# Q & A

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:11:59

Good evening.

I hope you all wrote a lot of easy questions. We used to call these Q&As—questions and answers. We changed it to Q&Rs, questions and responses. So we'll see whether it actually answers your questions or not.

Thank you for being here, and thank you for all of your questions. I had the difficult task of going through over a hundred questions you offered, categorizing and narrowing them down. I've combined some of these questions, and we'll see what time we have to address them. Apologies for not being able to get to every question, but I'm looking forward to the responses that do come.

A little context: we've been doing the Anicca chant each evening, so impermanence has been on some minds. I'll start with these two questions. The first: "The wisdom of impermanence has often seemed like a cold comfort. What is the path from accepting impermanence to happiness, as the Anicca chant refers to?" And the second: "How can I work with my fear of impermanence?"

It's not uncommon, I think, for people—when they hear that everything is changing—to feel that this is cold or uninviting to really explore. What's a little odd about that is that it's exactly the opposite. When we look to see the basic cause of suffering in our lives, it's because we are in one way or another trying to hold on or to want or to crave that which in its very nature is impermanent. I think I talked about this the other night.

It's precisely by settling into the flow of changes, both externally but specifically in the meditation, that ease arises. This is really what happens as the samadhi, the concentration, deepens. There's a certain momentum or flow that begins to happen, and we are simply in the flow of changing phenomena. When we're in that flow without trying to hold on, without trying to grasp, there's a tremendous sense of ease and openness.

A meditator once came into an interview describing their insight into impermanence. They said, "Trying to hold on to that which is changing is like rope burn. If you're holding onto a rope that's being pulled through your hand, the tighter you hold on, the more rope burn there's going to be."

What's interesting is just to really notice in our lives how often we do that. We can understand intellectually that this makes sense. But our conditioning, our habit, is that we like what's pleasant, we don't like what's unpleasant, and this results in a lot of holding, wanting, and craving—which is the cause of distress and unease in our lives.

So actually, opening to the truth of change—not only opening to it but dropping into the flow of it—is really quite joyful at times. It's always peaceful because we're not fighting against the way things are.

The second question was about a conditioned fear of change. I think I mentioned in the talk the other night that experience where I had a little accident walking, and then came the understanding: anything can happen anytime. It's relevant here because the first reaction to that was fear—oh my God, anything can happen anytime. But as I settled into it, the heart relaxed, because it got attuned to the truth of change and the acceptance of that. As we accept it, there's ease in the face of inevitable changes.

Even on a conceptual level—and what I'm talking about is really developing this understanding in our practice, so it's experiential—but even conceptually, being afraid of impermanence is like being afraid of gravity. It's the way things are. The more we can see that and open to it, the more we get over that conditioned fear. We're just in the experience and the acceptance of the flow, and it's actually quite easeful.

Maybe one more, tangentially related to how we can have different perceptions. There was an example of a person's experience jumping out of a plane. The first hit was tremendous exhilaration—an incredibly exciting experience. Then they realized they didn't have a parachute. So there was tremendous fear. And then they realized, in this particular story, there's no ground. As soon as they realized there was no ground, the heart and mind just settled into the experience of the free flow of things.

This description really is applicable to some of the stages we go through in Vipassana practice. As the practice deepens and as the concentration gets a little better—it doesn't have to be a super amount, but enough so that the hindrances are not quite so activated—there's a stage of practice where we are seeing, experiencing the rapid rise and fall of phenomena on a momentary level. It's very rapid, very quick.

At that stage, the mind is filled with light, crystal clear, and extremely joyful. But that's just a stage in the unfolding practice. We keep on practicing, sitting and walking, and then it evolves into a stage where we are just seeing the dissolving side of impermanence—not so much things arising, but the continual disappearance of things. The mind becomes attuned to that at this particular stage.

When we're in that stage, it's called the "rolling up the mat" stage because it's so disconcerting. There's no stability anyplace. We're just seeing things dissolving all the time. There's no place to take a stand. So there can be a lot of fear at that time, because we're not looking at it from the outside—we're experiencing this whole mind-body process dissolving, dissolving, dissolving. That's why they call it rolling up the mat; that's what people want to do, just roll up the mat and go home.

But then we keep practicing, and we go through that stage until it comes to a place of profound equanimity—a fantastically peaceful quality of mind where the mind is not affected, not reactive to whether things are pleasant or unpleasant. It's just like vast space, and everything is simply arising and passing. This is tremendously fulfilling and easeful. During that time, people can sit for hours; the body

feels light. And it's out of that stage, like the ground out of which these moments of enlightenment can happen.

So it's just to say that there's a progression. It's not just one kind of experience that unfolds in our practice. Sometimes it's joyful, sometimes it's fearful, and sometimes it's equanimous. It might be helpful to have that in mind as you go through many different kinds of experience in practice. When it's difficult, it doesn't mean it's bad meditation. It just means that's the phase we happen to be going through, seeing things in a particular way at that time.

This speaks directly to a question that was asked: Could you describe the relationship between selflessness and the rapid movement of attention? The insight into impermanence... let me back up. Have people heard about the three characteristics? The three general characteristics of experience are impermanence, dukkha (the unsatisfying nature), and selflessness. Impermanence and dukkha are easy to understand. Selflessness is not quite so easy to understand. But one doorway into getting glimpses of what the Buddha was referring to, and how we can experience it, is through the doorway of impermanence. There are other ways of experiencing it as well, but this is a rather accessible one because impermanence is very clear. It's not some esoteric truth.

Especially as the mind becomes stronger, as the qualities of mindfulness and concentration get strengthened—which is really what you're doing here in practice, strengthening those qualities—at a certain point, it really becomes effortless. There's enough momentum of those qualities that they're working by themselves.

Here's one image that describes this point of shift in our practice. In the beginning, if you think of an arch, you're kind of balancing on the top of it. The mind falls off—you fall off on one side and have to struggle to get back, fall off on the other side. It's very effortful. We do that a lot in the beginning of our meditation journey.

At a certain point, the arch becomes a trough, and we're just balanced at the bottom of it. The mind still gets pulled out from that place of center, but it falls back naturally to that place of balance. That's a development in the practice as we strengthen these qualities of mindfulness and concentration. It really becomes quite easeful, even when difficult things are happening. This doesn't mean that in that place of ease it's all blissful—challenging things can still come up.

but we've established ourselves in the flow that's just carrying us along without much effort at that point, except for that resolve to stay with it.

When we're in that flow and we continue the practice, our perception of change gets really refined. We can just see—something I call NPMs, noticings per minute. In the beginning, the NPMs are pretty low. Maybe five NPMs or ten. But at a certain point, and you can see this even with something as simple as being with the breath or being with the step—at first, okay, in-breath, out-breath. In-breath is one thing,

out-breath is another. But as we get more centered and connected, the in-breath is made up of so many more microscopic sensations. The breath is not one thing. It's like that. And we can feel and experience the rapidity, the microscopic nature of what's going on.

Another example: What do you hear? The sound of a bell. But if we're really listening, it's not one thing. There's so much going on in that short interval. So as our practice deepens in this way, and we're feeling the whole mind-body process with these high NPMs, nothing lasts long enough to consider it as self. Because the notion of self, the very concept of it, implies something stable. Everything is happening to a "me," and the "me" is just there throughout one's whole life. But when we are really paying attention to the truth of our experience, it's not like that. It's just this rapidity of changing mental and physical phenomena arising and passing very quickly.

Another image which I've been playing with lately came up on my self-retreat. It involves walking meditation. And I hope you are doing the walking, because sometimes people have the idea that the sitting is the real thing and the walking is kind of an interlude between the sittings. There is so much that can be learned in the walk. In some ways, more insight has come to me in walking than in sitting. So that's just a plug for you not to overlook it.

I was doing walking meditation, and I want to share something with you: the passive voice. This is one really effective way of having an immediate experience or taste or glimpse of selflessness. A lot of how we experience ourselves and the world and life is conditioned by language. The language we use conditions how we see things and how we understand things.

In English, and in many languages, the usual way we construct sentences is subject, verb, object. I'm going here, I'm going there. I feel happy, I feel sad. That's called the active voice. The passive voice would be something like "a sound being known" or "a sound being heard" rather than "I'm hearing a sound."

At one point in my practice—I don't even know how it arose—but somehow it came, and it was in walking meditation. I suddenly started framing the experience in the passive voice. Sensations being known. Just as a little exercise, if you move your arm, see if you can frame it as "the movement being known." You can move it quickly, slowly, but it's being known rather than framing it as "I'm knowing the movement."

The power of this is that in the passive voice, there's no "I." Just through a change of language, we've taken the self out of it. And so we're describing the experience to ourselves

in a selfless way. It's just things being known. Sound being known, a thought being known, a sensation being known. And what's so powerful about this is that it's being known effortlessly. You don't have to do anything. It's happening all by itself. The movement is being known—effortlessly and perfectly. Not a moment before, not a moment after. It's exactly in each moment, something being known without any reference to a self, to an I.

In terms of impermanence and selflessness, I was doing walking meditation, just walking in this open kind

of way, not limited to the sensation of movement being known, but moment after moment simply being aware of whatever's being known. Sound being known, a sensation in the body, the feeling of the breeze, thought being known. Moment after moment—things being known, being known, being known.

And all of a sudden, I had the image of a film. Usually we're totally caught up in the story of the film. But what is the film? It's really just separate frames moving really quickly. Because they're moving so fast, it feels like there's a continuity. Characters are built up, actions are built up, and the whole world of the story is created. But what's really happening? Is anybody on the screen getting chased or falling in love or getting murdered? No, it's just separate frames of film and pixels of light. Because it's happening so quickly, there's the illusion of continuity.

The sense of self and the deeply conditioned feeling of self is very strong in all of us. That's why it's so hard to really get a glimpse of what the Buddha was talking about. But if you're practicing in a way that incorporates this passive voice construction, even in how you're languaging it to yourself, you're not reinforcing "I'm walking" or "I'm happy" or "I'm sad." You're taking the I out of it—movement being known, happiness being known, sadness being known, sound being known. And then you see how rapidly it's happening. It's just like separate frames of the film. You see there is no one there. No self there, no abiding self there. But it's happening so quickly that we have this sense of continuity.

I was just playing with this, doing the walking meditation, thinking my whole experience is just like frames of a film. And then I was playing with the idea of being a character in the film—we all are. We're all stars of our own movies. It would be like a character in the film suddenly realizing that in any moment, it's just a film frame. Almost like the character steps out of the film and understands what's really going on, then steps back into the film and continues with the story. That's kind of what we're doing.

One of the through lines that pulls us back, that sustains the illusion of the whole story, the illusion of self, is the force of craving, of wanting. That's the mental energy that keeps us in the film.

The challenge for us—we're all laypeople in the world, not monastics devoting our whole lives to having stepped out of the film. Not that they always do, but that's the idea of living that life. We're engaged in the world. We're engaged with other people and relationships. So for myself, I just find it extremely interesting to learn how to play with being in the film and stepping out of it. Being in the film and stepping out of it at different times, because it's a way of finding or connecting with some sense of greater peace. We're so caught up in the turmoil of our lives and the turmoil of the world—especially these days, but really always.

So where is the rest in all of that? Where is the peace if we're continually immersed in this film of our lives, this film of the world? But when we have the ability to step back—I don't know, back when I was a kid there was a show on Broadway called *Stop the World, I Want to Get Off*. This is kind of like that. These are moments where we just understand things on a much more fundamental level, and there's a quality of peace, a quality of rest, even if it's just for a few moments.

I think that's our challenge as lay people practicing with an aspiration to be free, with an aspiration for the deepest kind of peace. How do we do it in the midst of our busy lives? This is one way. I hope this made sense. For me it was just a very clear and engaging understanding, and I started playing with it, as you can.

A question came in: "I understand the truth that for all of us, inevitably, everything ends in separation. While I understand this truth, how does one cultivate love for someone free of attachment?"

One of the phrases my teacher Munindraji used to say very often about Dharma practice in general was, "It's simple, but not easy." It's not complicated, but as you all know, it's not always easy.

One way of really seeing clearly the possibility of love without attachment is first to get very clear in your own experience of when each of those qualities—love and attachment—are operative in the mind and heart. For example, at any time when you feel particularly loving, whether with a spouse or partner, children, friends, or in any situation where you recognize that quality of the heart, if you can remember, just pay attention in those moments to really see and feel: what does this feel like? Learn to recognize very clearly that love feels like this.

Usually we have these emotions and we go through them, either liking or not liking them, but it's not often that we remember to actually investigate. What is the actual quality of this emotion? Because we're having it at that moment, it's right there for us to see. We don't have to be looking for it or waiting for it. It's already here. Oh, love feels like this. Spend some time exploring that feeling.

Then pay attention in your experience to when you feel most attached. For whatever reason, that feeling of attachment or clinging to another person—or I could even say wanting in some way—is there. Without judgment, just pay attention to what that feels like.

In my experience, they are two completely opposite feelings. When I feel most loving, it's the energy of generosity—a generosity of the heart, just wanting the other person to be well, to be happy. It's that giving. When I've experienced the most attachment, it's exactly the opposite. It's the energy of holding on.

Then we could really examine: what's the consequence, what's the result of each of those feelings? When we're loving, does it bring about more happiness or more suffering? When we're attached or holding on, what does that bring? It never brings more happiness. It's always the source of some kind of contraction or tightness or fear—fear of losing something. All kinds of things are born from attachment.

If we can clearly distinguish the difference—not theoretically, but from our own experience of how we're feeling these emotions—and see each clearly, and then see where each leads, that could be a strong motivation to practice cultivating love. And when we're feeling attachment, as everyone will until we're quite enlightened, at least we can recognize it and see something that goes quite against our usual way of understanding. Most people feel that attachment is an inextricable part of loving. Of course I'll be attached to the person I love—that's our usual understanding. But it's because people have not really investigated

that they're two different things, and in a way, opposite things.

So it is possible, but this is a lifelong practice, because the attachment we have to the people we love is very strongly conditioned. It's not going to go away magically. But we don't have to simply live out this habitual pattern of conditioning if we understand the right way to investigate it and see through it.

That's why, when you meet people who have cultivated this to a very great extent, they're extraordinary beings. Some of our teachers—think of the Dalai Lama. He had one line, something like...

I try to be with everyone I meet as an old friend. That's how he goes through the world. And you never get the feeling that he's attached to the person. He's just loving them. Many great beings manifest that quality. So for me, it's an inspiration that it's possible. But it takes that kind of investigation and clear seeing—again, not theoretically, but in our actual experience.

*Thank you.*

The next question: When in our practice do we let go, and when do we investigate? For example, when we have obsessive thoughts. And can you also say more about how to let go?

*Did you say obsessive thoughts?*

Obsessive thoughts, yes.

I'm contemplating something. What I'm about to say is provisional, so I might change my mind—but I'm not sure that investigation and letting go are opposites. Let's just put that up there and consider it.

I also want to make a distinction between insight and investigation. In one way, it's the mental factor—and now I'm getting into a little Buddhist jargon—but there are seven factors of enlightenment in the Buddhist teachings. These seven factors all have to be cultivated and brought into balance: mindfulness and investigation and effort and energy and rapture and calm and equanimity and concentration.

Investigation is the wisdom factor of mind. So wisdom—the wisdom factor of mind—is also what gives rise to wisdom. We're seeing things, understanding things that we didn't see before.

This wisdom, this insight, can happen in two ways. Sometimes it's just intuitive. It's not that we've necessarily chosen to investigate anything in particular, but we're just going along—sitting, being with the breath, other objects arising, or walking—and then, all of a sudden, we're seeing something that we hadn't seen before.

So the wisdom is there, the insight is there, but it's not necessarily from what we would call investigation, which—the word in English, at least—implies a more active energy. Intuitive insight is often a more receptive energy, where it just arises naturally.

The place where investigation I have found to be most helpful is what I talked about the other night when I was discussing "don't waste your suffering." That is such a fruitful place for investigation. Because at that time, if we're suffering, it means we are not being receptive at that moment. We're caught up in some kind of mental drama or conflict, and we're just lost in it—which is why there's some kind of distress, some kind of suffering.

So at that time, an active investigation can really be helpful. I do this a lot. When I'm feeling just out of balance in some way, I'll ask myself, "Well, what's going on in my mind now that's causing the distress?" And it's never about what it is that's happening. It's always about how I'm relating to what's happening.

This is the key point of meditation practice. How often do we get caught in the idea—you know, you have a sitting, not on retreat but maybe at home, and then somebody asks you, "How was your sit?" "I had a good sitting. It was a good sitting." What does that usually mean? It means it was pleasant. The body felt okay, the mind was calm. Good sitting. But if we were bored, restless, in pain—oh, terrible sitting.

That is completely the wrong measure. But this is what we do very often. Because we could be having a very pleasant sitting and hardly be mindful at all. We were just enjoying it and going with the flow. *This is nice. I hope this lasts.* And we could have a really difficult sitting and really be investigating, really be learning from it.

It's very hard to get out of that conditioning—that pleasant means good and unpleasant means bad in terms of meditation. This is just so essential: to come out of that frame. Because the pleasant-unpleasant

That's just following its own laws in our life. We don't have much control over that.

And the Buddha gave one teaching on this which is really so direct. He said, as long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. That is as direct a pointing to what we need to be cultivating in our practice. But it so goes against our conditioning, because we all like what's pleasant and we don't like what's unpleasant.

And that's why, going back to what I was saying a little earlier, that stage of equanimity is so powerful in our practice. When our mind has kind of reached that level of understanding and experience, it is non-reactive to pleasant and unpleasant. We're experiencing both—it's not that we're unaware of whether something is pleasant or unpleasant—but that's not the source of any reactivity. There's just an impartiality.

"What was the question?" someone asked. "When do you let go and when do you investigate? For example, with obsessive thoughts."

So investigating when we feel contracted in one way or another—that is really a good time to investigate. Investigating the way we're relating to whatever the experience is. Am I holding on? Am I pushing away? Am I ignoring? We really take a look at all that.

With obsessive thoughts, over the course of many years of practice, I have developed so many different techniques. I'll share with you some of the ways I've worked with them, but I'd really encourage you just to explore. When that's going on, try different things. My basic mantra for meditation technique is: whatever works.

So a few examples. This goes back quite a few years, but at one point in my practice earlier on, a theme that is not unusual emerged: having a lot of sexual fantasies. I'd be sitting, and my mind was still in a certain kind of way, and just all these fantasies would arise. And they were really enjoyable—the hour went really quickly. But after a while I thought, come on, Joseph. But they were so seductive.

So I was playing with a lot of different ways of working with that category. One approach: I started using the phrase "dead end," because I realized they're not going anyplace. It's not that they were going to get fulfilled—I was just sitting there, my mind spinning in them. And then finally they'd come to an end and I'd be back feeling my breath again. So it was like a dead end.

I started using that note at the beginning of them rather than waiting. So when those fantasies or desires would come up, I would remind myself, "Oh, dead end, dead end." And at times that was enough—okay, this is not going anyplace, stay with the practice.

Another approach I used at a different time: in the Tibetan iconography, there's this great Bodhisattva Manjushri, who is depicted with a sword of wisdom. So at one point, when these fantasies were going on and on and on, I said, "Okay, enough." It's like I took out my sword of wisdom. Enough.

The key in doing that is not to do it with aversion, because how one does it is important. But sometimes, in meditative circles and meditation teachings, there is a lot of emphasis on the yes—yes to things, allow things, be open to things.

So there is a lot of emphasis on openness, which is certainly necessary—just be open and receptive and allow. But equally important to the yes is the wise no. This is where we see clearly: this is not skillful, this is not helpful, it's not leading anyplace. So it's not just, "Oh, okay, allow it." No. At that time, no. Enough.

It would be like raising a child and never saying no—you'd have a monster. Well, our minds are a bit like that. So we need to learn that capacity for the wise no.

Now, one last approach. This one is actually my favorite, though I have to say the language may be slightly politically incorrect—it's on the border.

I was on retreat once, a two-month self-retreat with a couple of friends. And skipping all the details, something happened. My back was hurting, and I thought I'd go out for just a simple chiropractic adjustment, which I've had many, many times. So I went out, had this adjustment, and it was a disaster. For whatever reason—it seemed like it was just an ordinary thing—my body went into shock. This became a three-year ordeal. It was really, really difficult.

So I went back to retreat and I knew something really bad had happened. And my mind kept going on and on, obsessively: how could I have been so stupid to go in the middle of a retreat to get this adjustment? And look what happened. I was just berating myself for having done something so stupid with that consequence.

I was lost. Those thoughts would come and I could be gone for half an hour in that train. It was really hard—one of the hardest times in my practice ever.

But at a certain point, when I realized I was just getting caught again and again, I recognized that it was that particular thought—"How could I have been so stupid?"—that was so seductive, because I thought it was true. I understood that if I didn't catch that thought immediately, I'd be gone.

So I developed what I called cowboy dharma. Every time the first words of that thought came—"How can I..."—I would mentally draw my six-shooter and shoot the thought down. It worked, because I realized I could not give that thought any airtime at all. It was too obsessive, too seductive.

So feel free to explore this approach. I found it actually helpful to use the mudra. Here in public you might want to skip the sound effects, but you could do it silently.

I wanted to give an indication of the whole range of ways we can extricate ourselves from unwholesome thought patterns—whether it's "enough" or "dead end" or cowboy dharma or whatever. Play with it. Explore and see for yourselves what works. But it's helpful to develop some skills and some tools for how to come out of recurring unwholesome patterns.

Because who's suffering? We're the ones who are suffering. And so that itself can be an inspiration to really explore and investigate with interest.

This will be the last question of the evening. Knowing that there is upheaval and division in our country with consequences that are rippling out across the planet, in this situation, is social activism a part of the Buddhist path, and what might that look like?

I think there are two really important qualities that we can develop in our practice that can provide a framework for engaging with the world in a skillful way. One I've been talking a little bit about is the development of equanimity—so that we're not responding out of our own reactivity, which generally just adds to the confusion. We want to come, in some way, to find a place of balance in ourselves in the midst of all the turmoil and the suffering that's going on. People find different ways of doing this.

For me, one way of coming back to some greater place of equanimity in the midst of everything that's going on is just a deep historical perspective on things. This stuff has been going on forever. It's not that it's new to this time. I've been listening to a book called *The Fall of Civilizations*. It's really an amazing book. The author has traced civilizations from ancient Sumeria through the Assyrians and the Phoenicians and the Romans, and the Chinese, and the Indians, and the Aztecs, and the Mayans—just throughout the

centuries all around the globe. He traces and describes civilizations coming into being, flourishing, becoming powerful, declining, and collapsing. He describes the conditions of how it happened in each case—what were the causes of these powerful civilizations declining.

It was so powerful to see that these are historical cycles, just like we are born and grow old and die. Societies and civilizations go through the same cycles, and largely for a lot of the same reasons. It was really interesting. A lot of the decline of many of these civilizations happened because of some degree of climate change in that particular area where they could no longer sustain the growing population from their flourishing time—either drought or different climatic changes. Another cause was the chaos from successions of leadership. Things can be very stable and then leadership changes, whether in the old days it was kings or otherwise. And if the new leadership doesn't have the same wisdom or understanding, it often results in tremendous decline and chaos and conflict.

When I'm listening to this, it helps me understand what's happening now in a larger context. This is just part of the long historical unfolding process, and it's inevitable. It's not an aberration. This has been happening always. So that's one thing, just getting some sense of equanimity through the historical framework.

Another framework that brings about this sense of equanimity for me is the cosmological one. Are you familiar at all with the famous essay by Carl Sagan, "The Pale Blue Dot"? For those of you who aren't, he was describing what the Earth looks like from outer space. It's just this tiny, tiny blue dot in the vastness of the cosmos. And he goes on to describe how everything in our lives, all the drama, everything—the great things and the difficult and the suffering—everything is just happening on this tiny little dot in immense, immense space. From that perspective, I really appreciate it. Sometimes I go out at night and just look up at the stars and think, what am I upset about? It's just so small in the vastness of things. It changes how I'm holding things.

So that's one half of it. The other half is this: from that place of equanimity, somewhat greater equanimity or somewhat greater sense of peace with it all, then there is compassion for the very real suffering that's going on as all these changes are taking place. It's not to just withdraw into cosmic indifference. But we can use the equanimity to allow us to connect with the very real suffering that is going on for so many people—not so much from a place of reactivity or anger, which in the long run doesn't help, but from a place of compassion.

The phrase that I've used a lot was the title of a book by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman back in the seventies or so. The title of the book was *How Can I Help?* And I love that phrase as a way to live one's life. Can we go through life with that phrase being our basic motivation in terms of how we relate to other people, to the world? How can I help? Then it's a question of really seeing: where and how can I help?

And there are many things, many situations of suffering where there is nothing we can do about it. It is beyond either our capacity or domain, or where we have no agency or influence. And that's where we rest

in equanimity—okay, this is how it is. But there are many arenas where there is opportunity to help.

I think if we really hold that question in a very unpretentious way—because maybe it's just helping a friend, or helping in a local situation, or an act of generosity—there are so many ways in our lives, very immediate ways that we can help. And sometimes people are inspired and have the capacity and capability to help on a much larger scale, and so then there's the energy to do that.

For me, the way of dealing with the turmoil and so much of the suffering in the world is precisely the balance of these two qualities of equanimity and compassion, so that we're not adding to the confusion and we're responding in whatever way we can. This is really a beautiful thing.

And this ties very much into the wisdom of the practice, and particularly the wisdom of even beginning understandings of selflessness. Because there's one teaching: when we realize the selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless. I love that, and I really have found it to be true.

We know it in a very mundane, ordinary way—just our usual understanding of a selfless person, how we would use it colloquially. Generally, we see it as a very admirable quality. It's not somebody who's self-centered. They're selfless, and in that selflessness, there's more engagement with other people. Well, if we take selflessness to its ultimate realization—not just as a kind of personality trait, which is a beautiful one, but if we take it to the depths of understanding the truth of non-self—then our life becomes a manifestation of compassionate action.

A phrase that I like, and this might be a good place to end: In Buddhism, we use the term emptiness a lot. And in one of its most profound meanings, it means empty of self. I've come to really understand compassion as being the activity of emptiness. It's not that "I" am being compassionate. The more selfless we are, the more we understand selflessness, compassion is the activity of that state.

Everything you're doing here is precisely cultivating these qualities. It's of course of great benefit to each one of us, but also of benefit to the world, because it provides the frame for understanding how to engage in the world from a selfless place.

May all beings everywhere be at peace.

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