Dreaming Ourselves Into Existence: Dukkha, Non-Self, and Waking Up

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:34:58

My name is William Edelglas, and I serve as Director of Studies here at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts, on the traditional homelands of the Nipmuc people, many of whom still live in this area.

Before I introduce Joseph Goldstein, I'd just like to give you a sense of how the evening is going to unfold. As Joseph has written in the essay that was shared yesterday, the question of the self—non-self or not-self—is one of the most challenging and also one of the most significant in Buddhist theory and practice. Tonight we're going to begin, after a brief meditation that Joseph will lead, with questions that I will pose to Joseph about the self. Then after about forty-five minutes, we'll open up the conversation.

I think on an evening like this, Joseph Goldstein doesn't really need an introduction, but still it feels appropriate to say that Joseph has been practicing Buddhist meditation since the 1960s and teaching meditation retreats—mindfulness, loving-kindness retreats, insight retreats—since the mid-1970s in many places around the world. Speaking for myself, and also I think many others, what I really deeply appreciate about your teaching, Joseph, is the clarity of both your response to questions of doctrine and how you formulate questions of doctrine, but also the clarity of the meditation instructions that you give. That clarity, and the humility with which you offer it, and your sense of humor, has been a Dharma gate, an entry into the Dharma, for so many people. And that has meant so much to me and to so many others. I should say that Joseph is also the co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, which is right next door to us in Barre, and also a co-founder and longtime board member of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. So thank you so much for joining us tonight, Joseph. I turn it over to you.

Okay, thanks, William. So good to be with all of you.

As William said, I think we'll start with just a few minutes of meditation, a chance to simply settle in and arrive and get here. Take some comfortable meditative posture—not too comfortable, just some posture that keeps you alert. And again, we'll just sit for a few minutes.

If you like, you can close your eyes. Maybe take a few deep breaths as a way of settling into the body. And then let the breath find some natural rhythm. Keep in mind that it's not a breathing exercise; it's an exercise in awareness.

In a very relaxed way, feel the whole body, feeling yourself sitting. And simply become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. You can keep it that simple. See if you can feel each breath from the beginning to the middle to the end of the in-breath, beginning, middle, and end of the out-breath. Softening the eyes, the jaw, the heart, the belly. The body knows how to breathe, so it's simply feeling this very natural process.

When you notice the mind wandering in thought, as you become aware of that, simply begin again. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

When you're ready, you can open your eyes, reconnecting with the world around you.

When we start with the sitting, it's always tempting to just go on sitting, but we have some things to talk about this evening.

*William Edelglas:** Maybe we'll start with what might be a deceptively simple question: Why did the Buddha pay so much attention to the self, or not-self, or non-self, or no-self? Why is that such an important question for Buddhist traditions, especially early Buddhism?

Well, I think the importance of it is highlighted in one teaching of the Buddha when he said that of all the different kinds of wrong view, the wrong view of self is the most dangerous, is the most problematic, the cause of the most suffering. And so it clearly is a central part of the Buddha's teaching and the whole path of awakening.

I think a simple way of understanding why it's so important is this: when there is a strong view of self—which is the common way most people understand who they are in their lives—we find ourselves entangled in something deeply problematic. This is precisely why the exploration of non-self is so challenging: it really goes against almost our common sense understanding of who we are. In that sense, it's a very radical teaching.

But as long as we are caught up or identified or entangled in the view of self, then we spend our lives defending it, gratifying it, aggrandizing it, judging it. We have all these responses that come out of this felt sense of an I, of a self. And the Buddha was pretty clear about the path towards liberation: what we're really practicing along the path is the practice of non-craving, of non-clinging. That's the second and third noble truths. But as long as there's a strong sense or feeling of self in our lives, it's precisely that view of self that strengthens the craving in the mind and the clinging in the mind.

So that's why it's important to really begin to try to unpack what this whole notion of self and non-self is about—because it goes to the heart of the possibility of freedom. When the Buddha was asked what he teaches, he would often respond in the simplest possible way. He would say he simply teaches suffering and the end of suffering. That's his mission. And really, as we undertake the practice, that can become the

reference point for all of our understanding and for all our practices—for how we're living our lives. Is what we're doing creating more suffering or leading us to the end of suffering? Understanding or unpacking this notion of self is really a key element of all this.

So it's important to understand and unpack this notion of self. Maybe we should start there. In the suttas, we often see the terms *attā*, meaning self or oneself, and *puggala*, meaning person. Certainly, it seems as if one can talk about oneself, or the self, and the Buddha talks about himself. So there seems to be some sense of self that we can talk about. What's the kind of sense of self that might be the wrong view, in contrast to me saying, "Oh, I'm hungry," or "I see you there"?

Well, first, to acknowledge that we do use this term—self, I, me, mine, you—conventionally. This is our conventional language, and that's fine. There's no problem with that. It would be very cumbersome to go through life trying to communicate without using conventional language.

But what the Buddha was pointing to was that self—the word self, the term self—is a designation for something. It's not something that exists in and of itself. It's simply a word used to designate the flow of changing experience of this mind and body. So we want to use the term without getting caught in believing that the term is referring to something self-existing.

There's no one behind the process—this mind-body process. There's no one behind it to whom it's happening. Yet that's what we often intuit. "I'm having the thoughts," or "I'm having the feeling"—instead of the understanding that thoughts arise, feelings arise, sensations arise. All of these are part of the flow of phenomena, of changing experience. And there's no one behind it to whom it happens.

So I think it's important to understand the difference between the conventional use of language, the conventional use of concepts, and taking the concept to be the reality itself. This is where we often get confused.

Let me give you another example of how we often confuse concepts with the actual reality of the moment. This is something very simple—there could be a million examples of it. When we look outside and we see a tree, that's how people would describe what they're experiencing. But the eye doesn't see "tree." The eye just sees color and form. Then we create a concept designating that particular color and form: tree. It's useful in that way, but it's not positing an experience in and of itself. It's simply pointing to that experience. That's what's meant by concepts as designations.

And of course, self is perhaps one of the most deeply held concepts that all lives revolve around. So I hope that offers some clarity—and if not, you can try to draw some more out of me.

So you were talking about perception and talking about labeling. Then you mentioned the five aggregates. When I think of perception, I think of sensation, and when I think of labeling, I think of the aggregates. One of the things that the aggregates do is explain something about our subjective experience in the way that the self is often taken to explain subjective experience, but they do so without recourse to the idea of

self. I'm wondering if you want to say a little bit more about what the five aggregates are and how they can help us understand what it is to have our experience without a self.

That is a tall order. And it's just to say that for many years at the beginning of my practice, my teacher, Munindraji, my first Dharma teacher, would speak a lot about the five aggregates because the Buddha spoke a lot about it. When you read the suttas, the discourses, it's almost on every page where the Buddha's using that template of the five aggregates to describe experience.

Just as a reminder for those who may not be that familiar with it, the five aggregates describe all the aspects of the experience of this mind and body. The first one is the body. In sutta language, it's called form, but it really refers to the body or material elements.

Then there's feeling, or feeling tone, which is different than emotion. Feeling tone is just that experience of things being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is really interesting. The Buddha's pointing out that every single moment of experience at any of the sense doors, including the mind, always has a feeling tone embedded in it. We're experiencing it either as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

The reason this is so important, and why the Buddha highlighted it, is because this feeling tone plays a powerful conditioning role in the process of desire and aversion. Because something is pleasant, if we're not mindful of that feeling tone—oh, pleasant—then I want, I like, I want more. If it's unpleasant, aversion arises; we want to push it away. So this feeling tone is a key element in our experience.

The third aggregate is perception, which is the simple recognition of what the object is. All our use of concepts and language comes out of perception. Just as an example of this, many of you may be familiar with the technique in meditation of mental noting—in, out, or thinking, heaviness, lightness, whatever it may be. Those mental notes are not really a function of mindfulness; they're a function of perception that is recognizing what is there. This particular aggregate plays a really important role on our path because the clearer the perception, the easier it is to be mindful. It's the setup for mindfulness. Perception is like putting a frame around experience so that we can see it more clearly.

So there's the body, there's feeling tone, there's perception. And then there's the fourth aggregate, which is a big basket of phenomena. It highlights the factor of volition, which is so important because that's what carries the karmic charge of every event. But it also includes all the other mental phenomena, all the different kinds of emotions and mind states, skillful and unskillful, aside from feeling tone and perception, which have been singled out. So all the rest of the mind's activity is in this fourth aggregate of formations.

And then the fifth aggregate is consciousness, or the knowing faculty.

What was striking to me about all this—as my teacher would talk about this endlessly in the beginning—I just found it so boring. It sounded so theoretical and abstract, and he would go on and on about these aggregates. It took me a long time in my practice to see what a critical role they played in the actual practice of meditation and understanding.

So it's worth an exploration of this to some depth, where we can move from it being simply Buddhist philosophy, which might or might not be interesting to you, to recognizing that this is talking about the very nature of who we are. What's so astounding to me—and this just shows the brilliance of the Buddha, I know that seems like a funny word to use—is his ability to encapsulate every aspect of our experience within these five categories. I find that quite amazing. We can really understand every single aspect of our experience through the understanding of these aggregates.

I could go on and on about this. I'll just say one thing, and maybe it will lead to some other questions. In terms of understanding the aggregates as not-self, this formulation is key. It's not that hard—it's a little hard, but not that hard—to begin to understand the body as not-self. It's just doing its own thing, following its own laws. And we can begin to see the very impermanent nature of the feeling tones and perceptions and all our mental states.

But where we really get caught—and this is the most challenging aspect in understanding not-self—is seeing the selfless nature of consciousness, of knowing. Because we can be aware of all the impermanence, the changing nature of all this other phenomena, but still we think, "Well, I'm the one knowing it all." So I tend to think of consciousness as the last holdout of self.

In the essay "Dreaming Oneself into Existence," I write about the way perception of impermanence leads to a perception of non-self, and that leads to Nibbāna in this very life. This comes from a sutta that I really love. The distinction between a cognitive understanding of impermanence and the direct experience of it is crucial. We could go up to anybody on the street and ask them, "Do things change?" Everybody would say yes. This is not a subtle understanding. So we know on the conceptual level, and to some degree on the experiential level, that things change. But we're not so often really focusing our mind in a way that is seeing, or being in, the process of change as it's happening.

It's that direct perception of change that is transformative. The simple conceptual understanding that things change—that by itself is probably not going to impact our lives that much. It's when we are in the direct experience of that flow that really quite deep experiences of the Dharma begin to open up.

I'll give you an example. This happened in one of my recent self-retreats, and I like it because it points both to a depth of what's possible and yet occurs in a very ordinary circumstance. We don't have to be in some deeply concentrated state—there's a way of getting to the depth through a very simple exercise.

I was going for a walk. Those of you who have been to IMS or the study center know there's this three-mile loop that people often walk. So I was just going for a walk on this loop, and I would say I was being mindful, but not in a slow, creeping-along kind of way. It was just a natural-paced walk.

At a certain point I had the thought, "Well, what happened to the step of five minutes ago?" And it was obviously completely gone. There was nothing of it left. Then my mind started doing something interesting and said, "Well, what about three minutes ago? What about one minute ago?" That step's gone,

completely gone. Thirty seconds ago, five seconds ago, one second ago.

I brought my mind just to the point of the movement in the step continually disappearing—right in the moment, disappearing, disappearing, disappearing. It's like water over a waterfall.

If you're looking at the lip of a waterfall, water is tumbling over it continually. You can't hold on to any of the water that has passed over. This was the actual experience of momentary impermanence—things always just continually falling away.

Then my mind remembered a teaching of the Buddha, where he said that when you see impermanence, when you're perceiving impermanence, the mind doesn't cling. When it doesn't cling, it's not agitated. And when it's not agitated, it personally realizes nibbana.

That's a powerful statement. It takes us from wherever we are now to the highest goal of liberation. But in this experiment I was conducting, I wanted to test out that teaching in my own experience.

So there I was, the steps continually disappearing. Just like water over the waterfall—gone, gone, gone, gone, gone. I was in that direct perception of impermanence. Then I checked my mind: in that perception, was the mind clinging? And I saw that when we're experiencing impermanence on that level, it's impossible to cling because whatever we might want to cling to is already gone. It was so obvious, but it was very interesting to really notice the quality of my mind in that perception of change—not only perceiving the change, but actually checking: is there clinging or not?

Then I checked out the second part: when the mind doesn't cling, it's not agitated. I simply checked whether my mind was agitated in this very moment of non-clinging. And it was both so accessible and so profound, because it became eminently clear as I was becoming mindful of my own mind in this perception of change, of not clinging—there was no agitation. There was a very direct experience of peace in that moment. Maybe it lasted only a few moments, but it was genuine.

That experience of peace is a kind of forerunner of nibbana, in the sense that in those moments, there were no defilements in the mind because there was no clinging and there was no agitation. The mind was at peace. And so we begin to get a real experiential sense of the peace of nibbana, even if it's momentary.

As a comment on this whole story, one of the things I love about practice is the value of study within practice. It's often said that concepts and words are like fingers pointing at the moon, and that we shouldn't be attached to the finger—we should look at the moon. That's very accurate. However, sometimes people take this to mean the finger isn't important. But the finger—all the words, all the teachings—is important because it's pointing us where we should look.

This is a tremendous benefit in practice. The dharma is much vaster than our own individual experience. When we study, when we read the texts and hear the teachings, we're receiving many fingers pointing to different aspects of the truth. For me, one of the joys of practice—and this is what really delights me, even

in times of suffering—is taking that interest in looking at the mind, often with the help of a teaching like this one: when we're perceiving impermanence, the mind doesn't cling, is not agitated, personally attains the highest peace. We take a teaching and then look for ourselves. That's what, for me, enlivens the whole practice. It's an endless process of discovery.

I've forgotten the question you asked now, but I hope that somehow responded to it.

I love that story of the visceral sense of impermanence while walking—the impermanence of each step. One thing I feel you're describing, thinking about the teachings and the importance of study, is the doctrine of the three characteristics: impermanence, not-self, and dukkha. The way you describe it is a kind of granular-level description of releasing from clinging that allows the dukkha to diminish.

Well, I don't know if this is what you're getting at, but this is what's coming to my mind. As an explanation for everybody listening: one thing I learned from Munindraji, my first teacher, was that when people asked him questions, he would answer whatever he wanted to answer. Sometimes it related to the question, sometimes not, but it was always a good teaching. So I took that on as my teaching model.

Sometimes the insights arise on this very granular level, as you said, where we're getting very precise in the moment-to-moment unfolding and seeing impermanence directly.

Again, with something that I came across in the discourses. On one of my last self-retreats, I've gotten into the practice of listening to the suttas. They're all on Audible now, which is quite amazing. The whole collection of Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations—you can download them and listen. I find it's a very impactful way of taking them in, quite different than reading, and a nice adjunct to actually studying the texts.

So I was listening to one of the sutras and came across a phrase that I must have read many times, but it never had impact. When I listened to it, the words jumped out at me and have had a very strong effect on my practice. It was very simple. The Buddha was talking about how everything has the nature to change, and then he used this phrase: "to become otherwise." Everything in its nature is always becoming otherwise.

I think the reason it jumped out at me is that it's such an unusual phrase in English. We might say "everything changes"—oh yeah, I know that. It's such a familiar phrase that we almost hardly pay attention to its deeper meaning. But when I heard that things are always becoming otherwise, and that this is the very nature of phenomena, it made the truth of change so vivid.

Just as a couple of examples: I was doing some walking meditation, and all of a sudden my knee started to hurt a little bit. Oh, becoming otherwise. It hadn't been hurting, and then it started hurting—becoming otherwise. I came back into my house, something broke—oh, becoming otherwise. That phrase, I've just started incorporating it into my life, acknowledging this truth of everything changing. I wanted to offer

that in case some of you might find it useful in your own practice and lives: becoming otherwise. All the time, nothing is stable, nothing is staying the same.

Now, sometimes we are seeing this on a granular level, but there are insights into the three characteristics that also happen on what we might call the ordinary level of perception—not on this very refined momentary level. For example, one of the meanings of the Pali word *anattā*, which is generally translated as non-self or selflessness, is also "ungovernable." This means that things are happening according to their own laws—according to the laws of nature, according to the laws of how the mind works. They're not happening because we want them or don't want them to behave a certain way.

The body, not in this granular microscopic way but just in our ordinary perception, shows this so clearly. The body ages, the body gets sick, the body dies. It's ungovernable. We could say, "May my body never get sick," but that's not going to happen because it's the nature of the body to age, to get sick, to die.

This ungovernable aspect points to the *dukkha* characteristic. It's because things are ungovernable and not subject to our will that material form, for example, is going to go through stages of suffering, of unpleasantness, of decay. And this is not a mistake. This is simply the nature of the physical elements. It's true for everybody.

Likewise, the nature of the mind is ungovernable, not subject to our will, following its own laws. Have you ever thought to begin a sitting with the intention, "May there be no thoughts in my mind for this sitting"? Well, we might make that intention, but most likely—unless we're in a very deep state of concentration—thoughts are going to arise. The mind is following its own laws. It's ungovernable.

Here's an interesting connection between selflessness and *dukkha*. There's another aspect to *anattā*, though. This is why I find this whole notion of non-self so fascinating: on the ungovernable side, it's a condition for *dukkha*, for suffering. But there's also a liberative quality of selflessness. Yes, all of the elements of body and mind are simply following their own laws. And if we're not identified with them—if we're not creating the sense of self through our identification with the body or feelings or perceptions or different mind states or consciousness—that's the doorway to freedom.

Even as things are changing and unreliable, the mind is free if we're not taking them to be self. I find it so interesting that *anattā,* or selflessness, in one direction points to *dukkha* and in the other direction points to freedom. This is why this whole notion of selflessness is so central to the Buddhist teaching.

There have been a number of really great questions that have come in, and we could be here for the next week just unpacking them. I wish we had time, but one question that several people have asked in different ways is this: when you speak about the mind being free or the mind being at peace, the temptation might be to think, "Well, that is the self." And what you just said is that it's precisely not identifying with the mind as self that is liberated. Can you say a little more about how one might think about this very subtle way of relating to the mind—when we say the mind is free or the mind is liberating,

but the mind is not self?

Well, there are different ways of approaching that question. From one side, we could say that peace is a quality of the mind. Until we're fully enlightened, sometimes it's there, sometimes it's not. So it itself is part of the changing process. And the feeling of peace itself is impersonal—it doesn't belong to anybody. Just like you said earlier, instead of saying "I'm angry," we could reframe that as "There is anger." In just the same way, instead of saying "I'm peaceful," a more accurate way of describing it would be to say there's peace in the mind at this point.

But then there's something underneath that. I referenced this a little earlier in saying that the most subtle manifestation of the sense of self is in our identification with the knowing, the identification with awareness, with consciousness. "I'm the one knowing the mind at peace." And that's where, if that identification is there, then there will be a felt sense of self in that experience of peace. "I'm the one feeling it, I'm the one knowing it."

So it becomes really important to begin exploring ways of cutting through the identification with the knowing mind, cutting through the identification with consciousness. There are many ways to do this, and different Buddhist traditions talk about different approaches. I'll highlight a few.

One way of breaking that identification with the knowing mind happens naturally in the course of Vipassana meditation. At a certain stage of insight, we begin to see that what's happening moment after moment is a pairwise progression of knowing and object. There's knowing of a sight, knowing of a sound, knowing of a smell, a taste, a touch, a thought. And we can have the experience in meditation of seeing, moment after moment, knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object, arising and passing very rapidly.

In that experience, we are seeing directly the impermanent nature of consciousness itself. We see that consciousness is not just one steady-state thing that is who we are—consciousness itself is a conditioned phenomenon arising and passing in each moment. We begin to be in that flow of things changing, and just using the analogy of water over a waterfall, seeing that flow of impermanence, we can see that with consciousness itself. It's the knowing and the object together arising and disappearing, disappearing, disappearing. This begins to cut any view of consciousness as being I, as being self, because it's continually disappearing.

Another way, which I've talked about quite a lot in different contexts and which really changed my practice, was when I began to reframe the language of my experience in the passive voice. Usually we speak in the active voice: "I'm feeling, I'm thinking, I'm doing this, I'm going there." In our very language, we are reinforcing the subject, reinforcing the sense of self, just in the way we conventionally speak.

At a certain point in my practice, I was doing walking meditation, and I don't know what prompted it, but I just reframed it in the passive voice. I was walking and feeling the sensations of movement, and I

reframed it to myself: sensations being known, rather than "I'm knowing the sensations." This linguistic shift from "I'm knowing the sensations" to "sensations being known" had an amazing benefit, because in the passive voice there's no subject. It's just things being known moment after moment.

I would really encourage those of you who are interested to try this. It's particularly accessible in walking, although it could be applied in any activity. Just do some walking practice where you're feeling the movement and framing it—really experiencing it—in this way: "Sensations being known. That's all that's happening. Sensations being known."

There were so many interesting consequences of this. First, it became completely effortless because there wasn't an "I" trying to be mindful or an "I" trying to track the movement. I was just moving and the sensations were being known quite spontaneously and perfectly. They were being known exactly as they were appearing. The whole endeavor of walking meditation became completely effortless and very precise at the same time. It was an amazing shift, simply coming from this shift of language that took the subject—the "I"—out of the equation. Things being known.

Then, if you can settle into that for a while and get easy with it, where it becomes a natural way of being with experience, you can take it to a next step, which also gets really fascinating. These sensations being known—we might ask the question: known by what?

And this is not a kind of intellectual inquiry. We are right in the experience of things being known. So we're there in the experience—it's not thinking about it. In the very experience of things being known, we ask the question: known by what? It's like turning the mindfulness back onto the knowing.

And this is where it gets very interesting and ties into a lot of Tibetan and Zen teachings, which emphasize this point. Known by what? When we look, there's nothing to find. And yet the knowing is happening. So this is the great mystery of consciousness. There's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is there.

In some Tibetan and Dzogchen teachings, they call it the union of emptiness and awareness, or emptiness and clarity. The knowing is there, nothing to find.

I'll just give you one other place where I've played with this and explored it. Sometimes just in sitting, if sounds are arising—you know, we're all just in the experience of hearing, the common ordinary experience. So I'm sitting, sounds are appearing in the mind. And then I'll ask myself the question: can I find what's knowing the sound? When I look, again, there's nothing to find. And yet the hearing is still happening. So this begins to really cut through any identification with the knowing as being self, precisely because there is nothing to find.

Just one last little thing, and this is a little personal. In the last few years, I've started playing with some writing of poetry, which has been really a very delightful thing, and it's very meditative for me. So I was doing walking meditation on one retreat, and this haiku appeared spontaneously in my mind because I was hearing the sound of some birds. I was just walking and hearing the birds. So this is the haiku: bird

song in the empty sky of my mind.

And it just captured the moment because the bird song was in the empty sky externally, but also in the empty sky of my mind. And that captures everything I've just been talking about. Everything is arising in the empty sky of our minds. And if we can see it in that way, we're not identified with what's arising, and we're not identifying with the mind because we're experiencing it as being empty, unfindable.

I don't know if that connected with any of you, but if it did, feel free to use it in your practice. No need to send any royalties.

A question came in that I found very moving, and I think I'll just read it so I can capture it. I can imagine others might have a similar question. The questioner says: "For those with life-limiting illness, the loss of our lives, our loved ones, our existence can intensify the clinging to the self. Dharma practice with insight into impermanence and non-self as a healthy person was so much easier than as a person with a life-limiting illness. The intensity of grief and loss and the intensified clinging to the self feels like a setback. I'm aware of the bardo, but is there a more practical approach to meditation and Dharma practice that is effective with the immediacy and intensity of life-limiting illness?"

That's a big question. It is a big question, and it's interesting because I have a close friend and longtime yogi student who has pancreatic cancer. She's been going along, but just in the last few days, really in steep decline. I just got a text today about it, so it's very much in my mind.

It's pretty amazing. She was an experienced practitioner, had done a lot of practice, and it was amazing to me and inspiring. Because of her practice, and of having seen this whole mind-body process as being a flow of impermanence, just what we were talking about earlier, and in seeing the impermanence the mind not clinging—because she had been well practiced in that, really understood this whole process, this whole dying process—first, as being lawful. At one point or another, this is just the nature of what is going to happen for all of us in one way or another. So it's not to think of it as being in some way unnatural. This is an expression of the Dharma.

The Buddha was very explicit about this, in some of the reflections he offered on the nature of illness and death. And he suggested people practice this on a daily basis so that we do have a chance to integrate this understanding in our lives.

He said something so simple, but we really have to water the seeds of that understanding. He said we should reflect daily that what has the nature to age will age, and I am not exempt. What has the nature to grow ill will grow ill, and I am not exempt. What has the nature to die will die, and I am not exempt.

For me, as I practice that reflection, the part that stands out is that phrase: I am not exempt. Because even at a time that's not necessarily life-threatening, but involves some illness or suffering in the body, even though intellectually I know I'm not exempt, very often there can be a feeling somewhere that, well, I am exempt. But when we're faced, as the person who wrote the question is, with really being in the process,

we realize, yes, I am not exempt from this natural process. The more we take that in, the more we reflect on it, the less clinging there is to the thought that it should be different, or things should stay the same way, or they should be the way they were. That's not the nature of the Dharma. It's not the nature of the truth.

Going back to my friend who is right now in the dying process, what was so remarkable, and such a clear fruit of her practice, was that her mind was really at peace with it all. She was filled with love and understanding throughout this whole process. And of course, within the Buddhist framework of understanding many lives and rebirth, we can see the whole dying process—a phrase that came to my mind some time ago—as the birth canal to the next existence. We begin to see this whole unfolding in a very large context.

The question really reinforces the importance, in whatever our situation, whether we're still healthy or faced with a limiting illness or in the dying process, of seeing that there is nothing, no situation, outside of our practice. Whatever the circumstances, no matter how challenging or difficult, can we really look and practice the mindfulness of whatever is going on? Can we bring investigation, clear perception, to the flow of changes that are happening? It may be that this flow of changes at a particular stage in life is predominantly unpleasant experiences. There's no guarantee that the body is going to go out in an easeful way, but the mind can be at ease if we understand the naturalness of the process and its impermanent nature—so that we're really in the flow of changes as they're happening.

There's one phrase the Buddha used very often as people would come to him while ill and dying. There are many stories in the suttas of people coming to the Buddha at times like this, describing great suffering in the body. And he would say, "Though the body is afflicted, your mind can be at peace." That's really a call to us, to truly apply our understanding of the practice even in these very challenging situations. And it's possible. I mentioned my friend as an example—it is possible for us to do this.

I know for me in my practice, it ebbs and flows what I am capable of. Thinking of the questioner talking about the intensity of grief and loss, there may be periods where that intensity leads to a deep sense of loss, to what one might think of in a Buddhist framework as clinging. And then there are moments when that is able to relinquish a little. As someone who is not a white-knuckler in meditation, and not always perhaps striving as much as I could, I have a certain sympathy for letting the rhythms of our practice ebb and flow.

But let me speak to that point a little bit. Of course, there are ebbs and flows in many dimensions, many domains. But I think we can really cultivate a quality of interest and investigation even in the time of the ebbs. Even when things are difficult and we're really caught up in the suffering, times of suffering can pique my interest. In a way, those are the times that serve as a great wake-up call, because they're so intense and we can be so caught in different kinds of suffering. So then the question is: are we simply getting lost in the suffering, or can we really arouse an interest? What is going on in the mind now that is

causing the suffering? We use that very intense situation to investigate our own minds.

For me, the times of suffering have in a way become the most insightful—more insightful often than times when everything's just flowing along smoothly and everything feels wonderful. If my mind is suffering, I want to know: what's the cause of that suffering? If the Buddha said the body can be afflicted but the mind can be at peace, then when my mind is not at peace, why?

So just one little thing—this could be a whole evening or course on this—but you mentioned when we're really caught in the grief of loss. I've thought a lot about this. And I think sometimes we get caught in the grief because we equate it or conflate it with love. Somehow—not necessarily the person who wrote the question, but it can happen—people might feel, "Oh, if I'm not grieving, it means I'm not loving." And so in a certain way, we're feeding the grief because we don't want to let go of it, because it might be that in our minds we think letting go of the grief means letting go of the love.

I would just suggest an investigation of that assumption, because in my experience, these are two completely different emotions. In fact, when we come back to the love we feel for whatever it might be—another person or love of life—when we reconnect with the feeling of love, my experience is that in those moments, grief is not there, because they're really two different things. But we often have not investigated clearly how we feel with each of those emotions, and so we conflate them, and that's what can keep us caught in them. So again, this is a very big topic, but perhaps that reflection might be helpful.

A lot of the topics we've been discussing are very big topics. There's a saying that a philosophy that can be put in a nutshell deserves to be in a nutshell. And none of these questions lend themselves to small answers. They all beg to be unpacked.

And here's another one. Several questions address this, and it's something I'm confident Joseph has thought a lot about. On the one hand, there's this explicit claim that we need to cultivate a way of not clinging, of non-identification with the aggregates. And yet for people who may not be white men—who have identities that have historically and today are marginalized in a variety of different ways and different contexts—hearing "don't identify" lands differently. Because there's already a kind of stability from which someone like you or me is not identified, as opposed to an identity which is lived out in a very different way.

This is a really important question, and it comes up frequently because it points to something that really needs addressing. It has to do, I think, with a fundamental part of the Buddha's teachings when he talked about the two truths—the relative level of truth and the more ultimate level of truth. These are not two separate things. They're the same thing seen on different levels.

I'll give a simple example and then refer back to the specifics of the question. I'm holding up this cup. On the relative level, it's a cup—it has a certain shape, is made of certain materials, and I take care of it. I use it as a cup. On another level, if we looked at this under a high-power microscope, "cup" would disappear.

It would be a whole other level of reality—no cup, just atoms and electrons and subatomic particles, a completely different level of reality.

What's interesting about understanding these two levels of truth is that first we need to attend to the relative, conventional level of our reality. So in the question that was raised—what is our racial identity or any other identity, and what are the implications for how we're living our lives and the challenges of whatever that particular identity is—the importance of finding stability in that identity is essential. On that level, it's vital. It's so clear now, the deleterious effects when people don't take into account these relative truths. This is the world we're living in. We need to honor and respect that.

At the same time, to the degree that we also understand the more ultimate level of ourselves in whatever personal situation we're in—if we can understand this more ultimate level, whether we think of it in terms of the changing aggregates or the momentary change, things continually disappearing and not clinging—to the degree that we have that understanding, then we actually can work with, manifest, and address all the concerns on the relative level with greater clarity and with greater ease.

So it's not a bypassing and it's not an ignoring. It's actually connecting with a deeper wisdom of the selflessness of it all, and then using that wisdom to engage on the relative, conventional level of understanding of self and other—whether it has to do with race or gender identification or whatever it may be. We can really work to understand all the dynamics at play on that level. But as I say, to the degree that we've touched at least a little bit the other level, then we can do it with greater freedom, with greater ease.

This was an expression of the Korean Zen master who started the Providence Zen Center. He used this phrase: "There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." There's no self on the ultimate level, but still we're manifesting in this world as particular beings. They're both true. We have to attend to both. And they're both true.

We're the same person. It's not that one truth is here and the other truth is over there. It's all here. And it just depends which level we happen to be paying attention to at a particular time.

So we work to integrate these two levels. We work to understand the dynamics of our conventional reality and all its challenges, even as we understand the essential selfless nature of it all. And I think this is really the heart of a mature spiritual practice—the union of these two, not the separation.

Perhaps the heart of a mature spiritual practice is a good note to end on. There were many pages of questions and comments that came in, a lot of really helpful, perceptive observations, along with some poetry and recommendations. Many people suggested we should have more conversations in this series, and Joseph and I did have a previous conversation on Nibbana in January. Perhaps we'll have another one at some point.

There are many people expressing their gratitude. I also wanted to thank those who have offered dāna. Dāna is the tradition that the institutions Joseph has started here in Barre follow for supporting teachers. In the early Indian languages of Sanskrit and Pali, *dāna* is related to our word "donation." It means a gift, or generosity.

There are many, many ways of offering dāna. It's the first virtue of the Bodhisattva. It allows us to relinquish things to which we're clinging and also support the immediate needs of others.

Sometimes we might get attached to a teacher, and certainly there's a lot of dāna that is given to teachers. But I want to make a suggestion that it's the institutions—such as the Insight Meditation Society, the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and various publishers—that support us all as Buddhists. They support the teachers in getting training, provide a framework for people to come and grow in the Dharma. There is great benefit in supporting institutions that make so much of what we do possible.

Often it's said that the Buddha would teach in a graduated way. He didn't start out, when he would first offer teachings, with selflessness or the Four Noble Truths. He led up to that. And it's said that he always started these graduated teachings with generosity.

I was just talking about this with somebody and they asked me, "Why do you think he did that?" In reflecting on it, it's because in addition to being of help to so many people, it makes us happy. Generosity is just this most wonderful quality that makes us happy. It's a wonderful practice.

I'll share with you—this is a practice I've done for many years now, and it's been a source of tremendous joy in my life. I've undertaken the practice that if I have the thought to give something—and it could be money, and often it is, but it could be many other things as well—if I have the thought to give, my practice is to do it. Not to second-guess myself, not to let the thought pass by.

It's so interesting to me. Going through my life, I'll have a thought, and then I do it. Clearly it's of some help to the recipient, but it's also this source of tremendous happiness in my own life. I would just encourage you to practice in this way. It's a beautiful thing for oneself and for others.

So let's just sit together for a couple of minutes. Again, settle in. Take a few deep breaths.

And let the breathing find its own rhythm.

A key element of meditation is relaxation. It's not forcing, not efforting. Let the body breathe in whatever way it does—and it can be changing breath to breath. Simply let all the sensations of the body breathing arise in the empty sky of your mind.

Let all the words settle. Relax into a place of ease.

May all the wholesome energy of our practice and our time together be dedicated to the welfare, happiness, and liberation of all beings everywhere.

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