Ask Joseph: Group Mentorship Program

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:30:49

It's great to be with all of you.

I thought it would be nice for us to sit for about ten minutes and get settled and embodied. Take a comfortable sitting posture. Maybe take a few deep breaths just as a way of really settling into the body, and then let the breath find its own natural rhythm.

Remember that it's not a breathing exercise—it's an exercise in awareness. We can allow the breath to come and go exactly in its own time, in its own rhythm, in its own changes. Just feel the sensations of each breath as it comes in and as it goes out. Really simple. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out.

If other sensations in the body become predominant and call your attention, simply open to the feeling of those sensations. Feel them, notice how they change. They may get stronger, they may get weaker, they may disappear. When nothing else is particularly predominant, we come back to the feeling of the breath.

Stay particularly alert for the appearance of thoughts or images in the mind. A soft mental note of "thinking" or "seeing" can be really supportive in being mindful of them.

You sent in over a hundred questions, so it was quite an interesting exercise reading through them all and choosing among them. Obviously we can't address all hundred this evening, but there were a few common themes, so I'll begin by reading some of the questions and then offering a hopefully helpful response.

One person wrote: "The one area where I clearly falter—I would say really struggle—is in my ability to sustain a meditation practice. In the beginning, I really worked hard on it, but over time, it has been the hardest thing for me. If you could say only one thing that could plant firmly in me the seed of my meditation practice 2.0, what would it be?"

Another asked: "How do we establish a commitment to regular daily practice? At the present time, I am only practicing in a sporadic way—that is, when it comes to mind while I'm doing another activity, such as sitting and listening to a program related to meditation."

And lastly: "Why is it so hard to make time to meditate when I know I want to do it?"

I think this is not an uncommon problem for people, especially those who've been practicing for a long time. You go through cycles of really strong commitment where you're doing it every day, and then maybe that begins to fall away and you find it hard to get reestablished.

In my experience, the challenge is not in the sitting itself. The challenge is in disengaging—the process of disengaging from what we've been doing. It's as if we are caught up or seduced by the particular activity we're engaged in, and we just find it hard to disengage.

I have this experience in another arena, and it's so obvious to me how it's working. For the past few years, I've been working with a personal trainer at a local health club. I meet with him every two weeks, and then I do a routine at home. For the routine at home, I can be busy doing a lot of stuff, and I know I have to do it because I report to him how it's been—there's that accountability. But it's so hard to sometimes break myself away from what I'm doing to go do the training exercises. What's amazing, though, is that as soon as I do it and as soon as I begin, I enjoy it and I'm glad that I'm doing it.

So why is there that hump to get over in terms of going from one activity to doing something we want to do, something we know is helpful, and yet it feels like there's this little obstacle?

A couple of suggestions with regard to sitting: if you find yourself in this situation, where you have the aspiration for daily practice but you find you're just not doing it, what I would suggest is making the commitment to at least sit for five minutes a day. Is there anyone who could not do that? Anyone could make that commitment and actually do it. If you go through the whole day and you haven't done it, before you get into bed at night, sit for five minutes.

What will happen almost assuredly is that once you're sitting—once you've gotten over that transition point, you've disengaged and you're sitting—almost assuredly you will sit longer than five minutes. But you don't have to. Your commitment is for the five minutes.

I think it won't take long until you are again back in the rhythm of just sitting every day without being so concerned about how long you're sitting—at least to begin with, at least as you're establishing the habit again of a daily practice.

It's so simple. However, you have to make the commitment. Even though it's a minimal one, you really have to embrace that resolve: "Okay, five minutes a day, I'm going to sit down and meditate." I think everything else will follow from that, because basically you're going to enjoy it and remember its value.

There were a whole bunch of questions about concentration, so this seems to be a common theme. I'll read some of them.

The first: "I sit daily for about 30 minutes. I've been practicing for five years. It doesn't seem like my concentration has deepened a lot. I keep returning to the object of meditation and immediately slipping away into thinking throughout the whole practice." Sound familiar? "Does it change during long retreats? Do I need to sit longer?"

Another: "I have been meditating for over 20 years and I have a consistent daily practice. Recently, though, I've had difficulty concentrating—constant thoughts—and missing the moments of peace and

stillness I used to experience. I've had difficult times in the past with concentration, but I've always been able to find my way back. However, this persistent sense of unease and disconnection has been going on for a long time. And as I write this, I am realizing that it brings up fear, and I feel lost."

And the last one: "I've heard you say that in the beginning you struggled with concentration. I do also. Can you talk about the things that were most helpful?"

As you can tell, this is a common problem. First, it's important to recognize that concentration is an important, even essential part of our path, of our practice. The Buddha has said that without concentration, deeper wisdom doesn't arise. So we need to find some ways to strengthen that steadiness of mind, which is what concentration means—steadiness. The example given is of a candle in a windless place. The flame doesn't flicker. That's what we're trying to cultivate through a practice of concentration.

One thing to keep in mind is that for the purpose of insight, for the purpose of developing wisdom, it doesn't require a super amount of samādhi, of concentration. What's actually needed is well within all of our ability. As you probably know, concentration can be developed to very high levels, with a lot of powers that come from that and all of it. But what's needed for insight, what's needed for understanding, is just a base level of steadfastness of mind.

I'll mention a few different ways of strengthening it that have been helpful for me, because as one of the questions indicated, when I began my practice, I had zero concentration. I had studied philosophy in college. My mind loved to think. I went to India. I wanted to meditate. I would just sit down and think for the whole hour and enjoy it—which may have been one of the problems. The hour went quickly! But I wasn't getting anyplace in terms of developing that steadfastness of mind. So I know that if I can do it over these years of practice, anybody can, because I started from a very low level.

There are really two components to understanding the building blocks of concentration—two particular mental factors, which is Buddhist jargon for different qualities of mind. In the Pali language, they're called *vitakka* and *vicāra*. *Vitakka* means that quality of mind that connects with the object. It's like a bee going to a flower. The object is clearly in mind and we direct the mind to it. That's the first component. The second component, *vicāra*, is the sustained attention on the object. I call it connecting and sustaining.

It's helpful to keep in mind that this is what you're doing with each breath—to really have this clearly in mind. I'll give you a practical suggestion which made a big difference in my own practice. I changed the vocabulary I was using in developing concentration. Instead of using the language of "make more effort"—

I started using the language in my own mind of intentionality.

So for example, if we're working with the breath—or it could be a metta phrase, it's the same principle—we direct the mind to the object by connecting. Usually that's not the hard part. What I found really helpful was, right in the moment of connecting, giving a quick silent reminder to myself: sustain the attention for this half breath. Just having that intention, setting the intention each time of connecting and

then reminding myself to sustain for this half breath.

I think it's helpful to do it for just half a breath at a time. Because if we have the idea, "I'm going to sit down and be with my breath for the next half hour," that's hopeless. But if we have the intention to be with the breath for just the in-breath, just the rising, then connect with the out-breath, the falling movement, and then arouse the intention to sustain—if you do that consciously, even for a few minutes, maybe three, four, five minutes where you're actively calling that intention to mind, I think you will notice that the mind gets into the habit of that close attention.

This is what we're really doing: we're training the quality of our attention. It doesn't take long for the mind to learn, at least for a period of time. So you do this for a few minutes and then you can just relax into a more easeful being with it. If you find the mind again beginning to wander, take another three or four minutes to arouse the intention with each breath.

Does this seem clear? It was super helpful for me. I applied this both with the breath and in the metta practice with each phrase, because I was finding as I was doing the phrases of loving-kindness, my mind would be there for the first phrase and then it would just start to wander as I was doing the others. It's the same principle, and it really helped keep the mind steady.

Another tool—and I'm going to offer a whole set of tools that you can play with, each of them, and see which work for you—is counting the out-breaths. Breathing in, and then on the out-breath: one. Breathing in, out-breath: two. One to ten or one to eight, whatever. That also can help steady the mind.

Something I've discovered quite recently in terms of strengthening concentration was suggested by an American monk named Vimalasiri. He emphasized a lot that with each breath, you soften the eyes. In the way he teaches it, it's almost like a rhythm of in and out, softening; in and out, softening. Whether you do it that way or not, just give some attention to softening, relaxing the eyes.

What I and many others have noticed is that even though when we're sitting with our eyes closed they don't really have a function in the process of being aware, still out of habit our eyes are very engaged. Even with eyes closed, we can feel them going in the direction of wherever we're attending. So often we're carrying a lot of tension in the eyes.

What I noticed as I began practicing this in a pretty regular way—softening the eyes throughout the sitting—was that the unnoticed tension in the eyes, even as I was watching the breath, was calling my attention really unconsciously and distracting me from the breath. That tension there actually weakens the power of our steadiness. When I softened the eyes regularly throughout the sitting, it was so much easier to simply let the mind settle in the place we're attending to, whether at the nostrils or the abdomen or the chest, wherever. The mind wasn't being distracted by this tension behind the eyes. Again, it seems like a very simple thing, but it made a big difference. I was surprised.

Another little trick: in those sittings when your mind is just out of control—you sit down, you're trying to

be with the breath, and for whatever reason in that particular sitting it's just a barrage of thoughts, a flood of thoughts—what I found really helpful, actually somewhat miraculous, is to sit and keep the eyes open a slit. Interestingly, this is almost in contrast to what I just said about softening the eyes. So I would sit, feeling the breath, eyes open just a slit. And it was amazing to me that this cut through a lot of the wandering mind.

It does it for two reasons. One is that it's such an unnatural way of holding the eyes—open just the slightest amount, just a slit—the very unnaturalness of it keeps our attention there. And because our eyes are open even that little bit, we're connected to the reality of where we're actually sitting. There's less tendency to get caught up in our mind-created worlds of thought and image. Again, a simple thing, but I experienced a dramatic diminishment of the wandering mind.

So these are questions related to the sitting practice. There were many other questions dealing with how we are in the world, but these particular questions really are about our meditation practice.

So I practice Sayadaw U Pandita's meditation technique of following the graph of the breath, attempting to bring awareness to the beginning, middle, and end of each inhale and exhale. When my mind wanders off the object, I bring it back. Would you suggest at some point that I open my awareness and bring attention to changing objects? Do you think at some point it's important to focus on concentration, samatha meditation, as well as vipassanā? I've been meditating regularly for twelve years. Having done many types of meditation, I have a primary interest in concentration. Recently, I felt I had done enough concentration, but now that my practice no longer has a clear, simple goal, I have lost my motivation.

This question points to an important rhythm in practice to understand—both within a single sitting and also as we look over longer periods of time. It's really about how we interweave a directed awareness on a particular object, like the breath, with a more open choiceless awareness.

Concentration can actually develop in both ways. It comes from steadiness on a fixed object, but it also develops from steadiness on changing objects. This is called momentary concentration. When we are mindful of changing objects steadily, that itself builds steadiness and concentration of mind.

So we want to find an intuitive balance. I think if you keep this in mind—these two ways, directed awareness and choiceless awareness—and hold that frame in mind, over time you're going to be able to intuit as you're sitting: which is most important right now?

For example, you sit down and you're feeling the breath with a really directed awareness. After some time, the mind may feel quite steady on it. You could either continue and strengthen the fixed object concentration, or at that time—and I would trust your intuition and explore for yourself—open it up to a more choiceless awareness, being aware of whatever arises: different sensations in the body, thoughts, sounds, emotions, images. Then you've segued into momentary concentration.

As you're doing that, maybe at a certain point you feel like you're getting spaced out, losing the steadiness,

getting lost in a lot of thoughts. Then bring the mind back to the fixed object concentration. It's not that one is better or more important than the other. They're just two different approaches, and we need to interweave them in our practice.

This can also be done over longer periods of time. I've been practicing many years now, and there are times when I've settled in with a strong momentum into an open choiceless awareness. That's what I'm doing in every sitting, and it seems to be going pretty well. At other times—and I'm doing this actually right now in my practice and have been for the last few months—for whatever reason, the thought came: I think I want to deepen the fixed object concentration, deepen the samādhi in that way. So I've taken a few months, and I'm still doing it, where I'm just doing meditation on the breath.

For those of you who have practiced a while and have a little more experience, you can really get a sense of what will be most valuable for you in any particular sitting, or over longer periods of time.

One of the images I use to hold all of these suggestions is that what we're developing is a toolbox of different skillful means. As you practice, especially over many years, you learn—if you're paying attention to what works for you—how to use the different tools at different times. I would encourage you in your exploration of developing concentration and insight to begin to explore these different ways in a really mindful way, so you get familiar with which tool to use, which method or strategy to employ at any particular time. They're both helpful, and they both serve to strengthen the mindfulness and strengthen the concentration.

So this is the section on the meditation practice itself. As you can see, a lot had to do with the development of concentration and getting oneself to sit in the first place, and then learning how to modulate directed awareness versus choiceless awareness.

There were a whole bunch of questions about how our practice can help us navigate the many challenges facing us in the world. I'll just read a few of them.

"I am experiencing overwhelming grief. I wake up and simply feel enormous grief for everything I see and feel around me. The enormous litany, to name a few: climate change, abounding unlivable poverty, patriarchal governments all over the world destroying civilizations, wars unending with annihilation now on agendas. That's just the broad strokes. Advice would greatly be appreciated to be able to somehow be with the enormity of it all."

I think we can all relate to that.

Someone else wrote in: "How do you suggest I maintain equanimity in the face of almost daily news of damage to the earth that is causing so much suffering towards creatures? Is it sufficient to focus on advancing my personal path of liberation while the earth burns around me? What course of action would you recommend at this time in our history?"

And the last one, though there were many in this vein: "The burning question of this mind since May was, is it possible to have too much equanimity? Over the course of the past several months, what I realized was that my question isn't about whether or not I can be too equanimous, but how do I address issues that no longer cause me to be reactive but still have consequences that will affect me. It's sometimes strange navigating the world without the anger that consumed me for fifty-plus years."

These are really powerful questions. Given what's going on in the world, it can be overwhelming. The intensity of the news cycle—twenty-four-seven news bombarding us all the time—makes it really hard to know how to hold it, or even if it's possible to hold it. So the question is how to find balance with all this. I think we're all experiencing it to some extent or another.

There are two key elements that enhance our ability to hold what's going on—the magnitude of the dukkha, the suffering in the world—without getting overwhelmed. These two elements are equanimity and compassion.

What's interesting to me is that most people get inspired by the thought of compassion, the feeling of compassion. It's a word that uplifts us, and we all mostly resonate with wanting to be compassionate. Equanimity doesn't have quite the same PR. Even in the worldly news, we can hear stories of compassion and they inspire us. But how often do we read about equanimity in the news? Probably not that often. It's almost like it's not even a cultural value. It doesn't come up that much.

And yet, equanimity is the foundation for so much. It is the foundation for skillful, compassionate action. It allows us to be with what's going on without drowning in what's going on.

I want to talk a little bit about the nature of equanimity, because I think in our world, hopefully it's discussed a lot on retreats, but probably not as much as compassion. So let me describe what the actual mind state of equanimity is.

What characterizes the equanimous mind is the quality of impartiality—that is, seeing things and situations in their totality. It can be likened to space that holds everything. Space is not partial, holding some things and not others. So the equanimous mind has that quality of openness, of spaciousness, of non-reactivity. It's just holding and seeing what's there without jumping to conclusions right away, without getting caught up in conditioned reactivity.

But what's really important to understand about equanimity—and this is key—is that it doesn't mean non-discernment. We can have this spacious, impartial, non-reactive mind and still be seeing clearly what's what. We can see what's wholesome. We can see what's unwholesome. We can see what leads to peace. We can see what leads to suffering. But in the equanimous mind, to start with, we're open to seeing the whole picture, trying to understand things from as many different perspectives and sides as possible. It's clear, it's open, it's seeing what's what.

This quality of equanimity, this openness that includes discernment—this is really the foundation for the

arising of wisdom, for seeing how best to respond to any particular situation. It's like equanimity gives us the possibility of asking ourselves, "What is the most effective way of responding to this situation of distress or suffering?" It might be our own suffering, it might be people we're close to, it might be the situation in the world. Whatever domain or arena we're considering, when there's equanimity—when we're not just jumping in with our reactivity—it allows for clear seeing and real wisdom. What will be effective in dealing with this situation?

We may feel compassionate, and that feeling motivates us to jump in and do something. But if we're not seeing clearly, sometimes our action just causes more confusion, because it's not based on wisdom.

So how do we find the space of equanimity? This is in the midst of all the huge problems that are in the world and maybe in our own lives. How do we find equanimity, that place of balance, of impartiality?

There are a few tools and reflections that I've found really helpful, because it's very easy to be thrown off balance by the magnitude of everything that is going on.

The first reflection, which I think is helpful in every situation, whether those of suffering or not, is remembering that we are not the center of the universe and that we are not in control of most things that are happening. Most things are outside of our control. To just have a realistic understanding of that—I'll give you a very mundane example of this, but it could be applied in much more significant contexts.

Sometime recently I was at the airport and the plane was delayed for hours. It was so interesting to watch people's responses. Some people were pretty chilled out and other people were so reactive, taking it personally, complaining to the airline staff. But this was a situation completely outside of one's control, delayed for whatever reasons they were delayed. If we don't take it personally and we understand that it's outside of control, it's really easy to just relax back and do what we have to do with an even mind.

This can get a little trickier when we're facing a really big problem in the world and we want to do something. But the first consideration is: is this something within some degree of control? Is this an arena in which, in whatever even small way, I can have impact? Just to determine that. Because if there isn't, it would be better to address situations where we can have impact. Having this discernment can be really helpful.

Another thing that really helps with equanimity is simply seeing the bigger picture. I do this in a variety of ways. One particular way is really effective if I'm involved in some kind of personal difficult interaction. Sometimes at night, I just go out and look up at the stars. That's all. Just looking up at the stars and reminding myself of the magnitude, the unimaginable magnitude of this universe. And then I think about my own little life having this own little difficulty, and having that larger perspective kind of helps my heart relax. Instead of being so bound up in the drama of it all, it just makes more space. It doesn't mean not addressing it, but it means creating more inner space, more equanimity with which we can deal with it.

Something that helps with equanimity for me in larger societal problems is reading history. I'm a big fan of reading history because it just provides a perspective. A little while ago, I was listening to one of those great books courses—really interesting—on the rise and fall of civilizations before Alexander the Great. These are thousands of years ago, three or four thousand years ago. And it was a history of civilizations arising and becoming powerful, and then for a variety of causes beginning to decline and disappear, and a new one arises. This is just the sway of history. And we are part of that same cycle. We may think that civilization as we know it, this is how it's going to be from now on, but it's not. Just like everything else, it's following the law of change. Just remembering, even as I think about all the problems facing the world today based on the current civilizations at play, remembering the larger cycles of history enables the mind to feel a little more peace with it, a little more equanimity.

And then there's geological time and cosmological time. Are you getting the idea? Enlarging the perspective. Because we can be so caught up and so tied into our own little world. Even when we're dealing with very real problems, we can have a very contracted energy in dealing with it all. And it's not helpful. If we can create a little more spaciousness in our minds, a little more balance, a little more equanimity, it actually allows for effective action.

This is where compassion comes into play. The equanimity that we can develop through all the various things I mentioned creates that space. People might think, "Oh, well, we've become so equanimous and so spacious, we become indifferent." But indifference in Buddhist language is the near enemy of equanimity, meaning it looks like it, but it's very different. Indifference is pulling back.

Equanimity is a holding of everything. And in that place of holding, that's precisely the space out of which compassion can arise.

So this is an interesting thing to examine in your own experience and lives. What is the cause of compassion? It's a conditioned state of mind. What are the conditions which bring it about? And here we can see the power of equanimity in giving rise to compassion. Because compassion arises from our willingness to open to the suffering that's there, our willingness to come close to the suffering. It's that coming close which can actually open that wellspring of compassion within us.

But this is not always so easy. There are many times when we don't want to be with the pain and suffering, whether it's our own or somebody else's, because it can be painful, uncomfortable, or overwhelming. And so there are times when we think, "No, I can't deal with this, it's too much." So the practice of compassion really is strengthened by the strength of our equanimity, where we're not pulling back. We're there, our minds steady enough to hold, to be with the suffering that's present. And again, it could be our own. Are we compassionate with it? Or do we just want to get rid of it? Do we have a lot of aversion to it? Or are we open to the innumerable situations of suffering in the world? Can we let it in?

This is a practice. It's not that we have this ability or we don't. You can probably relate to this in your own meditation practice. When you're sitting and you begin to feel some pain and discomfort, is your first

reaction, "Oh good, let me be with this. This is a chance to come close"? Probably not. Probably the first reaction is, "I don't like this, I want to get rid of this." But over time, in our meditation, we learn, we practice—oh no, it's okay. It's okay to feel the pain of it. It's okay to feel the suffering. And so we develop that resilience to actually experience what is present.

I emphasize this because it's important to realize that it is a practice, this ability to come close. Sometimes it will be stronger and sometimes not. So we have to be responsive to what our actual state is in the moment. There are times when the suffering, either personally or in the world, is just too much for us. It's overwhelming. We don't have the capacity to be with it. That's the time to back off. There's nothing wrong with that. It's an appropriate response when we're off balance, when we don't have the capacity. So we back off, we attend to other things, we regain a little stability. And then we practice again, moving into it—okay, can I hold a little bit? Do you understand this movement? Become close to suffering, it gets too much, we pull back a little bit, we gain a little strength, we come close again. And over time, our ability to hold the suffering in the world becomes really strong.

There are some striking examples of this. Someone who always comes to mind in this manifestation of compassion is the Dalai Lama. The suffering of the people of Tibet, his own suffering, and the stories he endlessly hears about the atrocities that go on—and yet he has this amazing capacity to hold it, to feel it, and to have a compassionate response in whatever way is possible for him in that moment. I really hold him as an example of what's possible, and we can move in that direction.

One last piece on this. We could talk about this for hours, but given the state of the world, these really feel like important questions. Establishing and practicing, cultivating the equanimity which allows us to be with the suffering, practicing opening to it, coming close to it—as we come close, what develops in us is a quality of empathy. Because we're not shutting ourselves off, we can begin to feel what other people are going through.

And the empathy then leads to compassion. And compassion involves the motivation to do something, to act. This just goes back to what I was saying before: equanimity is not indifference. It's the foundation for opening so that we can respond and take action.

Thich Nhat Hanh had a wonderful phrase. He said, "Compassion is a verb." I love that because it's not just empathy, although empathy may be a part of it. Compassion is that feeling of "Okay, what can I do? How can I help?"

I love that phrase, which was actually the title of a book: *How Can I Help?* That phrase comes to my mind a lot as I'm navigating both my own inner life and my personal relationships and my relationship to the world. I feel like it's a mantra of compassion: "How can I help?" And with equanimity, we have some clear seeing of what we can actually do.

One last little thing on this. If you're interested, there's a documentary called *A Small Act* about how

sometimes even very small actions can have huge consequences. It tells the story of a small act undertaken by a middle-aged Swedish woman that rippled out in the most amazing ways. It was really inspiring to me because it shows that even small acts of compassion can have really big consequences.

There's a lot more we could explore here, but I was really moved by these questions because they are so meaningful in these times. How do we deal in a dharmic way with the magnitude of what's going on?

The next question: "After years of practice, I've recently been inspired by teachings on being aware of the witness, or knowing the knower. Can you give meditation instruction for transitioning from knowing the breath to knowing the knower, and any words of advice on holding this object of meditation? I feel I can experience it for a moment at a time when renunciation is easy and strong, but surprisingly, even the pleasure of meditation moves me off of it."

Knowing the knower. In recent years, especially, a lot of teachers within the Vipassana tradition have been emphasizing things like resting in awareness or knowing the knower. I'd like to clarify a few concepts and make some suggestions.

First, to clarify: it's not really knowing the knower or knowing the witness. Rather, it's knowing the knowing or knowing the witnessing. Because as soon as we use the language of "knower" or "witness," we are reinforcing the sense of self—the sense of someone there who is knowing, who is witnessing. Do you follow? So we want to move away from the creation of that observer toward the understanding that there is a process of observing, of knowing, of witnessing. That's just another impersonal faculty of the mind. It does not imply a self who's doing it. It's just this process of knowing, of witnessing, of observing.

So then the question becomes: we've clarified that aspect, but how can we settle into being mindful of that process of knowing?

One model for understanding this is recognizing that what we call our lives is really a moment-to-moment pairwise progression of knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. That's what's going on. That's the basic thing happening that is our life. Our life is not something apart from that. This is what we call our life. It's just moment after moment—knowing a sight, knowing a sound, a smell, a taste, a sensation, a thought, an emotion.

The Buddha described this in a very short discourse. He called this "the all." Because just in those six phrases, it describes the totality of our experience: knowing of sight, of sound, of smell, of taste, of sensation, of mind objects. Is there anybody who experiences something other than that? It's pretty interesting. We think our lives are so complex, but it's really only six things that are ever happening.

Sometimes I like to think of it as though our life is a six-piece chamber orchestra, and our life is the music being played. It's just different combinations. Of course, mind objects can cover a lot—thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations of the body—but it's just these six things.

What's really happening moment after moment is simply this: knowing an object, knowing an object, knowing an object. It can be interesting in your practice to see if you can hone in on this experience, because it simplifies things amazingly. And mostly, smells and tastes, except in certain circumstances, are not predominant. So really, it's only four things that are ever happening. Given how we think of our lives as being so complex, I love the fact that it comes down to these four simple experiences. That's just my own particular delight in seeing that.

So knowing an object—these two, the knowing and the object, are distinct but inseparable. For example, the knowing of a sound in a moment of hearing: the sound is the object, consciousness knows the sound, but they are arising together. We cannot separate them, yet they're distinguishable. They're two different aspects of a singular experience—the experience of hearing or seeing.

Let me give you an example of how things can be inseparable and yet distinct. Can you see what I'm holding up? It's just the back of this remote. But when you're looking at it, there are two different things going on: there's the color and there's the form, the shape. These are two distinct things. Color is not shape, and shape is not color. But they're inseparable. The color is in a shape, and the shape has a color. This helps us understand that knowing and object are inseparable but distinct.

When we understand this and we begin to have enough momentum in our practice—where we're not simply struggling to come back to be with the breath, where we've built up a certain momentum and it's kind of rolling along—that's the time when we can really begin to explore these two aspects. It's kind of like foreground and background. In each moment, both are present: there's the sound and the knowing of it. They're both present, but one of them—either the object or the knowing—will be in the foreground of our attention, and the other will be there but more in the background.

In the exploration of knowing the knowing, when there's enough momentum in practice where it's just rolling along, you can choose to emphasize either the object or sometimes prompt yourself: "Know the knowing." It's very interesting to do this, and also to understand that generally the object will be more predominant because it's more tangible. The knowing aspect of the mind is immaterial; it's not a material phenomenon. So it's much more subtle, and generally it's the objects of which we're most aware.

But what's interesting—and this is right out of the classical texts—is that as the object becomes clearer, the consciousness knowing the object becomes clearer. I found this to be true in my practice. As it deepened and the steadiness was there and the mindfulness was present more and more effortlessly, the object got so clear that it's as if that clarity opened up the mindfulness of the knowing aspect.

Are we still together? This is getting into more subtle aspects of the practice, but it's really interesting.

Another way to tune into the knowing—and I've talked about this a lot over the years, so many of you have probably heard me say this a million times—but it really changed my practice. And that is reframing my languaging of what I was doing in the passive voice. Normally we language things in the active voice:

"I'm hearing," or "I'm seeing," or "I'm hearing a sound," "I'm seeing a sight." The passive voice is "a sound being known," "a sensation being known," "a thought being known."

I first stumbled upon this in the walking practice, because it was really easy to do. The sensations of walking were so tangible and effortless. You're just walking, feeling the sensations of the movement. And I noticed: "Oh, sensations being known." The power of that passive voice is that it takes the subject out of it. There's no self involved there linguistically. It's just sensation being known, thought being known, sound being known—and it's all happening effortlessly and spontaneously. Because we're framing it in the language of being known,

that language is kind of a prompt for us to be aware of the knowing. Because we're referring to it in the very way we're languaging our experience. This being known, this being known, this being known. It automatically starts to turn our attention to the knowing aspect, even as we're aware of what it is that's being known.

If you haven't tried this, I encourage you to experiment with it, because as I said, it transformed my practice and made it so much more easeful. There was no longer a me trying to do something. It was just things being known, and it was happening all by itself.

Once you get into that rhythm, you could language it for a little bit until the language is embedded in how you're experiencing it, but then you don't need the language anymore. You're just in that mode of things being known. And then the question arises: known by what? This really directs the attention to an investigation of the nature of awareness, the nature of knowing. It's just another way of dropping into this.

This exploration of the nature of awareness, the nature of knowing, is a very interesting part of our practice. When it feels appropriate for you in your practice, these are certain ways of exploring it.

Someone asked about methods for being aware of awareness, noting that they're finding this difficult. I think it's exactly what I just expressed. I was using the term knowing rather than awareness, but it's the same thing—even though in a philosophical discussion we could get into whether they're the same thing, how they're different, how we're using the term awareness. But for the purpose of experiencing this, everything I said about becoming mindful of the knowing is exactly the same as becoming mindful of the awareness, becoming aware of awareness.

Maybe just one other prompt that could be used—a simple prompt. You're sitting, and you remind yourself to know that you're knowing. Because the knowing is there. It's not something hiding under a rock that we have to find. It's there in every moment, knowing an object, knowing an object. It's always there. And just a simple prompt—know that you're knowing—will direct your attention to that aspect of the process.

Someone else asked whether equanimity is the same as letting go. I would say it's the same as letting go of

reactivity. And in some way, it does imply a mind that is not holding on to any one particular thing, because it's that quality, really, of openness. That's a nice way of understanding the dimension of equanimity—that we're really not holding onto anything at that point.

Another question came in about the relationship of solitude with meditation. I love solitude, or certainly periods of it. Our culture is so speedy, with so much input, and we are just overwhelmed energetically by it all. To have periods of solitude is so healing and so restful. Even when in the solitude—for example, if we were on a retreat, maybe a solitary retreat, a home retreat or wherever—just the silence and the solitude, even when difficult things may be coming up, creates the space for them to come up and out. We're releasing so many levels of tension—physical, emotional, mental. We're giving space for the release of all that.

I think solitude is just one of the most beautiful and perhaps misunderstood or undervalued aspects of a life.

And of course, some people who are drawn to solitude in a big way might go off and live in a cave. There are stories of these great yogis spending fifty years in such practice. But I think for most of us, it's not necessarily that extreme. Rather, it's about having periods of silence and solitude, which serve as such a support for understanding, for clarity, for simply finding some inner peace.

Can you tell I'm giving a plug for it? It might be challenging, but I think it's worth considering. Each of you has your own life situations and circumstances, so you would need to figure out for yourself: Is there a way I can build in some periods of this? Maybe it's half a day, or a day, or a week, or whatever. But I would really encourage you to practice that kind of disengaging from the busyness of our lives. It's a beautiful thing. It's a very poetic space. Our hearts just open, and we become so much more attuned to what's going on.

Where does gratitude fit in with the Brahma Viharas? Well, I think it could be seen as a quality of metta, of loving-kindness. But in a way, it has its own special quality. Sayadaw U Pandita once said that gratitude is one of the most beautiful and rare qualities in the world. All of us have so much to be grateful for in our lives. Even when there are difficulties and challenges, a basic principle of Buddhist understanding is the interconnectedness of everything. Thich Nhat Hanh really emphasized this, using so many examples. If you consider the food we eat and try to trace back all the beings involved in allowing that food to be in front of us, an innumerable number of beings are part of that chain.

When we understand this and cultivate an appreciation and gratitude for the obvious blessings in our lives, it becomes a wonderful practice to express it, even to ourselves. One of the things I do, for example, is the simplest gratitude practice—totally simple. Sometimes I'll go out at night and just look up at the stars and the sky and the immensity of it all. Spontaneously, I'll have this thought, and I'll often say it out loud: "Thank you for the blessings of my life." That's all. It's not directed to any particular being. It's just to the universe. Simply, thank you for the blessings of my life. And it feels so connected and so heart-opening.

I think gratitude is a really beautiful quality to actually practice, in whatever way resonates with you. Don't underestimate the power of it, because it creates a beautiful heart, that particular quality.

May the merit of our time together be shared by all beings everywhere. May it be for the welfare and happiness, the peace and liberation of all beings everywhere.

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