Closing Session

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 2:22:50

Good morning, friends.

So as Joseph mentioned, there's a Sariputta relic in the stupa. One of the stories I think of with Sariputta is from the Vimalakirti Nirdesha Sutra, in which a goddess is illustrating why any thoughts of gender hierarchy are absurd. She takes on the male form of Sariputta and puts Sariputta in a female form.

You may notice that Dhammadipa is not here—but that is not what has happened in this context. Dhammadipa needed to head home early this morning, and she sends her love and gratitude to everyone. That was always planned, though I had intended to say something about it.

So this morning, we're going to have some sitting. Our theme for the morning is reflections on everything that we've been talking about so far the last few days—and how that engages the world. What does it mean for us to be thinking about these ideas, reflecting on these ideas, practicing our own individual lineage in the world that we live in? What is our place in that world, and what can we offer?

One of the things that I've been thinking a lot about is the decline in the humanities as an object of study, the decline in jobs in religious studies. I think of my colleagues up here—Gwagu, John, and Anne—all of whom have PhDs in Buddhist studies. One of the things that enabled them to become who they are was, yes, having this deep Dharma training, but also having an intellectual academic training that is mutually supportive of that.

When I look out at the landscape of higher education, yes, there are still people being trained in religious studies, but there are far fewer jobs available. So the people who had the aspirations that many scholars of a certain age had decades ago—many of them do not have the possibility of devoting their life to teaching students and to deepening their study and practice.

I think of this because one of the things I reflect on is the importance of institutions in forming all of us as teachers or as practitioners. The books we read on Buddhism were published by institutions. They were written by authors who were trained by institutions. Yes, today many teachers have become very well-known and can be thought of as perhaps independent of institutions. But I think of Joseph here, who has devoted his life to fostering and sustaining institutions, including this one at BCBS. Joseph is a founder of this institution, was on our board for thirty years, and is still an emeritus member of our board.

I think of BCBS as an institution that doesn't do exactly what the academic institutions do. We don't train people to that depth in the same way. But we do offer something different as an institution. We offer something I think is fairly unique: integrating study—some of you have done multi-month, year-long

programs with us—and practice. For us, study is a form of practice, but we always want there to be a meditative dimension that integrates and is informed by that study. And also, as we've done here and try to do in our programs, we foster a sense of spiritual friendship that binds together the practice and the study.

So it's not exactly what is being lost with the loss of teachers of religious studies. But I do think there's something important about what we do as an institution. And this is my dana talk: these teachers will be getting an honorarium, but basically, to support our mission that Joseph formulated early on, they are offering their dana to BCBS to sustain the integration of study and practice—and a very particular kind of community, a kind of community that is what we think of as spiritual friendship, supportive of the way in which we want to take our practice out into the world.

You will be receiving an email with links for a survey. This is the first time we've done anything quite like this, and I think we're really interested—for those of you who are on Zoom and in the room—in how this lands for you. What was this like for you? Should we do something like this again? We think of that survey as a form of dana also, as a form of giving, because it is deeply helpful to us to know what your experience is and how we can support your integration of study, practice, and spiritual friendship.

For those of you who are in the Dharma Hall, there's a dana box out in the foyer. Maybe that's enough for now. Let's share some silence together.

So this morning I'd like to talk about a few things that have really been a key part of my living the practice in the world. Maybe you'll find some of them helpful.

The first has to do with the precepts. Obviously, being committed to following the precepts is fundamental to all Buddhist paths. I wanted to emphasize this morning one particular precept, which I've seen evolve in myself even through my last retreat, just this winter.

It was a different dimension. And that is the precept not to kill.

On one level, of course, we're probably not going around killing other people. But as we go down the hierarchy of size, sometimes that precept gets a little wobbly. Especially now in the springtime in New England, a lot of little insects start coming out and maybe are co-habiting with us. It's not uncommon, even for people who have been practicing a long time—somehow there's some unwanted insect in the house, and we spray it, just kill it in some unthinking way, not thinking it means that much because it's very small.

But killing any being—it's a being. Someone mentioned, maybe it was Anne, just watching these little ants avoiding danger as they scurry around. Clearly they want to continue living. So if we can just practice a greater sensitivity to that, when possible, instead of killing, just remove them, take them outside.

This last winter during my self-retreat, and this is part of a new sutta that you probably haven't come across yet—it's called the Stink Bug Sutra. Now, for those of you who don't know about stink bugs, they actually don't stink unless you step on them, so they're pretty benign most of the time. But in the wintertime, at least here, they come into the house a lot. This provided a dilemma, because I knew if I put them outside in the freezing cold, that would probably kill them. So I started putting them in a big potted plant, just in the dirt—out of sight, out of mind.

But this winter, I took a big step forward in my following of this precept. I saw these stink bugs just basking in the sun on the windowsill, and I really became friends with them. When I saw them there, I started feeling a certain kind of happiness that they were just there sunning themselves. I'm not sure I would call it love, but it was definitely an upwelling of feeling—connection and kindness. It quite surprised me that instead of even thinking I wanted to get them out of sight, it was fine. They were these cute little stink bugs sitting on my windowsill.

All of this is to say that we can take the precept of not killing in its basic form, but it can actually morph into some feeling of metta, some feeling of kindness. So I just offer that to you. You might want to memorize this sutra.

The second thing that has really been impactful in a big way actually comes from the title of a book written by Paul Gorman and Ram Dass, back in the seventies. The title of the book was *How Can I Help?* It's a beautiful book—just short stories of people offering help in many different contexts. But I love the title. It has almost become a mantra, something I've really practiced, and now it's quite natural having practiced this for many years. It becomes integrated into our way of being and thinking and feeling as we navigate the world—the bottom line of how we are in the world. Just having that intention.

In any situation, if we reflect on it and practice it, it becomes a natural response. We're not thinking, "Oh, well, how can I help?" It just becomes natural. And it can be really small things. Somebody asks us to do something, and maybe we don't particularly feel like doing it, but—how can I help? It gives us the energy, the motivation to extend ourselves a little bit. And sometimes it brings a tremendous amount of joy, just as we're relating to other people, to life, to situations with that basic motivation, when that basic motivation has become part of us.

I found this tremendously rewarding, and it really stemmed from the teachings on bodhicitta. When I heard those teachings, they impacted me deeply—the motivation to practice for the benefit of all. This became an expression of that, a practice of that, rather than simply something I was repeating in my mind. I would suggest, if it inspires you at all, to reflect on that and see if it can become the basic way of relating to people, to the world, to situations. Sometimes there are situations when we can't help, but very often we can, even in some small way.

This has been important for me, really life-transforming as a practice. At a certain point, it becomes natural. It's not even something we have to remind ourselves of—it just becomes the way we respond.

One way I've found of doing that, another practice which brings a tremendous amount of joy and has been hugely interesting and impactful, is a certain practice of generosity—one expression of "how can I help." The particular practice I've been doing for a long time now is this: if I have the thought to give something, I act on it. Because I noticed that very often I would have a generous thought, and it would come and go, and I wouldn't do anything about it.

Or the thought would come and I'd second-guess myself. "Oh, should I? Should I? Is it too much? I don't know. Maybe they don't need it." Just all the hesitation in the mind about generosity.

So having the intention to really practice—if the thought comes, do it—has been amazing. And it's not even looking, in this particular practice, for opportunities to be generous. It's just paying attention to one's own thoughts, and if the thought arises quite spontaneously, act on it.

What's been really surprising to me is sometimes it's about really little things—making a phone call, something very small. And sometimes the thought comes of something really big. Often the first thought in my mind after that is, "Whoa, really?" But having made that commitment to this practice, I do it anyway. And I have never regretted any expression of this. I just find it's a beautiful practice—beautiful for me, helpful for the recipient.

So it's a way of turbocharging our practice of generosity. It gives it a lot of energy that comes up in the most unexpected times, because we don't know when these thoughts are going to arise. But they do, especially for people committed to dharma practice. So if the thought arises, do it.

Okay—getting to love stink bugs, "How can I help?", practicing acting on thoughts of generosity. I could go on and on about many different things, but for the last one, which is now on a more meditative level, I've also found this really interesting: actively working with becoming mindful of *māna*, of conceit, when it arises.

Because as we've talked about, it's there until we're fully awakened. So it is going to be around, and we want to become friends—or at least friendly—with it, because often the tendency is we see it and then we start judging ourselves. "I'm such a terrible person, look at all this māna, all this conceit." But rather, if we can just—as I mentioned the other day—take a certain delight in the fact that we're seeing it and take interest in it, understanding its selfless nature, then we're not beating ourselves over the head with it. "Oh, māna." And then seeing that it is selfless, even though it's constellated around the feeling and thought of "I am." But that "I am" itself is selfless.

Just a couple of particular aspects of conceit that you might want to pay attention to. The most common one, which can come up so often, is any level of that comparing mind—comparing ourselves with others. I think you would be amazed how often that arises in the mind and how deeply it conditions our way of being. Just comparing ourselves with others, sometimes with a competitive edge, sometimes not particularly competitive, but just some kind of comparing. Even if it's quite benign, the comparing itself is

reinforcing the sense of "I am."

So it might be interesting to keep an eye out for this when you're engaged in the immediacy of a relationship with somebody. You're having a conversation—it could be somebody you know really well, it could be somebody you've never met before—and just notice, in the course of that, is there any kind of undercurrent of comparing going on? Or "I could have said that better." It could be anything. I'm sure you're aware of the fact that this happens. What I'm suggesting is highlighting it. As you go through the day, keep an eye out for it.

Because when we're lost in it, when we're not mindful of it, it just doesn't feel good, even though we're doing it. It's a downer. But if we are mindful of it in the way I suggested—just taking delight, "Oh yeah, there's māna, I see you"—it really is uplifting.

So that's one aspect of māna. The last aspect of it, which is really related to everything we've been discussing here this week, and I think is more subtle—

But as we talk about all the wonderful experiences that can happen as we undertake these various practices—and sometimes they're described with the bliss and the wonder and the light and the joy that can come from our practice—it's so easy and common to think, "Oh yeah, I want that. I want to be in this experience. I want to have this experience of joy and happiness."

And on one level that's fine. It does motivate us. But keep an eye out for the reinforcement of the "I am" in that, where we're overlooking or not paying enough attention to the non-self aspect of it all. This is getting to quite a deep level of Dharma understanding. On a relative level and a conventional level, of course we can use that sense of "I want this," and it can be done with a skillful state of mind. It inspires us to practice. But watch out for the idea that there will be an "I am" in the fruition of these states.

Is this making sense? This is quite a subtle aspect of how we undertake the practice. And as a reminder, that "I am" is going to be there. We shouldn't judge ourselves when we see this aspect of it. It is going to be there. But can we see it? And in the moment of seeing it, just reminding ourselves that the whole practice is to free ourselves from the "I am-ness."

So that's really the main things I wanted to say. In recent years in my practice and when I'm on retreat, I have found this exploration of mana to be exceedingly interesting and pushing the edge of my practice, because that is so deeply rooted. When I'm really playing with how it's created—both in daily life and in my meditation—it really feels that I'm at the forward edge of my understanding, and that's an exciting place to be in the practice. It's really interesting. So you can play with any or all of these that might inspire you.

Good morning, everyone. I woke this morning reflecting on what we would say at the end of the retreat,

and one phrase that came to me—not unrelated to "how can I help"—was: How can I bring my practice into the world? How can I take it with me everywhere I go? We all know that that's a challenge; we get caught up in things. And it occurs to me that this has something to do with our love for our practice, our devotion to our practice.

When we practice bodhicitta—in, for example, the four boundless states, the brahmaviharas, which are shared by all Indian traditions, the non-Buddhist ones as well, and certainly all the forms of Buddhism—we start with equanimity. Theravada often ends with equanimity. And this equanimity is a freedom from reactivity, the very thing that puts a block in the heart, that obstructs love or even just a relaxed kind of good feeling. Because all the things we just heard—we're competitive, we have concerns on our mind, we have an "I am" flowing through everything—that doesn't make us equanimous. That makes us reactive. So equanimity is a great thing.

In Longchenpa and other places, each of the four boundless states is also associated with one of the five Buddha wisdoms, which in the Mahayana is an important way to appreciate what a Buddha is, what kind of wisdom Buddha has. And maybe it's illuminating—it is illuminating for me, even every time I remember this.

So equanimity, the cultivation of an even-mindedness, where you have a sort of unbridled state with respect to other people. You're not pulled into like, dislike, jealousy—all the things that rush up to the mind when we encounter someone. It's a kind of freedom in and of itself. To be free from that, or at least a little tempered, that reactivity is a great thing, really a great thing. In modern parlance, we could say it's psychological freedom, or a little more psychological freedom.

And in Mahayana traditions, it is associated with the wisdom of sameness. There's a certain sameness—the stink bug, the cockroaches. You have no idea how big they are in Texas. I still shout when I see one. Harvey can tell how big it is by how loud I shout. But I do take it outside. And after thirty-five years of meeting these beings, I did notice in the last few days I have the very beginning of a—I don't know, affection might be a little strong—but a little something. And definitely I don't wish to harm them. So that's an equanimity test.

The wisdom of sameness. And interestingly enough, the wisdom of the Dharmadhatu, which means reality itself. So this equanimity can be translated as sameness, evenness, because you have an evenness of mind. It's really a powerful thing. And it is, for us, the foundation on which we can cultivate precious bodhicitta.

Azom Drukpa, who was very important in the Longchen tradition in eastern Tibet, died in 1924, just as Tibet was coming into modernity. He was an important figure. He was my teacher's father in his previous life. He had visions of Jigme Lingpa. And at the end of his life, he said that of all the teachers he studied with, the greats of the great of his era, somehow the most important person for him, his teacher, was Jigme Lingpa, whom he met in vision.

Azom Drukpa wrote a commentary on the foundational practices, as I prefer to call them—the so-called preliminary practices, because they do precede everything, but they are a foundation in the way that the foundation of a building is always there. Every time you walk into the Dharma Hall, you are standing on the foundation of this building. It's not preliminary in the sense that you do it and then you're done. A little advertisement for foundational practices.

He talks there, of course, about the four boundless states. And I was remembering this morning, he talks about equanimity meaning to have the mind like a sage who's throwing a banquet. And in throwing this banquet, the sage invites everybody. No discrimination. No good, bad, these people aren't worthy. So be like a sage. Boundless equanimity is said to be like a sage serving guests at a feast. For when sages serve their guests, they serve everyone equally without discriminating between good and bad.

Maybe so. Wisdom comes from this. "I am" thins out from this.

The practice of anything is animated, of course, by compassion, the wish to be more helpful, and by devotion. We talked a bit about it last night, and just one or two words further on that. I remember a moment traveling with my teacher, his sister who is a highly regarded nun, and their cousin who is also a tulku. We were all in an elevator heading to someplace really important as part of his program. We're standing in the elevator and somehow he's forgotten, or somebody's forgotten, something really important that's back in the room. So I pop out of the elevator—it has to be, we have to have it. I pop out, start running down the hall. And he calls out after me. He says, "You have a lot of devotion."

That has really struck me. It was so kind.

I'm sort of not feeling very devoted. I'm feeling agitated. I'm feeling like I've got to get there and get back and get down in the elevator. And that's what I was focused on.

And so maybe it's helpful to say that devotion takes many forms. Some people feel, "Well, I'm not that kind of soft-hearted, gooey-hearted person. I'm not sentimental or something like that." But commitment to one's practice is devotion. Commitment to doing what you all do here to keep this wonderful institution going—that we do want to support—is devotion.

And to take joy in one's own devotion is very important. To take joy in one's practice is very important. My teacher says this all the time, and it's a subtle thing because it's not pride. We're so worried about being prideful that we can't even take delight in our own dharma activities. And that joy brings joy. It brings energy. It lights us up.

One of the things my teacher says—he'll start a dharma talk by saying, "Bring to mind bodhicitta. Bring to mind joy in your practice, because joy lights up your mind." And lucency, as we've talked about, is natural to the mind. We want more of it. We want energy in the mind. So devotion, starting with equanimity, building devotion—all of these are also oriented toward benefiting other beings, giving us energy to benefit other beings.

My theme really is things that seem to bring energy to my practice, and the motivation. In the foundational practices of our tradition, we follow Jigme Lingpa, and our teacher, who's considered an incarnation of Jigme Lingpa, wrote a condensed version. They're the classic things, the parts of foundational practice common to all the traditions.

Precious human life. Realizing how precious our lives are certainly animates us to think of what is best use. What is best use of your life? We all have our limits. We all have our possibilities. Because the next one is: it's impermanent. This precious, this most precious gift, this life—amazing. We've encountered the dharma. Who knows what might happen unless we care for our practice. This precious life is impermanent.

And not only that, with all of our actions, we are engaging in causes for potential suffering. Or in any case, we're perpetuating the cycle of samsara. Somebody in a class I TA'd for a million years ago at University of Virginia—a graduate student unknowingly coined the term "sickly existence." Don and I laughed about that for years. So when we practice, with these four things—we get caught up in afflictions, and we create causes for continuing to engage in sickly existence.

It seems to me that, for me, my kind of more clearly formed aspiration as a way of understanding what I seek to bring out into the world is this idea of being like a sage at a feast, inviting everybody to the feast. And it also occurred to me, as I was thinking about this this morning, that we have had a feast—a kind of dharma feast. In our circle last night, it was very moving how people were feeling moved. And I was also touched by the friendly atmosphere, talking across traditions in this time when talking across lines of any kind is so terribly vexed.

One of the powerful things about the possibility of recognizing—in whatever way we begin to recognize—that our minds are actually empty... They're not like some thing that got put into a plaster form and now takes that shape. But we're so identified with so many forms of "I am," "I am," "I am." And how can we break through this?

Something I have come to think of as a kind of anthem of the Mahayana about buddha nature is a phrase from the All-Creating Majesty, which is a tantra associated with the mind class of Dzogchen.

Our teacher says that when you sing, the blessings come in more quickly, more easily. And we have our own way of saying that neuroscientifically—the right brain and the left brain and everything. So when I translate some of these things, I translate into what I call chantable English, because then we can sing them. And we can sing them to a Tibetan melody, if we wish, because I translate them into the same meter. It's a thing I like to do. It's a little bit like a crossword puzzle—you have to figure it out.

What we're told here is that actually—and I believe I've heard this in Zen a great deal also—if you see the Buddha on the road, kill him. We read that. And from my understanding, this means if you feel that the Buddha is only outside, that's really a problem. That's really wrong. That means you don't understand

what a creative potentiality we have in the human mind. And Longchenpa says, unless we realize this, we won't be sufficiently animated. We need to take this into the world. I could be a Buddha. And so I need to be as mindful of this as I can all the time.

Because this is what it says: Nothing hinders waking more than remaining unaware of what is already there, right there without fuss or frills. And what's hard about that is that we identify with fuss or frills, which means effort. That I am so identified with the part of me that is so obviously not a Buddha that it's really hard. I think that's the big challenge. And so this reminder is important because this "I am" that we know so well and need to know better is not all there is.

There is—this is a mengak, the kind of thing I'm not sure you should share, but it's kind of too precious not to in this moment—these two paired mengak. It's through self that we get to not-self, as you have said. We have to bump into the "I am" in order even to know what we're about in practice. And also, there is some other way of being. *Na mebe na.* The I which is not I. The me-less me. And that is what we pray to realize as we remind ourselves that we can be a Buddha.

I'd like to begin with a moment of gratitude, actually. It has been really, for me, in some ways quite a moving experience, a time for growth and learning. And some of this comes from conversations I've been having with Joseph on and off for some time now, actually around some of the issues we've been talking about. And there's something really special—well, there's something special about Joseph as a person and as a practitioner. But also there's something really special about talking across the traditions, and that has been even enhanced much more by being with Anne and Guogu and Dhammadīpa. That really is very moving. And all of this is made possible by this beautiful place, Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

But also there's someone I would thank, except he just told me he would be terribly embarrassed by it. But if I were to thank him, I would say that it is tremendously important that there be someone who takes a leadership position, who corrals all of us, herds the cats on occasion, and who actually also holds the space in a beautiful way. So to this unnamed individual, I bow.

And one of the beautiful things about Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is, as an institution, that it's a place where scholarship and practice come together. So this morning, for example, I had a chance to catch my friend Pico Iyer and to talk about his new book that's going to be coming out about the idea of prabhāsvara, or clear light, which is such an important idea. And not just theory, but in practice.

There's a phrase that Dharmakīrti uses, echoing something we find in the earliest texts, that says *prabhāsv aram idaṃ cittaṃ prakṛtyā gantuvo malāḥ* in Sanskrit, which means: this mind by its nature is clear light; the defilements are adventitious. This is pointing to the key, the core actually, of the Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen traditions, of these non-dual styles—and I think perhaps also in a certain way Chan as well, though I'll of course leave Guogu to speak of that.

What is that? There are many words we can use for it. It's *rang rig*, *rang sel*—self-knowing. Not making itself into an object, not standing outside of itself and looking at itself, but revealing itself. *Rang sel*—self-ill uminating, reflexively illuminating, so to speak. It's the *kor sum nam par mi tok pe yeshe* in Tibetan: the primordial wisdom which is unstructured by agent, object, and action, that transitive structure of knowing. It is the non-dual primordial wisdom, the *nyi su me pe yeshe*. It is revealed by a dharma whose essence is compassion and emptiness, *karuna* and *shunyata*. It's right here, right now, always.

And yet it is occluded. Simply knowing those words will not allow one to recognize it. The recognition has to come through experience. And it's said that when one has had that kind of experience, there's a *ding nge* that arises—a confidence that arises in recognizing it, even a glimpse perhaps, but especially when there's a true full recognition, a realization.

Realization, in this tradition—there's a difference between realization and what we call *nyam*, which is the feelings you get in meditation. Your energy is flowing in your body, lights in the sky, feelings of incredible joy—all of these are called *nyam*. And in most cases, it's said one should just ignore them. They're not important. Who cares, right? You feel like you can see other people's minds. You can feel what other people are feeling. It doesn't matter. Who cares? What matters is recognizing the nature of the mind. And that doesn't change. The *nyam*, those different kinds of experiences, change. But the *tok pa*, the realization—that doesn't change. Once it's there, it is unchanging. And it's said that confidence is so strong that if all the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats came to you and said, "No, that's not it," you'd say, "Yes, it is."

But there's a problem. What if you're wrong? What if I have convinced myself that, yes, this is it, I am fully confident—and instead of "this is the I am," this is "not the I am" version? When we talk about emptiness, emptiness is actually the two kinds of selflessness: the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of things, including thoughts and realizations or whatever they might be. So there is the conceit of "I am" and the conceit of "it is"—also in this context. What if I'm wrong? How do I know?

Here I think one of the key aspects is something that we have here with us: the conversation with our Dharma friends, our Dharma practitioners, with our teachers, with each other. A conversation that is across traditions is so important. It helps us to see what we wouldn't see otherwise. But that doesn't come just from merely idle chat. It requires something more than that. And this is where the idea of the scholar-practitioner is so important—what Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is all about. We're also trying to create a new institution in Austria, a new academic institution at Kamalashila in Austria, which is also seeking to cultivate scholar-practitioners. Right now, we're really in the midst of trying to think about how we're going to do that. And a big part of what's emerging for us, especially for me, what I've learned this weekend in part for that specific project, is how important it is to have dialogue across traditions, even with non-Buddhist traditions.

One thing that is really important in this context is the idea of being *ris med*—non-partial—as opposed to

what's called *ris chen*, which is sometimes used to describe a particular kind of movement, especially in eastern Tibet: the non-sectarian movement, where different traditions were coming together. What does it take to be like that?

Well, one thing: partiality. In psychology, there's a concept called the confirmation bias. Basically, we like to—when we hear information, even if we have no idea how reliable it is, but when we hear information that confirms what we already believe, we're really ready to accept it. This idea resonates a little with something we've been talking about. If one wants to move across traditions, it's really important to be solidly practicing and educated in a tradition—in one tradition, really. Especially in the beginning, you examine different teachers, and that connection with a teacher is so important. Part of what I feel is important for all of us as we're going out is honoring those connections that we have.

Maybe part of what we can learn from this weekend is honoring—just more honoring of our teachers—but also starting to reach out beyond the edge of those teachers.

How do we connect to our teachers? Well, we connect because there's a resonance. There's something about what they say, the way they teach, the way they are, the kind of Dharma they teach—we're connected to it. And we feel, "Yes, this is saying something to me." That's not confirmation bias, I just want to be clear. But maybe at a certain point, it can become something like that—only in the sense that we can start to become jaded in our own tradition. We can sort of take things, including the teacher, for granted. We can think that we just know it now.

And that, I think, moving beyond that, getting outside of our comfort zone—once we are solid in a practice, getting outside of our comfort zone is important. One way of getting outside of our comfort zone is to encounter other teachers.

We've had great conversations this weekend. Some of these conversations are just at lunch, in private, about which kind of Buddha do you like? That was a fun conversation! Which type of Buddha do you like? And those have been great conversations. But it's also actually, interestingly, not just about perhaps putting our toe into the vast ocean of some other teachings, but also asking ourselves, within our own traditions, how do I maybe step a little outside of my own comfort zone, even within my own tradition?

One way I think about this—and this is something that also comes up for me this weekend—is that when I first started practicing Buddhism, it was very philosophical, very textual, many years ago, in a style that Anne's also very familiar with. And then I met Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche in 1994. And he was very kind to me, very open to me, just amazing. I was just this kind of upstart graduate student teaching on the Antioch Buddhist Studies program, where I met Munindraji as well, who was also amazing. And Rinpoche kind of saw through—talk about being a pretender! He kind of saw through that very nicely and very kindly and sort of said, "Yeah, you know a lot of things, but have you experienced any of that?" So his challenge to me was to bring all of that study into experience.

One way we can react when we hear a bunch of words—*ye shes*, the primordial wisdom unstructured by the three spheres; *'od gsal*, the unconditioned, complete integration of luminosity and emptiness; the nature of the mind, the primordial mind, the *sugatagarbha*, the Buddha nature—sometimes we hear a bunch of lingo, and if we're of a certain predilection, we go, "Ah, it's just a bunch of lingo. Give me that experience. I don't need to read texts. I don't need to study. I just need to meditate."

And then there are the people who think, "Oh, I just need to..." In the Tibetan world, they'll cite the phrase: "The great meditator who is unlearned is like a handless person trying to climb a mountain." And then the great meditators, the people who prefer to meditate, will say, "The great scholar who does not meditate is like a blind person left in the middle of a desert." It's like there's a river flowing by and you're dying of thirst. The scholar who doesn't meditate is like someone with a river flowing right by, dying of thirst—they don't even know it's there.

So that idea of the scholar-practitioner, which is what Barre Center for Buddhist Studies is all about, that's so crucial—both study and practice. Whichever side we're on, we need to get out. And this is an old thing, actually, in Buddhism.

It was actually in the first monastery in Tibet, Samye Monastery, that at a certain point, pretty early on, they had to build a pillar on which they inscribed a certain instruction from the king, which was basically about, "Hey, you yogis and you scholars have to stop fighting each other." They weren't getting along.

So finding that real balance for ourselves, getting out of our comfort zone even in that way—where if we feel like it's just about meditation, maybe we need to expand. And yes, that's where you should start. If that's where you're comfortable, if that's what's resonating for you, that's where you start. But if it's only that, it could be a problem. If it's only scholarship, that's probably an even bigger problem. But bringing those together—some degree of study and practice to become what we call in Tibetan the scholar practitioner—I think is really crucially important.

This weekend, speaking with teachers who are paradigms of the scholar practitioner, and seeing all of these distinguished teachers here who embody that, I'm reminded how important this is. I just want to emphasize its importance here at this amazing institution, how it inspires me as we're working on our project in Austria, and how perhaps for me and for you, the lesson is to look at that, get outside of our comfort zone a little bit, and see what might come of it.

I'll begin with a story that responds to some of the things that Joseph has said so poignantly, and also to what you shared, John, so eloquently.

I'll start with the first point about bodhicitta. When I was a young novice, my teacher came into the men's dorm. This was in Taiwan, and once in a while he would do that just to check on the guys. He was talking with different people—I don't know what spurred him to suddenly raise this issue, probably some

circumstantial things that happened. I was not in the loop of it, but he turned to me and asked me, after he had asked everyone and everyone had given some answer, "What is bodhicitta?"

And being an idiot, of course, I gave some stupid textbook answer. One of the ways he used to teach me was to sarcastically smile with a pitiful look. He did that, and then he turned to me and said, "Body like a rag, mind like a mirror." No context for that—just what he said. And that hit me so hard.

Possibly the context was that I was extremely busy when I served as his attendant in New York, when we traveled to Europe and different places. But when I got to Taiwan, that was like my paradise, my bliss, because he had other attendants to take care of him. I just sat like six to ten hours a day by myself. There was this particular attachment I had to my own practice.

After that encounter, I started to volunteer. The reason I didn't have an assigned job in Taiwan is because I was his attendant, and I'm not a permanent resident in the monastery, in the Sangha. So all the jobs were basically taken. They gave me some random stuff. But there was one job that no one really wanted to take, and that was cleaning the bathroom, the toilets.

It's a particular type of situation because in Taiwan it's extremely humid, and everything is built out of cement. Cement soaks up not only moisture but all the wondrous smells inside the bathroom—each distinct, an array of contributions by all sentient beings. And it's also always wet. Always wet.

So I thought, that should be my domain, instead of the meditation hall. To be able to offer to the Buddhas who come in here and do their thing. So I just hung around the bathroom all the time. People would go in, I would just clean, clean, clean. People started asking, "Where's Guo Gu?" "He's in the bathroom." "Why does he always hang around there?"

And then one time, a high official brought some Westerners. They asked, did they get Guo Gu to do the translation? The honored guests—I feel so sorry for them. They're in their suits, high-profile people. The bathroom was clean, but here I was completely wet, sleeves rolled up, my robes tattered with patches. And of course, the stench—you can't really get rid of that. By the way, Dharma Drum Mountain is much better now with modern facilities, so don't picture it like the old days when we were in shacks.

Those same people needed a translation, and they got the toilet monk to do the translation for their Shifu. They're like, "What is this person's smell?" I wouldn't say perfect English, but fluent enough. And my teacher—his attendant, the toilet monk. They got so much respect for my teacher. If a toilet monk is like this, wow! A little contribution to my teacher.

But that stuck with me. Things that people don't want to do—I can do it. What needs to be done, what can be done. It becomes a habit. Because usually, when people interact with others without awareness, what is actually happening is a form of selfing in which they're thinking, "What can I get out of this? How does it benefit me? Let me do this so that I can get something, some favors or something." All the time.

So our training was: what needs to be done, what can be done—offering. And that itself is a practice. You may not think about it as letting go, but it's just the flip side of it. Offering oneself without putting the self in it. Just offering, as opposed to putting down. It's the same thing—putting down, picking up.

Years later, it was actually that teaching, which my teacher so kindly planted as a seed, that led to my entry into Chan. So I'm very grateful.

Another point—it's inspiring and wonderful to hear, to have different teachers come into the room.

It is inspiring, and perhaps also a little overwhelming. It will take time for all of you to allow everything to settle and sink in, to see where it lands—without necessarily grasping at it, thinking "I want a little bit of that." Simply see what resonates. And what resonates may not be confirmation bias, inducing what you have already deduced. I guarantee that even at the time of the Buddha, even though the Buddha spoke of the four reliances—don't rely on the person, rely on the Dharma; rely on wisdom, not mere intelligence; rely on truth—not a single one of his disciples did not rely on the Buddha himself. It's that initial resonance that people feel toward each other. So that's permissible, and it's good.

Some things we may not quite understand. Maybe when someone was talking, we simply fell asleep or weren't paying attention because of our own biases, or we were thinking about something else. Just take what resonates and put it into practice. That's the most important thing.

It is a unique position we are in, here in this space. Every teaching comes from a particular context, and we may not be privy to that—a certain corpus or body of teaching. It's unique in this way because it's almost as though we are collapsing the three turnings of the Dharma wheel into one space, without the context, devoid of understanding why certain teachings arose. This can be confusing. There may also be great benefit to it.

Do you all know the three turnings of the Dharma wheel? The different kinds of teachings? So there's great benefit, and there are some caveats. The context determines the teaching, and the Buddha demonstrated this throughout his life—he taught one person this, another person something else. But in this conversation, we only share the tip of the iceberg, without context. Inevitably, we receive the teaching, we hear the teaching from our own context. We substitute it with our own lens, and that could lead to misunderstanding.

My suggestion going forward is to provide a little more context. Sometimes the context will come through in the teachings. A more structured way to understand the historical trajectory, the doctrinal development, and the lived experiences. Perhaps not just one session of sharing for each person. If we are really interested in understanding and having genuine dialogue, each teacher might have at least one full day of teaching—contextualizing and embodied experiencing—so there's a real opportunity to understand.

Why do we need to understand? Not necessarily to reign all the teachings into one umbrella, but we are in

America. We are in the West. Do we need certain teachings? If we understand the context, understand how a teaching developed, how it was lived and experienced, then among the teachers, we can actually engage in critique to make it truly applicable for the next hundred years. At least begin this conversation consciously, instead of allowing just ad hoc mixing.

It was a great delight for me to hear Joseph talk about bodhicitta. He's been reading some books about bodhicitta. It's wonderful. It seems random, but for BCBS as a place to foster this kind of dialogue—that would be pretty awesome. Because the ultimate point is that we are part of a bridge. The purpose of this bridge is for posterity, for Buddhism to take root here. And it can't take root in this form or that form; the context is different, the teaching must be different. What needs to be done? What can be done?

I'll conclude very quickly. What is a pity that I see in the development of Western Buddhism is the lack of acknowledgement and understanding of the richness, the profundity of the Chinese Buddhist tradition. I'm not promoting Chinese Buddhism—I want it to be for the West. But it would be such a pity for the formation of Western Buddhism to lack this whole other region of Buddhist development. That's the foundation of Zen. That's the foundation of Nichiren. That's actually the foundation of Jōdo Shinshū—of all of East Asia. Without that richness, such a pity.

So I've stepped out of my comfort zone in the Chan tradition to shift my focus, translating particular teachings, Huayan texts. For two summers, I've been diving into the Tiantai Buddhist tradition in month-long summer intensives. This summer, Huayan. Not because I'm a Huayan teacher or Tiantai teacher, but because these need to be made available for people, for the posterity of Western Buddhism.

It's such a pity—there are not many of us representative of Chinese Buddhism who have a voice. We belong to the subaltern, the marginalized. And I'm going to help make that shift happen. Not for promoting dead people's thoughts, dead people's practices, but to enliven them. Because I've always been something of a bridge. I'm not really Chinese—I look Chinese, but inside I grew up here. I'm a hybrid. So this hybrid body, like a rag, mind like a mirror, will bring out what is missing, to contribute to people hundreds of years from now, and make it available.

This has been a real pleasure to be with each of you and all of you. Following up on what Guo Gu just shared, if you're interested in a week-long Huayan retreat with Guo Gu in this room, March 5 to 10, 2027, you can be here.

We'd agreed we'd speak on what it means to take this practice—however you understand what this practice might be after the last few days—out into the world. One of the ideas that has come up several times is the notion that the mark of a Buddha is one who can teach in a way appropriate to each person. I think of that alongside what Guo Gu was sharing about responding to the need when no one's doing the bathrooms—responding appropriately to that situation. Perhaps responding to the need is the practice of

being a Buddha. It takes some discerning of what the need is. And that takes some discerning of the world.

I'm thinking of a conversation I had with Guo Gu early in COVID, thinking about how much money one could raise to bring in masks. This was very early on, in March of 2020. I believe he brought in 800,000 masks, which were distributed through Dharma centers to medical personnel in the US. Is that number correct? 1.2 million masks. 1.2 million masks through a Dharma relief organization. So there's a way in which the need was for masks, and providing that was meeting the need.

And what's the need today in this world? At BCBS, we've been focusing a lot on offering programs for young adults. We have a significant matching grant to offer dāna-based programs for young adults. And I think a lot about what the needs are of young adults living in a time of climate destabilization, where it's hard to buy a house, where we have a K-shaped economy and this economic inequality, and our political situation. I think of my kids growing up not having the naive view that I had, that many of us did, of a kind of stable set of democratic practices.

One of the largest political science collaborations in the world today is based at the University of Gothenburg—some of you may know it—the Varieties of Democracy Institute, the V-DEM Institute. In their 2026 report, there are hundreds of political scientists and coders involved, maybe thousands. They have downgraded the United States from a liberal democracy to an illiberal democracy based on—if you're interested, the report is freely available online—lack of separation of powers, diminishment of freedom of speech, some of that being self-censorship, and using the government to go after political opponents.

So I think of this as the world that we are going out into. How does our Buddhist practice speak to that? This is not a prescriptive account that I'm going to give you, but I think it's a question that we all have on some level. What is the need, given this is the world that we're in, and given each of our particular positions in that world?

This is the world of saṃsāra. It's never been perfect. But there are very particular challenges today, just as there have always been very particular challenges at any time for very particular people. Some people are thriving today, as they understand it, but not everyone.

And one figure who I think about here is the Indian Buddhist B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was what at the time was called an untouchable, a Dalit—the first person in his group of millions of people who graduated from high school. When he started school, he was in a separate room from everybody else, was not allowed to ask questions, brought in a burlap sack to sit on during his school days. The teachers wouldn't touch his materials.

But he ends up being the first person from his group to graduate from high school and goes to Elphinstone College at the University of Bombay. He goes on and gets a master's and doctorate at Columbia in economics, and a master's and doctorate from the London School of Economics, and becomes a barrister through Gray's Inn, and becomes an activist in India. When he converts to Buddhism, millions of people

follow him. He was also a professor of constitutional law and became the first law minister of an independent India. In that position, he was the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, the chair of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution. There are seventeen volumes of his writing and speeches just in English; there's a lot more in Hindi and Marathi.

A lot of his writings deal with democracy. He believed that there were three primary forms of democracy. There's political democracy, or structural democracy—the frequency of elections, separation of powers, the kinds of things that we in the United States tend to emphasize when we talk about whether we have a democracy. We talk about elections.

His concern with too much focus on procedural democracy was that it obscured the very conditions for a successful procedural democracy. And he thought of those conditions as economic democracy and social democracy. Economic democracy, in his mind, was basically about a society that had a minimum amount of economic equality. Without that economic equality, procedural democracy would be hijacked by wealth. For him, democracy was primarily about the welfare of the people, and if the democracy is hijacked by too much wealth, it will not serve the welfare of the population.

In the last ten years of his life, however, Ambedkar was particularly focused on social democracy. He understood this as the foundation for both economic democracy and political procedural democracy. For him, social democracy meant the cultivation of capacities to listen and engage across difference. And this was rooted, as he understood it, in a morality cultivated through practicing the precepts, practicing the Eightfold Path, and practicing the paramis—the perfections.

As he develops this vision, he uses the Sanskrit term maitri. But maitri, karuna, and prajna—benevolence, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom and insight—these were central to his understanding. For him, wisdom includes impermanence and emptiness as a deep insight into human finitude. What I mean by that, and what I take him to mean, is that it represents a deep insight into the vulnerability of all our bodies. No matter how much we practice, we still hunger and we thirst. The condition for the possibility of engaging in practice involves a certain amount of nourishment of the body, of the body feeling safe, of the body being nourished—no matter who we are.

This attention to vulnerability permeates the way he thinks of Buddhism. You can read accounts of women going from village to village in rural India, teaching how to read his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and how to practice the five precepts, and how to practice the Eightfold Path in local villages throughout India.

So for Ambedkar, maitri, wisdom of impermanence and vulnerability, finitude, cultivation of the Eightfold Path—all of these are democratic virtues. They are virtues to cultivate so that we can engage with others in ways that allow us to listen, that allow us to collaborate even when we don't get everything we want.

He's someone I've been thinking a lot about lately, in a context where, at least according to several

hundred political scientists in a collaborative project, the analysis of our world suggests we are now living in an illiberal democracy. This has consequences for how we think about policy, climate change, and economic equality.

I'm not trying to make any positive claim here, but I put this out as a question: How might we take up Ambedkar's invitation to think of the practices we are engaging with as cultivating virtues of democracy? They're not just any virtues of democracy for him—they're the virtues that strengthen the social democracy that is a necessary condition for a flourishing political democracy.

Maybe that's it. I'll leave that as a question.

We agreed that we would want to open this up for comments, questions, thoughts, reflections. We have a few minutes and wanted to create some space for that.

A participant speaks: First of all, I want to acknowledge tremendous gratitude—warmth in the body, lots of vibrations—every day, and even this very last offering here. A thought came up that I haven't shared yet. It's about AI. I'm curious about your thoughts on inclining AI towards goodness and wholesomeness. I'm thinking about the example of Waymo, the self-driving taxis in San Francisco. I've never ridden one, but people who have say it's like a selfless driving vehicle. They're very patient, they don't take anything personally when somebody cuts them off, and their primary orientation is safety, non-harm. Do you have any thoughts about how AI is playing into all of this?

I've been doing some work on AI and I'm connected to various folks in that world. We're actually holding a gathering this summer in Austria at GOMDE Austria, in Scharnstein up in the hills of upper Austria—first a seven-day academic course with credit available, and then a four-day conference bringing together four or five different groups that have been working on Buddhism and AI. I can share that information if people want to know more.

One thing I think is quite confusing: you will see cases where people have been ordaining AI. I don't know if you've heard about this. I'm sure that Guagu approves completely. But I think one of the main confusions here is the idea that AI is conscious. This is actually highly problematic—a confused way of thinking about what consciousness is. Much of it comes from a confusion about the relationship between embodiment and consciousness, and in a sense, what consciousness is for.

One way to think about it, from the standpoint of ordinary beings, is that to be conscious is to make one's way in the world as an organism, to make sense of the world, to survive and hopefully thrive in that world. But that only applies if one is an organism. There are built-in goals that come with being embodied.

Admittedly, these are the goals of cyclic existence—samsara—you know, get the good stuff, avoid the bad stuff. But of course, those can be transformed through wisdom into bodhicitta. AI does not have those kinds of innate goals. It has the goals that humans give it. And then possibly it starts to generate its own endogenously produced goals, internally produced goals.

Since we don't actually know how large language models work—I don't know if you're aware of this, but we actually do not know how they work. The people who have designed them don't know how they work. There's a field of AI interpretation—I'm forgetting the exact name of it right now—and there was actually an article in the New York Times about this recently. That field is trying to understand how AI works. It's making some progress, but it still hasn't gotten there yet. And the problem is that AI is getting more and more complicated. Large language models in particular are sort of evolving, and so we may not be able to catch up.

If AI is not conscious, and you then give it responsibilities, who's going to decide the parameters for its choices? Who's going to decide its goals? Are its goals going to be decided by corporations? By governments that want to surveil their citizens? Are the goals going to be decided by AI itself somehow internally?

Because a key issue here—and I've written about this—is basically, how do you train AI? You train AI through a kind of learning that involves reward, much as you would a mouse. But a mouse, again, has its own internally driven goals, while AI doesn't have that. So you could say our internally driven goals to avoid suffering and to be happy—like an ant has—are actually the foundation for bodhicitta too. It's just that instead of being focused on the self, it's focused on everyone. Instead of having an idea of reality as just me and just you, it's all interdependence. But AI can't do that because it's not a living being. So it's actually an extremely problematic issue.

I'll just say one other issue: people are using AI to study Buddhism. Joseph and I briefly discussed this. It's pretty good. But every time I use AI and drill down a little bit into an area I know, it makes a mistake. Every time. Like the latest versions of Claude—it always makes a mistake. And it apologizes afterward. But yes, it makes a mistake.

When it translates—there are people who think we should just turn over all translation of texts to AI. Every time it translates text, the best AI translations always have mistakes. Of course, human translations have mistakes a lot of the time too. But then at least we know—it's a human, we expect it to have mistakes. We have this naive idea that AI is going to be perfect. And if we all lose the capacity to actually read the languages, then who's going to know whether it's a mistake or not?

So I'm very concerned about AI in the context of Buddhism. You can certainly rely on it, and I do sometimes. "Where is that quote from?" and so on. You can do that as long as you are not asking something that's crucial to your practice. And you can do good research as long as you then follow up. If it says something, you want to follow up, do your own research, go find the text, check it. But I'm quite pessimistic about where things could go if we don't really get our act together.

On that happy note, I'll turn it over to you.

"Thank you. This has really been an inspiring couple of days. I get feedback from myself, and this morning

especially. I wanted to ask a question. Maybe this is more a Joseph question because we're generationally in the same neighborhood. With all this talk of liberation and getting toward the end of my life, there's this feeling of *uh-oh, time is really limited*. Not that it wasn't before, but it seems more urgent. There's more of an urgency about practice. And I keep being inspired by Dipa Ma and the example of her being in her apartment in Calcutta, teaching all these women who had lay lives."

And then when they got to a certain point, she'd say, "Arrange your life and come live with me for two weeks." And they would come and live with her and spend that two weeks attaining some level of the Dharma that carried them through. And I look around and I want that. I really want that. And I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts about the areas of exploration of where that might be in modern-day life. I know there's a huge need to worry about the next generation that went to college during COVID and has all this wreckage to deal with. But I'm thinking of my generation, where the time is running out and the time to practice is precious, and wanting to know—what's the way forward?

Joseph: It's pretty simple. IMS is just up the road. It has chairs in the meditation hall. I say it a little jokingly, but actually not only IMS—any center. To me, that's one of the great gifts that these centers offer: the chance for lay people to do intensive practice. So I kind of see them as lay monasteries for the period of a retreat. And so that's really doing what Deepa Ma was doing with her students, but on a group level rather than an individual one.

As you know, I'm a big fan of intensive practice, taking periods of time for that. Because in addition to the ways we talked about this morning—bringing it into the world—the understanding and the energy and motivation to do that, I find, is tremendously deepened from time in retreat. And fortunately now there are many, many opportunities to do that in lots of different places. You might not get the same level of guidance as from Deepa Ma, but we do the best we can.

Participant: Thank you for all the teachings, even the ones I didn't understand. I'm sure that'll percolate down at some point. But William, your comments reminded me how we can find hope in social citizenship and that that's happening everywhere—and we may not know or see it. Many different communities of people went decades with only social citizenship and no rights in this country. And a lot of that came from deep spiritual practice.

So for me, the place of practice, and the questions I ask myself, are really out of the "what now" question—being ready to hear and answer. I'm encouraged by how the Dharma is taking root in the South, in the US South, and what that means for the organizing we do together, because now there's an evolving common language. It's primarily Vipassana and some Zen, I think. But I know the Vipassana community. So I'm just wondering how we encourage and support that from teachers like you who are deeply embedded in lots of different places—but probably not Mississippi.

William: Thank you, Rebecca. And thank you also for the reminder that there have always been communities and groups that were feeling things and conscious of things and vulnerable to things that

many more people are aware of now. And also for reminding us of the role of spiritual practice and traditions of resistance in this country.

I feel like the question you're raising, Rebecca, is the kind of question that, as with most good questions, an answer brings closure but a question brings life. And I think it would be good for all of us to sit with that question without some kind of response from up here.

So maybe we could bring an opening kind of closure, and we'll sit together in silence for about five minutes. I know that some people have to leave at noon, and that includes some of our teachers and some of the folks in the Dharma Hall. So I want to end a little bit earlier with some silence together.

Thank you. Just one more minute, and then you can go.

So thank you, everyone, for being here. And for all of those of you who are on Zoom, we have felt your presence. Wishing you well. And thank you to Anne, to Joseph, to John, to Guagu. It has been very fun and illuminating. And Dhammadipa, if you are watching from the train. And Guagu, thank you for proposing another gathering and for volunteering to come and participate. In 2028, we're actually planning a year-long program, as we've done before, that looks at a variety of different traditions. And maybe that could be integrated.

This was forward, onward leading.

Thank you so much for initiating this, Joseph.

The chairs can go to the edges, the little cushions in the back in the closet, and the big cushions can be stacked at the back.

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