for us what mindfulness means. This is why sometimes in practice I really encourage people, when we're lost in a thought and then wake up from being lost, to pay attention to that very moment of waking up. Lost, lost, lost, and then—oh, thinking. Right there in that moment, instead of judging ourselves ("Oh, lost again"), we can actually have delight in the fact that we're now awake. We can have a very clear sense of what wakefulness means, what awareness means, because we've just gone from being deluded to being awake.

So one piece of encouragement here is that for as many times as you get lost in thought, that many times do you awaken. Why not delight in all those moments of awakening rather than judging oneself for having been lost? For me, that moment of transition is really powerful, and it's one that we often just pass over. We don't highlight that moment and what can be learned from it.

At first, we may notice and become mindful most easily of the loudest thoughts, or the longer stories that we're engaged in, or the more dramatic emotions. Given the state of the world, these may be coming with greater and greater frequency these days. But what's interesting is that both in sitting meditation and in walking meditation and also in our daily lives, we may be missing the more frequent but quickly passing thoughts—the lighter ones.

I had a really interesting experience of this recently, a few years ago, on a self-retreat. I was just going for a walk, but with the intention and application of being mindful as I walked. It wasn't the Vipassana speed of lift, move, place—it was just walking at a more or less normal pace, but being as mindful as I could. What was so surprising to me in doing that, after many years of practice, was how many quickly passing thoughts would arise, even in the span of one step. And in those moments, even though they were quickly passing thoughts, in the moment they were going on, I was not mindful of them because they were so light. They were underneath my radar. This undercurrent of thought was really interesting to me.

I want to read a little teaching from Dudjom Rinpoche, who was one of the great Tibetan masters of the last century, because it really points to this experience and the importance of becoming aware of this undercurrent of thought. This is what he wrote:

"When you are meditating, it is easy to identify your coarse thoughts when they arise suddenly. But until a few of your subtle thoughts have arisen and are recognized, you do not know that they are there. These are called the undercurrent of thought."

And I love this next phrase: "They are the sneaky thieves of meditation." For that reason, it is very important to post the guard of mindfulness. I love this—the thieves of meditation—because we think we're meditating.

We think we're being mindful. And we are to some or even a large extent, but underneath there is this pretty frequent horizon of these light thoughts.

What's interesting is that for me, I saw so many of them in one way or another were referencing a sense of

self. It could be a plan or a memory or a comment or a judgment. And so unknowingly, with these thieves of meditation, we're reinforcing this view of self, this view of I.

I really began to appreciate with interest—it truly captured my interest—to watch, not only in times of formal meditation, but throughout the day, just noticing the many times these undercurrents of thought are present. And this is one way of tremendously deepening our practice. We're dropping down to a more subtle level. We're training the quality of our attention, refining the quality of our attention.

One example of the impact of this undercurrent of thought came to my mind when I began to observe it in myself. It felt like the soundtrack of a movie or a TV show. This is probably a fairly common experience. When I'm watching a movie, sometimes I can be so absorbed in the story that I'm not even consciously aware of the soundtrack, the music in the background. And yet that soundtrack is powerfully manipulating our emotions. Music plays a certain way and we get tense, another way and we feel happy. All of this is going on in the background and we're hardly even aware of it. And yet it's having this tremendous impact on our lives.

This is why I'm emphasizing so much—and why it's been of such interest to me—to really emphasize within our practice of mindfulness keeping an eye out for these very light thoughts.

Sometimes it can be really amusing because we become aware of these random thoughts that just pop up in the mind. One time I was on retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita in Australia. As many of you know, he was a very strict and demanding teacher, and everybody was really trying to be impeccably mindful. We were in line for lunch and I was second in line. We were going through the lunch line, and the person in front of me reaches the table with the food. He takes the lid off the pot and puts it down. But as he put the lid down, it fell to the floor and made this big clattering noise in the midst of all this silence. And the first thought in my mind, just in that moment, was: "It wasn't me."

A sense of humor about one's mind is essential in this whole path of practice. As one yogi told me in an interview once, as he was observing his mind, he said, "I have discovered the mind has no pride. It will do anything." But we do not have to be caught by it all. We don't have to be identified with it. If we're aware of it, we can really have a sense of humor about everything the mind is doing.

With this attention to the nature of our mind and what's arising in our thoughts and emotions, we also begin to get very clear about the deeply conditioned habit patterns that have been developed over the course of our lives and that are driving our lives. For example, are the conditioned patterns that we see come up again and again obsessive planning? Worry? Anxiety? The judging mind, either of ourselves or others? Are our actions motivated by generosity, by love, or are they motivated by desire or by anger? Or probably some combination of them all.

This investigation and understanding is not a theoretical exercise. Through the mindfulness of all these patterns, it shows us so clearly how we're leading our lives. Instead of just acting out mechanically the

patterns of our conditioning, we're really beginning to see what's going on.

In whatever we do, we might ask the question: What quality of heart and mind is being cultivated? What is becoming habituated? What is being strengthened?

And what makes this entire exploration so transformative—and this understanding is what imbues our practice with tremendous power—is the profound realization that we have agency in this whole process. It's not that we're condemned to just act out all the patterns of our conditioning. As we cultivate mindfulness and we see with greater clarity what's going on, not so lost and carried away by it, that's when we can exercise some discerning wisdom and say, "Okay, what's skillful? What should be cultivated? What's not skillful? What should I let go of?"

Through the power of mindfulness, we begin to see that our minds can be trained. This is a tremendous understanding because I think most people in the world don't realize it. We're just living our lives, we are who we are, and we act it all out without the understanding that the mind is a dynamic process that can be trained. It's mindfulness of what's going on in our minds that allows us to make wise choices.

The question then for all of us is: trained for what? We're transformed, but transformed in what way? The Buddha pointed out the various possibilities in one very simple statement when he said that our minds can be our best friend or our worst enemy. I think we've all had experiences of both. When the mind is in a wholesome state, it becomes our best friend. When the mind is in an unwholesome state, especially in an extreme case, it can become our worst enemy.

With this understanding, we see the causes of either great happiness and fulfillment in our lives or the causes of great suffering—and the realization that we have agency in that. This is a powerful recognition. As another answer to the question "Why meditate?" we can say: to make our minds our friend. I love that. What could be a more intimate friendship than friendship with our own hearts and minds?

What I so appreciate about the Buddha's teachings is the clarity with which he sorted all this out. I'm often struck by how in meditation we give the mind a simple task—just be with the breath—and it's hard enough just to do that, to link together five or ten breaths with strong mindfulness. Yet the Buddha was able to see the entirety of the mind and all the ways it manifests, showing with such clarity what might be called a map of the inner landscape.

This is one teaching you're very familiar with, I think. He taught, and we can see for ourselves, that when we act motivated by greed or by hatred or by delusion, suffering follows. When we act motivated by generosity or by love or by wisdom, it becomes the source of happiness in our lives. In this regard, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that everything rests on the tip of motivation.

In our investigation of our own experience, our own hearts and minds, we need to really focus and understand and become aware of the motivations behind our actions. But this is not so easy to do. We might understand on an intellectual level that motivation is a really important aspect, and that

understanding aligns with our values. But how often do we actually apply it in our lives? In the midst of our daily lives, do we stop and reflect before we act? What's the motivation here? Probably not that often, because motivations can be very subtle and sometimes hard to see. They're often mixed.

Here there's a powerful intersection between the understanding that everything rests on the tip of motivation and our mindfulness practice. While in the course of our normal lives motivations may be hard to pick up if we haven't trained ourselves, in meditation, through practicing being mindful of motivations, we get much more skilled in becoming aware of them—even outside of meditation, just as we're living our lives.

There's one arena of activity in which I've found this exploration of motivation to be particularly fruitful: the whole arena of speech. Not when you're on a silent meditation retreat, of course, but in the midst of our daily lives we speak a lot. In terms of all the interactions we have in a day, speech is a very prominent part of our life experience.

Just as an aside, one of the many lists in Buddhism enumerates the ten wholesome and unwholesome actions. Of the ten, four of them have to do with speech. That shows the importance the Buddha gave to being mindful, aware, and discerning about our speech and the motivation behind it.

As many of you know, the Buddha outlined four types of wrong speech: lying, backbiting, harsh words, and useless talk. I'm not a Pali scholar, but the word in Pali for useless talk is my favorite Pali word: *samph appalāpa*. It sounds just like what it is. I have found this, as well as the other three categories, to be such an interesting place to practice.

I can be hanging out with friends in a social situation, just conversing, and so often I can see in my mind an impulse to say something that is totally useless. It has no bearing on anything except perhaps to announce, "Here I am, pronouncing my presence." At those times when I can see that impulse, the motivation to *samphappalāpa*, and I'm mindful enough to refrain, it always feels great.

It feels like a conservation of energy rather than a dissipation of energy.

So again, this is a fun way of practice, because we really have a direct application of seeing the importance of being mindful of our motivation before we speak or before we act.

What's so significant about this whole process—the whole process of exploring our minds and our actions—is that none of it depends on blind belief or dogma. And again, this is one of the things that first attracted me to the Buddhist teachings. It was not about demanding belief. The Buddha wasn't saying, "Come, you must believe this." It was always framed as, "Come and see, come and investigate for yourself." This is my understanding coming out of my realization of what brings happiness and what causes suffering—check it out.

And I love that, because then our entire lives become the laboratory of our understanding. We're testing

out in ourselves, for ourselves, in our own experience.

So there's this real focus on becoming aware of motivation before our actions. But another arena of investigation—of our minds, of our experience—which I've found hugely helpful in my practice and in my life, and I've talked about this a lot in recent years, is condensed in one phrase which I now use often: don't waste your suffering.

Although external circumstances in our lives will of course impact our experience, and sometimes there are very troublesome or even harmful or unpleasant experiences that come in the course of a lifetime—no one is exempt from that—how we relate to those experiences is completely up to us. No one makes us relate to difficult feelings or emotions or situations in a particular way. That's totally within our capacity: to see how we can relate to this in a wise way.

This doesn't mean that unpleasant things are going to stop happening to us from time to time or even frequently. But it does mean that we can train ourselves and learn to relate to these unpleasant experiences, whatever they may be—in the body, in our emotions, in relationships. How we relate to them is up to us.

One example of this, one of my favorites, is from the Zen master poet Ryokan. He lived in the 1800s, I think, and he was this monk in Japan who lived alone in the mountains, very poor. He wrote a lot of haiku and poetry, and he would wander around and play with the village children. There are wonderful stories about his life.

So he lived in this kind of ramshackle hut up in the mountains someplace, with very few possessions. One day he came back to his hut and everything had been stolen. What did he do? He wrote a haiku: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

Now I wonder how we would be if we came back to our house and everything was stolen. Would we be writing haikus? "Oh, the moon at the window. I'm so glad they've left it." Probably not. But I love the story because it just points to this truth: yes, our minds can be developed or trained to relate in skillful ways. And if we don't quite become great haiku poets, we might at least develop strength in the quality of equanimity—realizing that lots of things happen in our lives, some we enjoy, some we don't. Have we developed a capacity to hold all of that without adding more mental suffering to the situation?

This is particularly revealing, and it has been for me in my practice. We can be going along and for whatever reason there's some suffering in the mind, which really means some difficult emotion—might be frustration or sadness or anger or desire or anxiety. There's a whole long list of them. So when I'm either in formal practice or just in my life, and something comes up that's disturbing, my mind is no longer at ease.

By "don't waste your suffering," I mean don't deny it or try to push it away. Don't avoid it. Don't waste your suffering means taking an interest: okay, this unpleasant emotion is arising in me—can I investigate

it, can I explore it? Not only can I explore the energy of the emotion itself, taking interest—oh, anger feels like this, or sadness feels like this, or anxiety feels like this—but when we have that interest, in those moments we're not particularly identified with that emotion.

We're actually being mindful of it. And so we learn something.

Then we also want to check out what is the attitude in our mind about this emotion. Just as an example, suppose there's anxiety. Do we just have aversion to it, not like it, try to get rid of it in whatever way we can? Or if we're checking the attitude in our mind, we might notice, "Oh, there's aversion here." And then we can settle back into that quality of acceptance—the ability to open to it, to feel it without reactivity.

Years ago, many years ago, the most afflictive emotion coming up for me in my practice was fear. It wasn't fear about anything in particular. It was just free-floating fear, but it was really strong. I worked with it for a long time, noting it: "Fear, fear, fear." But it just felt locked in.

Then at a certain point—and this took a long time for me to realize—I was doing some walking meditation, the fear was coming up, but then something switched. That switch was reflected in the thought: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay. It's okay." And I realized that was the first moment in all of that time that I was truly accepting of it. Because even though I had known it was there and I was noting it, I was not being mindful.

This highlighted for me the difference between recognition and mindfulness. We often confuse the two. We think if we're recognizing what's there, it means we're being mindful. But that's not necessarily so. We can be recognizing something through the filter of aversion or through the filter of attachment. Mindfulness means yes, we do recognize what's there, but then there's that extra quality of acceptance—it's okay.

For me, "it's okay" became the magic mantra. Whatever I was going through: it's okay to feel this. It's okay. And that acceptance then made possible the real exploration of it.

So, everything rests on the tip of motivation. We've explored that arena—don't waste your suffering, which means when we are suffering in some way, that is a fantastic opportunity to understand on a deeper level the patterns of our conditioning, what's causing the suffering, and ways of letting go.

There's one more arena of investigation, again in response to the question "Why meditate?" The Buddha highlighted this so often in his teachings: the importance and many implications of seeing impermanence on more and more refined levels. How do we relate to the simple fact that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away? And what has the nature to arise? Everything. Everything has the nature to arise and therefore will pass away.

A couple of years ago, I came across a phrase in the texts which I had previously overlooked. It highlighted this insight into impermanence, made it more vivid just in the language of it. It said: "Everything is always

becoming otherwise." It's kind of an unusual phrase in English. But because of that, it just highlights—yes, everything is always becoming otherwise, changing.

I could be going for a walk and maybe I get a twinge in my knee. And now: "Oh, becoming otherwise." Instead of "Oh, why did that happen?" and ruminating about it all—no, it's just things becoming otherwise all the time.

There are two phrases which encapsulate this understanding. One is a phrase I've used a lot: anything can happen anytime. Things are not as stable as we would like them to be. Anything can happen anytime.

Going along fine, feeling healthy, and all of a sudden some illness arises. There are countless examples of anything can happen anytime—and sometimes really good things can happen at any time.

The other phrase, which the Buddha emphasized in one powerful reflection, he said we should really cultivate and practice every day. He gave emphasis to this reflection for the deepening of our practice. He said this is what we should reflect on: Whatever has the nature to grow old will grow old. Whatever has the nature to become ill will become ill. And whatever has the nature to die will die. This is just nature.

But here's the tagline: And I am not exempt.

I have found that to be such a powerful reminder. Because as we go through our lives with various expressions of becoming older, becoming ill, and maybe even in a dying process—and I see it in myself, even with little things—even though intellectually I know I am not exempt, I can see in myself that deep feeling: *Well, I should be exempt.* There's some very deep refusal to acknowledge the dharma of all of this. It's just nature. It's just the law. It's not a mistake.

But if we don't attend to that, then we get attached to things staying the way we want them to stay, the way we like them. If we're attached to summer, how do we feel in winter? If we're attached to youth, how do we feel as we're getting older? If we're attached to health and vigor, how do we feel when we become ill?

It's so clear that if we are not aware in a living way—not in a theoretical or intellectual way, but if we're actually living and practicing this understanding that things are always becoming otherwise and we are not exempt—as we integrate that more and more deeply into our lives, we navigate all these changes with much greater ease.

All of this comes out of our refinement of perception of change.

One question that might arise at different times: when we hear all this, we may wonder, if everything's changing all the time and everything is always becoming otherwise, what's the point of doing anything? Having relationships, striving for goals, working for the good—if everything is always in flux, what becomes the motivation for acting in skillful ways?

There are a couple of distinctions which are very helpful to understand in our lives and also specifically in our meditation practice. The first is understanding the difference between attachment and commitment. Attachment means we want something to stay the way it is—whether it's a relationship, whether it's some pleasant experience. Attachment or clinging says, "Stay this way." Of course, that's impossible. Commitment means that we can have a steadiness toward an aspiration, toward a goal, through all the changes. The commitment can be there.

This relates to another distinction, which is between expectation and aspiration. An aspiration basically sets the goal for our practice, for our lives. We aspire to become more aware. We aspire to become more compassionate. We aspire to be more generous. The aspiration sets the direction and the goal. Expectation means that we want things to be the way we want them when we want them.

A good example of this, which I've experienced countless times in my practice: I can be having a sitting and—in what we would call, not in a very skillful way, but we all do it—I would have what I call a "good sitting." What we think is good really means it's pleasant, right? So we're having a good sitting. The mind is somewhat concentrated, the body feels at ease, it's all going along very smoothly. And then we think, "Finally, I got it. Finally, I got this meditation thing." We get up and can't wait to come back to the next sitting.

We can sit down and the mind is restless, or it's bored, or there's pain in the body. Things are always becoming otherwise. We can have the aspiration to greater ease, greater clarity, greater understanding—with the understanding that there will be endless ups and downs. It's like a sine curve, up and down and up and down. But the slope of the curve is going up. Attachment or expectation is trying to fix things, which is counter to the understanding of the great truth of change.

I want to say a few words about the last area of exploration in answer to the question, why meditate? This has to do with something very subtle, hard to understand, really counterintuitive—it goes against our common understanding of things. And that is the Buddhist teaching on selflessness or non-self.

We have the idea, commonly, that there is some essential self, someone behind all experience to whom it is happening. That's the I. That's the self. And this felt sense of self is deeply habituated. Our lives revolve around it. So it would be worth investigating. If, as the Buddha taught, there is no self, no permanent being to whom things are happening, then it would be interesting to explore how that felt sense comes about. Because it's so prevalent, so predominant—how does it arise in the first place if it's not there?

Understanding how it arises is not complicated. It arises whenever there's identification with momentary experience. A thought arises: I'm thinking. Or my thought—we're identifying with it. The same with different emotions: love, anger, fear, joy. I'm angry, I'm fearful, I'm joyful. With all of these, the I is extra. Each of these experiences—whether thoughts, emotions, or feelings in the body—they're all arising impersonally due to various causes and conditions, manifesting their own nature, and passing away.

So it's love that loves. It's fear that fears. It's joy that joys. The thought is the thinker. There's no I behind it. It's not that they are referring back to a self. They're just arising due to the various conditions, manifesting their nature, passing away when the conditions change. But we're so habituated to identify with all of this phenomena. And it's that identification which creates that very deeply felt sense of self.

Our practice really takes us to tremendous depth of understanding, to a transformative way of understanding what this whole process is about. It's important to understand that this is not just a philosophic inquiry, although it is interesting on that level. But it's a way of understanding through which we can free our hearts and minds from the clinging and attachment and identification that is the cause of suffering in ourselves and other people.

Through this understanding—and this is what may be unrecognized for a while—this understanding of the selfless, impersonal nature of phenomena leads directly to a compassionate engagement with the world. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, another of the great Tibetan masters, offered a teaching that inspires me so much. He said, "When you recognize the empty, selfless nature of phenomena, then the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

I love that. Compassionate activity is the manifestation of the realization, the understanding of the empty selfless nature of phenomena. One little phrase I like: compassion is the activity of emptiness. We bring together this transformative realization about our own experience, about the nature of our own minds, and see how it directly manifests in terms of caring and compassion for the world.

All of this is really in response to the question, why meditate? I hope some of this resonated with you and perhaps helped to create some areas of interest for further exploration.

Let's sit for just a couple of minutes and let all the words settle.

May all beings everywhere be at peace.

Thank you all. I hope you continue to have a wonderful, revealing rest of retreat. It is a fantastic thing to be doing—really a privilege to have the opportunity to be doing it.

Many good wishes, and thank you for listening.

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