# Questions and Answers with Joseph Goldstein

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:01:19

Good to be with everyone, and so grateful to have Joseph Goldstein here. I'm grateful that Caroline Jones had the insight to invite Joseph to join us, and I want to add all of the feelings of gratitude that I saw in the notes people wrote with their questions. Most of you know, but Joseph is really the visionary behind the Forest Refuge and, of course, one of the founding teachers of IMS and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies just down the hill. And one of many of our central important teachers, certainly for me and for probably many others here. So thanks for being here, Joseph.

*Really appreciate that. I hope you ask easy questions.*

I curated them, and I got the hardest ones. Of course, there were like thirty-four questions, and we might get through nine, but I grouped them in categories. So even if it's not your specific question, I'm sure Joseph will cover all of the Dhamma tonight.

So, Joseph, we'll start easy. If you had one sentence to sum up the path, what might that be?

*Don't cling. Maybe I'll add another one from the text, but that's the essence. This comes from one of the suttas: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. Whoever understands this, understands the whole of the Dharma. Whoever practices it, practices all of the Dharma." So it's very precise. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as I or mine. That could really be the foundational understanding of one's practice.*

This might be just adding to that: When sitting, there's an awareness of the body sitting, breathing, feeling, and there is knowing. Is this practice enough, or is there a next step to practice?

*I think the practice is enough, but there is a refinement in how we're attending to each of those objects of experience. Being mindful of the body and not identifying with it is not that difficult over time, at least with particular sensations arising, because we're aware of them coming and going. The same is true of thoughts, even though we may have many of them. Still, it doesn't take too long until we realize that they're just passing phenomena, that they don't really belong to anyone.*

*The tricky part is not identifying with the awareness itself, because even as we're being mindful of all these objects of experience, there's often a very subtle identification creating the sense of someone knowing all the experience. In a way, we could say that's the last holdout of self—this identification with consciousness, identification with awareness.*

*So then it becomes interesting: how can we cut through the identification with knowing? It's quite subtle because knowing itself is a subtle object. It's not tangible like a sensation of the breath or even a mental*

*phenomenon like thought. It's more subtle than that, and so it can be difficult to become mindful of the knowing in a way that we're not identifying with it.*

*Over the years, I found a few different ways to play with or understand ways of cutting through that identification. One is quite classical in the Vipassana tradition, one is more from the Tibetan tradition, and one I made up myself—which is the best.*

*The very classical Vipassana way of cutting through that identification starts earlier on in the course of practice. At a certain stage of insight—and this is more toward the beginning of the path, it's not a super advanced one, but still takes some attention—we see that in every moment, every moment's experience is a pairwise progression of knowing and object, which arise simultaneously. There's a knowing of a sensation arising and passing, knowing of a sound arising and passing, knowing of whatever the object is. As the practice begins to deepen, we really start to experience that everything we call self is simply this process, this pairwise progression: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object.*

*The thing is, it's happening so quickly that it gives the illusion of solidity of some kind. There are a few common examples of this. If you have a torch with a flame and you're making a big circle, if you go at a certain speed, it will look like there's a circle of fire, a ring of fire. But actually, there's no ring there—it's a flow of phenomena. Likewise, when we go to the movies and get so involved in the story, emotionally involved, what's really happening? Nothing we think is happening is really happening.*

It's just pixels of light on the screen. But because it's happening so quickly, we're not seeing the discontinuity. And so it appears real and solid.

Well, that's how the whole notion of self comes about. This pairwise progression of knowing an object is happening so quickly—it's like a movie. We get lost in the story because we're not seeing the arising and passing moment after moment.

So this is really what our practice is about: refining our perception of change with the insight that in every moment there are these two aspects, inseparable but distinct. That's an important point. You can't separate the knowing from the object, but they're two distinct processes arising and passing together.

At a certain stage of insight, we begin to see this rapidity of change really clearly, and that weakens the identification with consciousness. We see that the consciousness aspect of this pair—the knowing of an object—is arising and passing in each moment. There's nothing there, nothing which lasts long enough to be self. And certainly not each moment of consciousness. So that's one way of cutting through this very subtle identification.

There's another approach that may be even more accessible. In some Tibetan traditions, and also in some Zen, often the instruction is to look for the mind—to try and look, can we find the mind? For example, you're sitting and maybe you're hearing sound. Sometimes when I'm sitting, the question will come into my mind: Can I find what's knowing the sound? It's clear that the sound is being known, but can I find

what's knowing it? In some of the Tibetan traditions, the teaching is that when you look for the mind, there's nothing to find. And the not finding is the finding. It's to see that there's nothing to find. And when there's nothing to find, there's nothing to identify with. So that's another way of freeing oneself from identification with awareness, with consciousness.

Building on this—and this is my own little addition to the canon—many of you probably have heard me speak about how so much of what we're experiencing is determined by the language we use. Language has a profound impact on how we experience the unfolding.

Usually in our ordinary speech, we use the active voice, that grammatical function. Active voice means there's a subject, a verb, an object. "I'm knowing a sound," or "I'm going here," or "I'm going to get that." Subject, verb, object.

At some point in my practice—and I don't know how it arose—I just started using the passive voice in describing the experience to myself. It became very clear in the walking meditation. At first it would be, "Oh, I'm knowing the sensations." But then in the passive voice it became "sensations being known." That's the passive voice construction. Sensations being known, a sound being known, a thought being known.

Even though writing coaches will tell writers not to use the passive voice, from a meditative point of view, I found it tremendously effective. When we use the passive voice—"sensations being known"—there's no self as subject there. It's just things being known, and there's no "I" as the subject. So just through the language we're using to describe our experience to ourselves, it puts us right into that frame of things being known.

Some remarkable things happen from that. First, things are known completely effortlessly. If you move your arm with this frame in mind—sensations being known, sensations of the movement—why don't you try it? It's completely simple. You can move at any speed, being known. It's just being known. Do you have to do anything for it to be known? It's happening all by itself.

So the practice really became hugely less effortful. In this framework, when we shift from the "I" looking for something to the passive voice of allowing things simply to be known as they will be, things get very fluid and easy.

One meditative exercise might be to play with this for a short time at first—maybe five minutes or ten minutes—either in sitting or walking or going about. Frame that five minutes in terms of what's being known moment after moment. We just kind of settle back, receiving what's being known, not doing anything. It's all happening by itself. This gives a real taste of selflessness, of cutting through the identification with the knowing, because there's no knower there.

Is this making sense? If it is, I just encourage you to play. Experiment with it, because both for myself and now, having taught this for many years, people have found it really helpful. And it's so simple—completely simple—so don't complicate it. It's just moment after moment, things being known. Be attentive in that

process.

Many dharma teachings emphasize equanimity and non-reactivity. How do we differentiate genuine equanimity from nervous system shutdown or dissociation?

First, as many of you are probably aware, each of the Brahma Viharas has a near enemy—something that looks like it but is not it. The near enemy of loving-kindness is attachment. We think when we're attached to somebody it means we love them, but they're really two very different states. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. The near enemy of mudita, empathetic joy, is exuberance. And the near enemy of equanimity is indifference.

So it's really important that we examine the quality of mind we may be calling equanimity, to see if it has the flavor of indifference or the flavor of impartiality. I like the word impartial to describe equanimity because it's really the space of mind that holds everything equally. It's just seeing things for what they are. Now, this impartiality does not imply withdrawal. It doesn't imply indifference. It's simply openness—openness to what's actually there and seeing it fully. From that place of impartiality, we then have a better chance of discerning an appropriate response to whatever the situation is.

Here is where there's an important balance between equanimity and compassion. Equanimity gives us a full understanding of whatever the situation is. We're seeing it clearly, without bias, without partiality. Based on that clear seeing, we can then discern what the compassionate response to this situation might be. Equanimity settles us back into openness, and compassion motivates engagement with the world. The two really balance one another and, for me, create a beautiful way of navigating the complexities of our lives. Can we have equanimity about what's happening and also have an open heart that's responsive in a wise way?

There are many examples of this, but I'll give one that illustrates non-equanimity, equanimity, and then how metta and compassion arose from it. This goes back many years. I was having a conversation with another teacher and friend—someone I've known for a long time—but there was a conflict going on about something. Of course, now I don't even remember what it was, but I remember the interaction. We were in my living room, he was sitting in one chair, I was sitting in another, and we were going back and forth. It was somewhat charged because naturally we each thought we were right, and we were getting into this kind of conflict.

Then at a certain point—and this happened quite spontaneously—I went from the sense of me sitting here and that person sitting there, being involved in this conflict, to something else entirely. My mind quite spontaneously shifted from that perspective. It became this space which held us both. Even now, as we're sitting together in this room, we could think of ourselves as just "I'm here, you're all there," each in your own seat. But just for a moment, see if you can become aware of the space that's holding us all.

What that shift did was take me out of identification with this mind-body process to the place of just open

awareness, spacious awareness—the space that was holding us both. And what was so striking was that the quality in that space, the quality holding us both, was metta. It wasn't something I was thinking about—"How do I create metta in this situation?"

It just happened. So I saw that becoming the space was like equanimity—instead of being caught in the conflict, the space holds us both. Getting out of the way, and the manifestation of that was connection. It's quite amazing that we can go from that self-identification to equanimity to connection.

So there are a few possibilities here. Do you see a distinction between healthy doubt, which science-backed research shows supports more humility and thorough decision-making, and doubt as it's understood in the Dharma as a hindrance?

Yes, there's a huge difference. And again, I think it's in some Zen teachings where they talk about the great doubt, which is really about the doubt of investigation. You mentioned in the question humility. It is the humility of realizing, at least for most of us, that we're not fully enlightened yet. And if you are, please let me know afterwards.

But for those of us who are not yet fully enlightened, to have that quality of investigation, of exploring—well, what is this? I know that you're familiar with the book by Suzuki Roshi, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. It's a great book with many great teachings. He said, "In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." And so beginner's mind became kind of a watchword after that book. But that's the quality of a wise doubt, which really implies that interest in exploring and investigating rather than relying on whatever preconceptions we may have about the nature of experience.

For me, it's one of the things I love about going on retreat each year. Because, as you well know, you've just been here for almost a month, many of you. When we're practicing, especially on retreat, we're always at the forward edge of our practice, wherever that may be. We're exploring, and sometimes it's smooth sailing, and sometimes there are a lot of hindrances. But we're right where we're supposed to be in exploring what's arising and what comes next.

What's interesting for people who may practice like that for a while and then don't practice, don't keep up that kind of exploration—my experience and observation has been that we begin to live in the memory of our experience of the practice, rather than staying at the forward edge of the exploration. So this wise doubt is that beginner's mind. And our practice in our life, even though you may not always remember this, is always interesting. If we're really at the forward edge of what we need to understand and explore and accept and become mindful of, it's endlessly interesting. And that, to me, is the beauty of retreats like this, because it keeps us right at that forward edge.

So that's wise doubt—beginner's mind, openness.

Doubt as a hindrance is just perplexity. The example given is being at a crossroads and being completely

indecisive about which way to go. Should I go this way? Should I go that way? And we're caught. We're trapped in the doubt.

I'll give you an example—but there are many examples of how we can get caught in doubt like that. This goes back years to one three-month retreat at the retreat center. There was one yogi who was doing Vipassana and then was having some kind of struggle. So he said, "I think I'd like to do metta." Okay, so I gave him the instructions for the metta practice, thinking maybe that would help settle things. He did the metta for a little while, and then he came up against some difficulty—oh, maybe I should be doing Vipassana. So, okay, go back to Vipassana and just do that. A week later, two weeks later—no, no, this is not working. I think I'm going to do metta. This went on for almost three months. His mind just could not settle into doing one thing and seeing where it leads. It was this perplexity, this going back and forth, this indecision. So that is clearly a hindrance in practice.

And of course, there are also all the forms of self-doubt: I can't do this, it's too hard.

Be watchful for that. It's just a tape in the mind.

What's interesting about this kind of doubt that's a hindrance—the Buddha referred to it as the most dangerous of the hindrances. So it's something we really want to keep an eye out for. Because with all the others, we're in the ballpark of the present moment experience. We may be viewing it through the filter of desire or aversion or sleepiness, but at least we're in the ballpark. With doubt, we're not even in the ballpark anymore. Our minds are just going back and forth, completely disconnected from what is actually happening in the moment.

So this quality of doubt as a hindrance, this skeptical doubt—we really have to pay attention when that may be arising in the mind and name it clearly, name it carefully. Because if you can be mindful that it is doubt and name it, it loses its power. We're not then caught in it or lost in it. "Oh, this is doubt." You might even use a phrase from the suttas: "Mara, I see you." Mara is trying to get me with doubt. I see you.

But it's very seductive, because doubt comes masquerading as wisdom. And that's why it's so dangerous. These doubts come in a very wise-sounding voice, and so we start believing it. So it's worth exploring a little bit the different ways doubt may arise in each of your minds. Probably there are different variations of that indecision or perplexity or self-assessment—or assessment of others, especially the teachers. What do they know? Pay attention to whatever form it may arise, if it does, with the intention to really keep an eye out for it. Because if we can be aware of it, then it's not a problem. When we're not aware of it, it really can derail our practice. So it's a really important one to take care with.

A question came: Can you speak about the impersonal nature of all things, along with a sense of purpose? A sense of purpose seems personal.

Sense of purpose often does seem personal—until we see the impersonality of it. One frame for understanding the different ways each of those manifests, and it doesn't align perfectly but mostly, is the

difference between expectation and aspiration.

When there's expectation in our practice, that is always personal. We have this expectation, which is always a setup for suffering, because we're not in control of how things unfold. Things unfold according to their own laws.

One common example I found in my own practice: if I'm on retreat and have a really good sitting, then at the end of the sitting the thought comes, "I'll get up and do some walking and then I'll just pick up where I left off." So often—good sitting, concentrated, go for a walk, come back, and for whatever reason the mind is doing something else. To the degree that I was holding to that expectation that it should be a certain way, it's a setup for frustration and hinders our ability to be just with what's happening. So it's all very "selfing" with expectation.

With aspiration, that's understanding—we could maybe express it as this understanding of why we're practicing or what we're practicing for: for greater awareness, for greater compassion, for greater wisdom.

I'm going to back up a minute. Sometimes in—I don't know, is the phrase "new age" still used? There was a whole time it was just called "new age stuff." I don't know if that's still being used. Anyway, one of the new-agey things was "no goals." Goals—don't have goals, just be in the moment. The Buddha definitely laid out a goal. The Eightfold Path leads someplace. It's not just meandering around, not going anyplace.

The Eightfold Path is leading, we could say, to awakening, to enlightenment. So we can have that aspiration, which sets the direction for our practice. We might say that is a purpose—a sense of purpose. We can hold that sense of purpose as an aspiration, but we're seeing it not so much in terms of an egoful striving, but rather as a realization of our values and what leads to the accomplishment of our values. It's a very different feeling and mind state.

I think it's very possible to have that sense of purpose, a deep sense of purpose, and I think most Dharma practitioners have this. It's why you're here. This would not be most people's idea of having fun. It is fun—I think it's tremendous fun—but from the outside, it doesn't look that way. Because there is a sense of purpose and a sense of direction. Can we have some sense of why we're doing it, but with an appreciation that it's a natural unfolding? It's not an egoful striving. And if it is, then that egoful striving should be noticed as wanting or desire, so we don't confuse the aspiration with the expectation.

Someone asked: "Is your faith strong in the four path attainments as genuine markers on the path? Please expand."

Yes, my faith is strong. One of the characteristics of this tradition—and it's not true of all Buddhist traditions, as different Buddhist traditions frame the process of awakening in different ways—but in this tradition of the Buddhist teachings, based on the Pali Canon and the early discourses, there are four stages of enlightenment: stream entry, once-return, non-return, and arahant. The function of each of those

moments of realization is the uprooting of certain defilements in accordance with that particular stage.

For example, at that first stage of stream entry, what is uprooted, first and foremost, is the view or belief in self, because the mind has opened to a reality beyond everything and anything we could take to be self. We could think of it this way: if we think of our normal lives as revolving around a self-center, that sense of "I"—basically this is how we go through our lives. This is the conventional understanding, and it's the place from which most people are living. But then imagine going from self-center to zero-center, to realize that there's no self at the center of things. It's the zero-center.

If you think of nibbāna as being the experience of zero, zero is a really interesting number, because it's not a thing in itself, and yet it has the most powerful function in the whole number system. I was once reading a book called *The Nothing That Is*. I just saw that title and it totally intrigued me—*The Nothing That Is*. So I bought the book and started reading. It was a history of the number zero. The first few lines really captured my interest. It said—and I think it's mostly accurate, though I may be paraphrasing a little—"When you look at zero, you see nothing. When you look through it, you see the world."

Somehow that just resonated with the experience of nibbāna, which is zero. There's nothing there that could be claimed as "I" or "mine." It's zero. And yet, it's the nothing that is. It is its own reality. From that experience of the zero-center, the whole world is being seen without reference to an "I," without reference to a self. It's just, as one of my teachers said—and this may be in the text—everything is just empty phenomena rolling on. This whole mind-body process is empty of self. It's just phenomena arising and passing away.

And so that first experience of zero is what uproots the belief in self. It's not to say that the deeply conditioned patterns of selfing are all eliminated at that time. That's why, for example, one of the very last defilements to be uprooted—not until we're fully enlightened—is what's called *mana* in Pali, usually translated as "conceit," but it really means any sense of "I am."

So an interesting reflection arises: if the view of self has been uprooted at the first stage, why is this conceit or *mana* not uprooted until the final stage of liberation? It's because that pattern in the mind—"I am"—is so deeply conditioned. It really has to do with comparing oneself with others, any comparison whatsoever. Better than, worse than, equal to—that's *mana*. Or a view over time: "I was this in the past, I'm this now, I'll be this in the future." I am. It's "I am-ing."

So that pattern in the mind is very deeply conditioned. However, because the view or belief in self has been genuinely uprooted, the pattern of "I am-ing" is seen and understood itself as being selfless. We recognize, "Yes, it's just a pattern that's still there and will be there for quite a while," but it has lost the essence of its power, even though we get caught in it a lot. This is just another selfless phenomenon—the pattern of "I am."

For me, I love it when I see *mana* in my mind. When I can see it arising—and it does, and it will until we're

fully enlightened, it's going to be there so many times in so many ways—every time I see it, I'm really delighted. I would rather see it than not see it. And when I do see it, I feel like I'm working on arahantship, because that's one of the last defilements to go. There's a lot of energy and delight in the fact of seeing it, whereas it took a while to get over the judgment of myself: "Oh, there's conceit again, there's *mana* again." We can really change our attitude if we have interest in seeing it and understanding it.

These realizations, certainly at the first stages, are not super far-off. Many yogis have experienced the first stage, so there is confirmation at that time. But even before then, sometimes people can get caught up in an unhealthy striving for these realizations, and the effort gets way out of balance. There's grasping at something in an unhealthy way.

So the Buddha had two other teachings which I think are really important to help balance that. If the striving for attainment is strong and really creating an imbalance in the mind—which is not uncommon—the Buddha talked about two levels of experience before stream entry, which he called the faith follower and the Dhamma follower.

The faith follower is someone who, for whatever reason, has this deep, deep faith in the teachings of the Buddha. They're not questioning, they don't have doubt about it—that faith factor is very strong. The Dhamma follower is the yogi who has explored the teachings in some depth, who really has an understanding of impermanence and *dukkha* and at least a conceptual understanding of non-self. There's been real investigation and the development of wisdom.

The Buddha put people in these two categories, which occur before stream entry, and called them noble individuals who are assured, who are on the path leading to enlightenment. I find that really reassuring for a lot of people. Those who are truly committed to the practice and have devoted themselves, who are either faith followers or Dhamma followers—that's a great foundation to rest your practice on. You have faith, you have assurance: "Yes, I'm on this path, this is where it's going." And so you can let go of that unhealthy striving, because you understand this will just lead onward to all the different stages of realization.

I think many of the experienced yogis who come here and to other places are already faith followers and Dhamma followers. You can really have confidence in that, because it's right out of the texts.

Well, this is, of course, a huge issue in our culture, in our society, and it's something IMS has been working on very consciously for quite a long time now. I think we really committed ourselves to greater diversity on all levels of the organization all the way back in 2008, when it first became a really strong intention.

As those of you who have been involved in this kind of work know, especially in the beginning years, it was really challenging. It's very complex, and there were a lot of cross currents and lots of stuff going on. But we were very clear in our intention.

Over the years, at first we really expanded the BIPOC representation on the board of directors of IMS, and

that made a huge difference. For a long time, maybe we had one or two BIPOC folk on the board, but that was not enough to really effect change throughout the whole organization. When we had many on the board, maybe sometimes as many as half, that's when the whole issue really was energized.

Then some years ago, we did a teacher training for BIPOC folk because we realized it's not only the board of directors—it's who's sitting up front, representing the diversity of people who come. So there is very much a lot of intentionality behind that. And of course, there's always more that can be done, and a lot of things get overlooked. But the intention is there to keep developing. It's really a strong value of IMS.

For me personally, it was an amazing journey, the exploration of all of this. It first started even before the change began at IMS. I was part of a retreat for social activists that was actually set up by Ram Dass and some others. It wasn't at IMS; it was at some other place. And for some reason, it was the first time—as I was hearing the stories of people, it's quite embarrassing to say this—that was really the first time I became really conscious that this is a problem in this country. When I look back, how could I not have known that all along? But it really opened up a whole new world for me. And that's what motivated a lot of the sense that we have to do something.

There's always more. And so I think just as an institution, if there are any insights or things where you see it's not quite working as well as it might be, it would be worth letting us know because the intention is certainly there.

One final question: What is an aspect of meditation or Buddhist practice that is often overlooked but you think would be of great benefit to most people?

I'm going to say something that you will probably never find in the suttas: Have fun.

And it doesn't mean take things lightly, but it means just having that beginner's mind, just taking that interest and exploring and investigating. I mean, what could really be more fun than exploring one's own mind? Because our whole lives are a manifestation of our minds. Everything we do and everything we feel and how we relate to things—it's all coming out of our minds. So really, the practice is exploring our life. And the origin of it all is the nature of the mind and everything that's going on in it.

So to just have that quality of interest rather than, as I say, an unhealthy striving or expectation—just that interest in exploration of the whole range. And sometimes it's easeful and sometimes it's hugely difficult. But if we have the right attitude, it's always interesting. What's happening now? How am I getting caught? How can the mind be free?

I don't recall in the suttas the Buddha saying, "Have fun." Although interest—interest is really one definition or one source of pīti, or rapture. Pīti is often described as intense interest. And it brings a lot of joy, regardless of what it is that's happening.

So, have fun.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice, may my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue, my mother, my father, and my relatives, the sun and the moon, and all virtuous leaders of the world—may the highest gods and evil forces, celestial beings, guardian spirits of the earth, and the Lord of death, may those who are friendly, indifferent, or hostile, may all beings receive the blessings of my life. May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the deathless.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice and through this act of sharing, may all desires and attachments quickly cease, and all harmful states of mind.

Until I realize Nibbana, in every kind of birth may I have an upright mind with mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigor. May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.

The Buddha is my excellent refuge. Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma. The solitary Buddha is my noble guide. The Sangha is my supreme support. Through the supreme power of all these, may darkness and illusion be dispelled.

*Thank you all. Have fun.*

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