Ask Joseph: A Group Mentorship Program

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:49:55

Good to see all of you.

As Catherine said, we'll sit for maybe just five or seven minutes since there were a lot of questions to get through. So take a comfortable seat. Simply settle into the body, feeling yourself sitting. Maybe take a deep breath or two. Then let the breath find its own natural rhythm. Softening the eyes, relaxing the shoulders. Breathing in, know you're breathing in. Breathing out, know you're breathing out. Be aware of thoughts as they appear in the mind, and simply notice them come and go without getting involved.

There were a lot of interesting questions, and I learned a lot from reflecting on many of them. So thank you for sending them in.

The first question: "In moment-to-moment meditation, I can get overwhelmed by the confluence of thought—like being angry at someone—a physical sensation such as neck discomfort, and then the pressure of trying to note whether something is pleasant or unpleasant. I get lost and just come back to the breath, but I feel like I'm falling short of the moment-to-moment meditation practice. Are there any steps you recommend?"

I think this is not an uncommon situation where sometimes it feels like so much is going on at the same time that it can get confusing, and we don't quite know where to put our attention. A couple of simple suggestions:

The basic guideline for practice and what we should be paying attention to is to become mindful of whatever is predominant in the moment. Even if it feels like many things are happening, the mind will be drawn to one aspect or another. We can just note the predominant object moment after moment without trying to figure it out by ourselves. The mind will automatically be drawn to the predominant experience.

This also points to an interesting distinction. Many of you are probably familiar with the tool we often suggest of mental noting, where we put just a very soft whisper of a note onto the experience as a way of strengthening our connection to it. For example: in, out, pain, tingling, vibration, hearing, thinking—just noting moment after moment. Many people find this helpful either to use throughout the whole sitting or just for certain shorter periods of time to refine our perception.

But sometimes things start happening too quickly, and the noting feels cumbersome and too slow. So it's helpful to make the distinction in one's mind between noting and noticing. The key point is to notice what's happening. You could think of noticing as being a synonym for mindfulness. The noticing is what's important, and the mental label is simply a support for that when it's helpful, when it feels appropriate.

Be with what's predominant. Even when there are a lot of different things going on, one thing will be in the foreground, another will be in the background. And if many things are moving quickly, just settle into the noticing aspect rather than trying to note.

Next question: How to work with a greedy mind? Does anybody have a greedy mind?

One thing to keep in mind is that having a greedy mind or noticing a greedy mind does not mean that we're a greedy person. Sometimes people might conflate those two. A greedy mind really is simply referring to that mental quality or mental factor of craving—the craving for something. That's what the greedy mind means.

Craving in the mind, as most of you probably know, is a deeply conditioned pattern, which is the cause of a lot of suffering in our lives. The Buddha talked of craving as the Second Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth is the truth of dukkha, of suffering or unease or stress. Then he said, what's the cause of that? The fundamental, underlying cause is craving. The Third Noble Truth is the end of craving, and the Fourth Noble Truth, of course, is the Eightfold Path.

Understanding that this force of craving, or greed in this sense, is really deeply conditioned in all of us means it's going to be there for a while. It's said that craving, sense desire, is not uprooted until the third stage of enlightenment. So for most of us, we should make some friends with it because it's going to be around.

How to work with it? Almost anybody who's practiced will have quite a lot of experience with this. First, it's to realize that it is a very strong force. I'll share one little story to indicate how even about something very small, this craving or greed can be so persistent. I was doing a self-retreat in my home, doing walking meditation, walking back and forth, and then the thought came into my mind: oh, a cup of tea would be nice.

Oh, wanting, wanting. I kept on walking. Five steps later: "Oh, a cup of tea, that would really be nice." No, I just saw it, let it go. Another five steps: "Cup of tea, cup of tea, cup of tea." I don't know how long it went on. And I was getting amused by it. But it was really persistent—until at a certain point, "Oh, cup of tea," and I went for the cup of tea.

It reminded me of a blade of grass pushing up through concrete: a really small thing, but with a big force behind it. So it's to understand that and to appreciate the power of this force in the mind, which is why it's so important to begin to get a handle on it, to begin to learn how to work with it in different ways.

One of the ways that I work with it—and I find it challenging, but also very rewarding, even with these simple little desires—is just to take small moments, little moments of renunciation. For Westerners, renunciation doesn't often inspire people. It feels like we tend to conflate it with deprivation. But actually there's a wonderful aspect to renunciation: that ability to see what's there and have the strength to say, "No, I'm not going to do that. No, this isn't so skillful."

In a lot of meditation instructions and environments, there's so much emphasis on the yes. Yes, allow, accept—which is really a key point of the whole meditation practice, to open in that way, to say yes to what's happening. However, the wise no is equally important. And this is not the no of aversion. This is the no of wisdom. It's seeing something arise in the mind and realizing, "No, this is not so helpful, it's not so useful." But I don't think we've exercised the no muscle very much.

I think it's really worth doing, even about very small things, like a cup of tea. And obviously, with things like that, there's nothing wrong with having a cup of tea—that's not the message. But it's the ability to see the force of desire, the force of craving; that's what we're saying no to. And so that's hitting on something fundamental to having a life of greater ease and greater harmony: the ability to say this, the ability to actually have that momentary renunciation.

There are a million situations where we could practice this. A very big arena might be in just paying attention to the patterns of our speech. I see a lot of things arise in my mind. And one particular kind of speech—I mean, in some situations it's obvious to refrain from lying or harsh speech. But one of the places I love to practice this renunciation is in the categories the Buddha talked of as useless speech. When we're about to say something and it's just completely useless, and yet the impetus to just let it spill out—I've found it both helpful and empowering to see it in the mind before speaking and say, "No, I don't have to do that."

One of the benefits of practicing these small moments of renunciation is that it's actually a conservation of energy. And we can feel it. Whenever I can actually say, "No, I don't need to do that," it feels like a victory over Mara, the tempter. "No, I'm not going to buy into this." There is a genuine feeling of empowerment with strengthening that place in our mind.

So these are ways of working with the greedy mind. One other really interesting thing to look at—and this is actually fascinating. When you're going along and you have a desire for something, anticipating the pleasure of it, it's really the anticipation of the pleasure that motivates us to act. It's not even often the thing itself, but the idea that, "Oh, this is going to be pleasurable." And that's why we go for it.

A really interesting exploration would be to look at your mind when that desire first comes and that anticipatory pleasure arises. Make that the object of your awareness, your mindfulness, so you really get a sense of the force that's driving the action. And you can really feel it: "Oh, yeah, that would feel good." Then, after you gratify whatever it is—whether it's a cup of tea or a good meal or whatever the object of gratification is—let's say five minutes afterwards, or ten minutes afterwards, you've had the cup of tea, you've done whatever it is that you were enticed to do. Ten minutes or so afterwards, check out your mind again and compare the difference between your mind before

the action when you're being seduced by the anticipatory pleasure, and watch your mind 10 minutes after you've experienced it. The question you might ask is: does it make the slightest bit of difference?

So often, after I've had the cup of tea or whatever it was, 10 minutes after it's over, it did not bring me lasting happiness. It was a moment's hit—it felt good. And then it's gone, and it really didn't make any difference at all whether I had gone for it or not.

But please don't believe me. I would really invite you to check it out for yourself, because the conditioning of desire and craving is so strong. What I've found is that it's mostly in looking ahead that it's so seductive. When I look back on the fulfillment of many of these little desires, it didn't mean anything. This understanding, based on really looking for yourself—again, it's not believing it as a theory—just taking some interest in your mind before and after. This is simply a way of exploring and working with the greedy mind. It gets pretty interesting because you're working with a very fundamental power, a very fundamental habit of mind.

One could go on. I could go on a long time talking about the greedy mind, but we'll move on.

Here are some related questions: What is the best thing to do when you experience doubt about your meditation experience? Specifically, doubting that your experience of awareness is nothing more than something fabricated or interpreted through a concept you place on top of your experience—similar to how someone might believe in a religious idea such as God or heaven and attribute experiences to that idea because they've read and been taught about it. Another question: What happens when you lose faith in the practice or in the idea of freedom? And finally: Are the benefits of a long-term meditation practice directly proportional to the number of hours spent meditating, or is there a plateau?

All of these questions really have to do with the unfolding trajectory of practice over many years. I know many of you have been practicing for a long time, so you'll be familiar with this. There are many, many ups and downs, as you know. One day the sitting will be great—calm, concentrated, body at ease. The very next sitting can be restless, boring, filled with thinking. It just goes up and down like that.

What I would say is that with all the ups and downs over time, the slope of the curve is going up. After five years of practice or ten years of practice, even though there are still ups and downs, we can see the progress and the deepening of mindfulness and concentration. But it doesn't mean that progress is linear in the sense of just moving upward. It's up and down and up and down, yet the slope is going up.

And then there are times when we do hit plateaus. I've experienced that many times over all these years. We're going along, things seem to be going fine, and then it's like we hit the doldrums, and it just feels like we're going over the same stuff again and again. That's when doubt can arise, and we can get discouraged during these times of plateau in our meditation.

At one time, during my India days, I was on a retreat and I was in one of these places. It just felt like nothing much was happening. I started to get discouraged, judging myself, judging my practice. Then I saw what was going on in my mind, and I gave myself a little talking to. I said, "Joseph, just sit and walk, sit and walk—that's your job. Let the Dharma take care of the rest."

It was a kind of surrender to the Dharma, surrender to the unfolding, knowing that—and I'm going to anthropomorphize this a little bit—the Dharma knew better than I did how things should unfold. If I could just trust that, and do my part, which was simply to sit and walk and sit and walk, it was so helpful. I stopped all the self-judgment, I stopped the doubt. I just sat and walked. After some time, I got out of the doldrums and could feel the practice unfolding again.

So it's important to recognize those times and to recognize the doubts or discouragement that might come up—and not buy into it. We really just need to continue doing the practice and have that trust that the Dharma will lead us onward, which it does. I've seen it in myself and I've seen it in thousands of yogis. So I have a lot of confidence in that.

It's something like—have you ever walked in a labyrinth?

You're going toward the center, and then the labyrinth path leads you away from the center, and then around a little bit, and then toward the center, away from the center. It could well feel that in those times when the path seems to be leading away from the center—uh-oh, what did I do wrong? But really, we just have to keep walking because the path is leading to the center through all those changes of direction. Maybe if you can keep that in mind, it will encourage you just to stay with it.

But then the question is, at those times when we do get caught up in doubt—doubt about ourselves, our ability, doubt about the practice—how do we work with it? Of all the hindrances—desire and aversion and sleepiness, restlessness—doubt is the most problematic. Because with all the others, we can learn how to see through them. If there's desire, okay, there's a certain filter on the mind, but we can still be connected to the object. But when there's doubt, that removes us from the ball field. We're not even playing anymore. We've really just stopped our practice if we don't know how to relate to doubt skillfully.

The image in the texts to describe the doubting mind is so apt. It's described as the thorny mind. When doubt is persistent, it's just like a thorn that keeps jabbing—very unpleasant, very discouraging. Often, if people don't know how to work with it, they give up because of the doubt. But it is very workable if we know how to do it.

The trick is seeing through that very wise-sounding voice in the mind, because that's the voice of doubt. It's very skillful. It's a skillful actor, very compelling. So we believe it. "Oh, this is not the right time for me. Oh, this isn't working. Oh, this and that." And it's talking to us in such a convincing way that we believe what it's saying and we are not recognizing it as doubt. We think it's wisdom.

This is the key point: doubt comes masquerading as wisdom. But if we understand that and we see it, simply by recognizing these different kinds of thoughts of doubt—"I see you. I recognize you as being doubt"—when we can do that, then we're no longer seduced into the belief that what it's saying is true. We just see it as the doubting mind, another thought arising and passing in the moment, and we go on with our practice. It does not have that compelling force in mind, but it takes recognizing it.

What I would suggest for those of you for whom doubt comes up from time to time: see if you can become very precise about the particular kinds of doubt that each of you have. For each of us, the doubt may be expressed in a slightly different way. We have to recognize what our own particular doubting voice is saying, and to recognize it so clearly that you could almost write it out in a sentence. Just as a few examples: "The practice isn't working." Or "I can't do this." Or whatever it might be. Because if we can recognize the doubt really clearly, that helps us to recognize it as doubt. And then we just note "doubt, doubt, doubt," and it has really lost all its power.

Does this seem clear? Working with doubt is really important. If we don't understand it, it can be a huge obstacle on the path. And yet if we do understand it, it is super workable and it's not a problem.

So the next question is really interesting, and it did make me reflect a lot: How do we deal with feelings of self-loathing, depression, and self-unworthiness? How do we deal with shame and guilt? Now we're really getting into some very difficult and painful mindsets and emotions.

So first to say, I am not a trained psychologist. There are dimensions to this that I may not be addressing. But of course, these feelings do come up in meditation, and from a meditative point of view, we can come to some deeper understandings of them and how to work with them.

It seemed to me that the feelings of shame and guilt may be some of the emotions underlying feelings like self-loathing or self-hatred—when we have shame about something or guilt about something. So when I was reflecting on this question, I started thinking about the different conditions that may give rise to shame, and then how to work with those different conditions.

One obvious cause for shame to arise is when we've done something contrary to our own values—we've committed some unskillful action and we recognize it as unskillful. Then just in thinking about it afterwards, we can have this strong sense of shame. The second kind, or second condition, I simply call internalized shame. This is a feeling that may be conditioned from childhood and may have nothing to do with unskillful actions. It's just some unfortunate childhood conditioning, and so we grow up with this internalized feeling.

So how do we work first with the shame that comes from our own actions, when we've done something that has been unskillful? The challenging question in these situations, I think, is to reflect on and ask: what wisdom is to be gleaned from this very painful emotion? And I think this is probably not a question that is frequently asked.

But I had a very strong experience of this. I'm going to share a shame story that goes back forty years, but it's still quite vivid in my mind. I was on my first retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita. I had come to IMS, and as I've mentioned before, he was a very demanding teacher, very formal, with a lot of pressure in that environment. One time I went in for an interview, and for whatever reason, whatever was going on in my mind, I just really exaggerated something about what I was experiencing. He looked at me and said, "That

isn't true."

It was devastating. This great master was basically saying that I had just lied. And I realized that what he said was accurate. I left that interview mortified. There was so much shame and self-judgment. For a few days I was processing this, just going on and on. It is a really painful feeling.

But something really important came out of it, because I was on retreat. After I worked through all the shame and the judgment, I was watching my mind, trying to understand what had just happened. And I realized what was useful in that situation and that emotion for me. First was simply highlighting that yes, what I had said was really unskillful—it wasn't accurate, it wasn't true.

But even on a more subtle level, what was interesting—and this took some days to come to, it was not immediate—I realized that I was glad to have seen that my mind was capable of doing that. Because if you had asked me beforehand, in meeting with a teacher whom you totally respect and venerate, would you ever say something that's not true? Before that happened, my answer would have been: no, that's not something my mind would ever do. Well, surprise—it did do it.

And that was very freeing for me to see, because it cut through a certain self-delusion I had held—that my mind would never do something like that. Because of that delusion, I could have been repeating that same kind of behavior without really acknowledging it, always thinking, "No, no, this is something I would never do." But Sayadaw called me on it. He said, "No, that's not true."

And so the shame that I had revealed something about my mind which was very freeing. Because once we realize that yes, our minds are capable of all of this, then it's easier to keep an eye out for that kind of unskillful behavior. Are you following this? It's kind of a convoluted story, but it was really powerful.

The underlying point I want to make is that as painful as that emotion is, there's a lot we can learn from it. There's a lot we can learn about our own minds. But it's challenging because shame is a particularly painful feeling. More commonly, I think, we're either drowning in it, lost in all that self-judgment, or we're just trying to get rid of it in some way, distracting ourselves from it because it's so painful. And then we don't learn anything from it.

So I would simply suggest—and this is challenging, not easy to do because the feeling is so painful—that there's a great deal of wisdom embedded in that experience. It's reminding us that our actions have consequences. Our actions affect other people; our actions affect our own minds. To have that lesson reinforced throughout our lives—hopefully it doesn't always have to come from shame, it can come from more uplifting reminders—but that fundamental understanding that our actions have consequences is a huge lesson. I think very often we're just going through our lives acting out our conditioning, perhaps not paying as much attention as we should to the quality of our actions. What are the motivations behind them? Are they skillful? Are they unskillful? This is all part of our growth and our greater freedom.

What's also helpful to remember in all this is that our situation is not unique. Unless you were born a

saint, I think all of us have done things in our lives that we're ashamed of—unskillful things that, when we become aware of them in one way or another, naturally give rise to that feeling of shame. Sometimes it may be about something really significant, and sometimes about something that to other people might seem small, but we know and understand that it was unskillful.

As a few reference points from the Buddhist texts: one of the stories from the Buddha's time tells of a man who killed 999 people before somehow crossing paths with the Buddha. Through the magic of his enlightenment, the Buddha got this man on the path, and he eventually became fully awakened. But can you imagine what he was feeling in that period between when his actions were reflected back to him by the Buddha and when he became fully enlightened? There must have been incredible feelings of shame. Then there's the Tibetan master Milarepa—I don't know if you know his story, but before he became enlightened, through some kind of psychic powers he caused the deaths of many relatives who had done him harm.

All of this is to say: hopefully you haven't gone around killing people, but even if that were the case, it's possible to learn from it. It's possible to actually come to a place of freedom. So even though it's challenging, if that feeling is strong for whatever reason, can we see it or understand it as a loud ringing mindfulness bell? That difficult emotion is telling us something about the quality of our actions and the impact they've had on ourselves or other people or both. We can truly transform this painful emotion into liberating wisdom, though it takes considerable interest and courage to do this.

So recognizing that if at any time this emotion is what's happening, see if you can call up that sense of interest and courage. And watch to see that it doesn't morph into what in other Buddhist contexts is called the near enemy of shame, which is the feeling of guilt. These are two different feelings.

I've worked with guilt—not so much in that situation but in others—reflecting on things I had done. At a certain point, again on retreat, it was coming up really strongly in my mind and it piqued my interest. What is going on here? Why is this feeling of guilt so strong? I realized through looking directly that guilt is really an ego trip, because it's saying "I'm so bad"—with an emphasis on the "I." It's just strengthening the sense of self. There's a profound difference in our hearts and minds between guilt and regret.

By saying guilt is an ego trip, I don't mean to suggest we should not take responsibility for our actions, but guilt is not a useful response. It's actually quite unskillful because it merely strengthens the ego self. If instead we can have that transform into regret or remorse—where we're acknowledging what we've done, taking responsibility, but without that self-laceration—then we respond in whatever way is appropriate. If it's possible to make amends, we do it with the people involved. If it's an internal process of asking forgiveness, we engage that. If it leads us to the strength of resolve, "No, I'm not going to do that again"—there's a wisdom in regret and remorse that is simply not present in guilt. I think it's really helpful to begin sorting all of this out.

Now, with regard to deeply internalized guilt that may have come from childhood—this is a whole

different matter, because it's not arising because of something we've done. It's actually arising because of things done to us in some unskillful way. If we can recognize it as such and frame the feeling with mindfulness—seeing it and understanding to some extent where it comes from, coming to a place of acceptance so that we're not fighting or struggling with it—that provides the space for the feeling to arise and pass away. If we're struggling and fighting with it, that actually locks it in.

So if this is a deeply internalized feeling from childhood conditioning, it may come up frequently, but it is still just a feeling in the moment. We can learn to relate to it in a way that is much more spacious. A phrase from a Tibetan teacher encapsulates this attitude beautifully—it just felt so skillful to me—

He wasn't talking so much about shame, but about other emotions. He said, "It's real, but not true." And I thought that really captures it, because we're acknowledging the reality of our present experience. Yes, this is real, and it's not true. And so that's what gives us the doorway to some freedom with it, to hold both. I think that's the balance.

The last thing to say about this—it was a big question with a long answer—is that with this deeply internalized, conditioned shame, it may be that a therapeutic environment could be helpful in really working on some of that early conditioning. So that also is another avenue of approach.

The next question: "My practice starts out with a single-pointed focus on the breath and then a body scan. Then I focus on my whole body at once. I feel a tingling all over my body, which is very calming. If the sensations fade, I refocus and try to stay in this state. Is there something I might be doing to go deeper?"

Well, this is a really important question because it points to one of the most pointed teachings of the Buddha. Whenever I reflect on this or say it, it makes me sit up straight because it's so direct. The Buddha said, "As long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible."

At least for myself, I have a little way to go. Because this conditioning is almost hardwired. Of course we want what's pleasant. Of course we want to get rid of what's unpleasant. This may even be the product of evolution. But as a scientist friend of mine said, "Evolution programs us for survival, not for liberation." So even though it may be very deeply conditioned, if we're considering what frees the mind, this is the point to look at.

And mindfulness is such an amazing quality of the mind that can actually help us relate to these two universal aspects of our experience. Some things are pleasant, some things are unpleasant. This is all of life. So it's not that those two aspects are going to go away, but how we relate to them—that's the essence of our practice.

And mindfulness is really quite amazing. For example, with those nice tingly sensations—yes, they're very

pleasant when that happens in practice. Can we be mindful of them without wanting them to continue? Because that's just a kind of attachment, attachment to the pleasant. In being mindful, we are experiencing the pleasantness. So it's not that we're pushing pleasantness away. It's just that we're not holding on, we're not attached to it. This is a fine line in our practice and in our lives. But it's really worth exploring because it will give you an increasingly deeper sense of the power of mindfulness and how it leads to freedom.

Because when we can be mindful—oh yes, pleasant, pleasant, unpleasant—and we're just open to experiencing unpleasant, coming to that place where it's okay, it's okay to feel unpleasant... but that's not our usual condition. Usually something unpleasant comes and I want to get rid of it. So in some way, this is the essence of the practice.

It might be interesting at times to practice in two ways: either when there's something noticeably pleasant or noticeably unpleasant. Using those experiences as a time to practice, reminding myself, "Pleasant, okay, pleasant. Let me feel it not holding on, just being open, being spacious, letting it do whatever it does." Maybe it'll get stronger, maybe it'll get weaker, maybe it'll disappear. That doesn't matter because what we're practicing is non-attachment. We're not practicing to have certain experiences.

I want to repeat that because it is the key point. We are not practicing for certain experiences, even though we often are. We're practicing for something. But really to reflect: no, what we're practicing is to be free of attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. That's the practice. So we can use these times that are particularly pleasant or unpleasant to practice what is the essence. But we have to remember and call to mind what the essence is, because it's very easy to be seduced into thinking that a pleasant sitting is a good one and a painful sitting—oh, I just had a terrible sitting.

Or if we were sitting in some kind of bliss or ease and somebody asked, "How was your sitting?" we'd say, "Oh, my sitting was great." That's our usual way of assessing our experience, and it's incorrect. I feel like I'm pounding this home a bit, but it is the essence of it, so I wanted to emphasize that.

Not holding on to pleasant sensations.

These next few questions are going to require another long response because they touch on something central to the Buddha's teachings and to liberation—something with so many subtle aspects.

One person writes: "I have practiced mindfulness meditation intermittently over the past two years. I really struggle with distancing or freeing myself from the concept of self. Any suggestions?"

Another asks: "How do you balance knowing yourself—life story, abilities, traits, interests—and deepening insight into non-self? Our culture really emphasizes self, especially for career. How do you balance self and not-self?"

And then: "What's the difference between knowing the walking and walking without the 'I'?"

As we all know, just like attachment and aversion, the concept of self is really deeply conditioned. You could go up to anybody on the street and ask, "Is there a self? Do you have a self?" Everyone will say yes. This is our normal way of living and understanding things. Of course there's a self. So that concept, until we're quite far along the path, is going to be there and it's going to be strong—this view of self.

The first thing to say is that even when we hear the teachings about non-self and it's not really clear to us, or it's a little confusing, or we hold it up as an ideal, we shouldn't struggle with it, because the struggle just entangles us further. The idea is to take interest in it and to begin to understand both what it's referring to and how it's created. How does this concept of self come to be if it's not there in the first place? That's an interesting question.

The term "self" is simply a designation, a word for something. It's pointing to something. The self is not a thing in itself—it's pointing to something. So then the question becomes: what is it actually pointing to? When we use that term, which we do conventionally speaking, and I'm not suggesting we stop using it—it's convenient—we have to ask, well, what is that term actually referring to?

In the Buddhist context, it's pretty simple. The term "self" is a designation for the changing mind-body process. And of course, the whole of meditation is the exploration of this mind-body process.

Just like the term "river" is a designation for the phenomenon of flowing water between banks. It's the flowing water that the term "river" refers to. And that river is not a thing in itself apart from the flowing water—it's just a referent.

Or a rainbow. I've used these examples often. A rainbow appears in the sky, beautiful. We all love to see a rainbow. But what is a rainbow? A rainbow is an appearance arising when certain elements of air and light and moisture come together in a certain way. The appearance is there, and we all have the experience of rainbow, but rainbow is not something in itself. It's just an appearance arising out of conditions.

So the question really becomes: how does this concept of self come to be? And more importantly, how does the felt sense of it arise? That second part is really crucial, because we will feel like there's a self, right? It's not just some abstraction disconnected from our experience. So how does this felt sense of something that's not really there come about?

And also how the concept of self can be useful, because it is useful at times.

So the simplest way of seeing how this felt sense of self comes to be—and I'm sure you've experienced this many times in your practice—is that there's a flow of mind-body experiences: thoughts and feelings and emotions and sensations. In any moment when there is an identification with the object, so a thought arises in the mind. The thought is impersonal. But a thought arises, and for almost everybody there's this almost automatic identification with the thought. "I'm thinking. My thought." So this process of identification is its own process. The process of identifying with something is itself selfless. However, that

process is what creates the felt sense of an "I." I'm thinking. I'm hurting. I'm happy. I'm sad. All of these experiences are impersonal, arising out of conditions. And yet, because this process of identifying with them is so habituated, over and over again we're just creating this felt sense of an "I."

This is not hard to see, at least occasionally. Just notice when you're sitting—notice the difference between the experience of being lost in a thought and being aware that a thought is happening. Being lost in a thought is when we're identified with it. Being aware that a thought is happening is seeing the impersonal nature of the thought. We're just sitting and aware, and a thought arises and passes away without any identification at all. That will give you an immediate sense of the difference, an understanding of how the felt sense of self comes to be and how we can be free of it. And we have countless thoughts during the day, so there are endless opportunities to practice this.

There's another way to see how the sense of self is so deeply, deeply conditioned in us. Take the walking meditation. When we're walking, just feeling the movement and the touch—this is an experiment for you to make, and I hope you'll do it because I found it to be very revealing. You're walking, and even as you're being mindful of the movement and touch, see if you notice a very subtle overlay of an image of foot or leg. It's not in the front of the mind. It's just—I don't know the right word; this may be the wrong word, but it's coming to mind—diaphanous. Just something that is barely there, but there.

I've noticed this. When I'm walking, I'm feeling the movement, but somewhere in the mind is this subtle overlay of this image or concept: foot or leg. When that's there, it's a very easy step—almost an automatic one—to "my foot, my leg," and right there the sense of self is back. Foot and leg belong to me.

One way to contrast the experience of walking in a selfless way with the experience of walking when there is this subtle overlay of that image and concept—and then all of a sudden, foot, leg, my foot, my leg—is when you're walking to frame the experience in terms of the elements that the Buddha talked about. In those days, in Buddhist language, they spoke of earth, air, fire, and water elements. They're really just shorthand for different experiences. Air element is movement or pressure. Earth element is hardness. We use earth element, air element as a shorthand pointing to those experiences of hardness, of movement, of softness.

What I found in walking—I just started making the mental note for some periods of time—I would just be noting "air" or "air element" as I moved, "earth element" as I touched. Air, earth, air element, earth element. And it was really striking, because unlike the notion of foot or leg, it's very unlikely that our mind would say, "my air element, my earth element." Our mind doesn't go there. And so then we're dropping into the impersonal nature of those sensations. They're selfless. It's just arising out of the conditions of the body and the movement and the touching the ground. Completely impersonal. No "I," no self is involved at all. And it's pretty dramatic. It doesn't take years of practice to experience it.

We don't have to have any exceptional amount of concentration. It's just remembering to make that shift in how we're experiencing, how we're framing the experience. This can be really helpful.

Very recently, just in the last week or so, I've been reflecting on a way of understanding why the sense of self is so incredibly seductive. The world is running on that concept. Mostly everybody is just moving through their lives centered around the sense of I, the sense of self. So I was trying to give expression to the whole Buddhist teaching—and this is really key to the Buddhist teachings on awakening, on freedom—understanding selflessness. Why is it so seductive?

I was reading this book that I just happened to come across, and I only got to the first few pages. It's a book on what is called complexity theory and the unpredictable nature of emergent properties. Now you can see why I only got to a few pages. But it really was pointing to something for me.

So what does emergent properties mean? It means that when you have a collection of elements, these elements in working together create something greater than the sum of its parts. We can take many different examples. Just take the example of a car. The car is made of all these many, many parts. If you laid them out on the ground, there would be no car—it would just be these pieces. But you put the pieces together in a certain way, and the emergent properties of a car emerge: the fact that you can get into it and drive someplace. You could never tell what those emergent properties are from just looking at the parts. But in coming together, all of a sudden there's a new level of experience.

This is where it all ties in. When I read that, I thought, "Oh, the sense of self is really describing the emergent properties of the basic elements of this mind and body"—the physical elements, all the mental qualities, consciousness. These are like the parts of the car. These are just the elements of what we call self. And the elements by themselves, if we laid them out, would not constitute what we recognize as being a person. But when they are working together, as they are in our lives as human beings—these basic elements of physical sensations, mind states, consciousness—when these basic elements come together, the emergent property of what we call self arises, of who we recognize: "Oh yeah, that's who this is." So self in this way is a designation for the emergent properties of the basic elements.

There's a great little story of Nasruddin, who was this Sufi teaching figure—wise man, crazy man, fool—and there are lots of stories about him. He went into the bank one day, wanting to cash a check. The bank teller says, "Well, show me some identification." He's looking, and he doesn't have any. Then he pulls a mirror out of his pocket, looks at it, and says, "Yep, that's me."

That's what we do. We recognize the emergent properties of the basic elements as being self. So on that level, it's real. The self is real because it's describing what has emerged from the working together of all the elements.

What's interesting, though, is that this concept of self describing the emergent properties does not tell us anything about the basic elements which have gone into it. And it's on the level of the basic elements that we see impermanence, that we see the dukkha aspect, the unreliability aspect—which is not necessarily apparent when we're using the idea of self to describe the emerging property of how we move through the world.

There's a phrase that I've used very often in the teachings. It comes from a Tibetan teacher who says, "The self is real, but not really real." I think it's pointing to these two levels. The self is real as an emergent property of the different elements, but it's not really real because when we drop into the experience of the elements in themselves, we see the selfless, impersonal nature of it all.

Why is that important? Because when we see the underlying reality—just the changing, impersonal, impermanent nature of the sensations, thoughts, emotions, feelings, everything, all of those basic elements—it begins to weaken our attachment to them, because we see that they're constantly changing. From that experience, then, as we're living our life in the realm of emergent properties, going through life as a self and as a being—which on that level, those concepts are fine—but having understood the elements which gave rise to them, we can live that life with a lot greater freedom and a lot less suffering, because we're not attached to it.

That's why this belief in self is so seductive—because it does refer to something, but not to what's fundamental.

The next question touches on such deep things of life and aging and death: "I've been meditating for decades and have a daily practice. At age 85, I am experiencing memory loss and have been recently diagnosed with Parkinson's and mild cognitive disorder. I find myself more anxious in general and trying to adjust to the losses I confront—moving to assisted living and giving up my independence, giving up driving my car, no longer as active in my artist community, no longer painting as I once did, the loss of connection with my husband who has severe dementia, and being present with the impending loss of my own mind and, to some degree, my body. My question is, how can I use my practice to address this? How can one use the mind to deal with the losing of the mind? How do I accept such tremendous loss with grace? How do I address the anxiety when I'm too overwhelmed to sit for long?"

As I was thinking about this and reflecting on the whole process of aging and decline, a few different reflections came to mind.

First, to really stay present in the moment, especially at this stage—where it looks like the intensity is looming on the horizon, but the full experience has not yet arisen. I think it's really important to stay present with one's actual experience and watch the thoughts that come and trigger fear or anxiety. Because in the moment, things might be okay, reasonably okay. But then certain thoughts come, anticipating what's coming, creating this whole story and scenario in our minds. Depending on the particular kinds of thoughts—and there could be a wide range—some could be looking at the situation with clarity and balance, just figuring out what the next steps are. Or certain kinds of thoughts could trigger tremendous fear. That's not helpful. It doesn't resolve anything and just creates a lot of suffering for ourselves in the present moment.

So it's really helpful and interesting to watch how thoughts trigger emotions. This happens not only in the situation I just described but throughout our lives. This relationship of thought to emotion is really

fascinating to observe. The thought may be about something that is not actually happening in the moment, and yet just having the thought can create powerful emotions of distress.

If we can catch the particular thoughts that trigger fear, that trigger anxiety, and see them—"Oh, this is just a thought, this is just a thought now"—and come back to the actual present experience, that's a first step in this whole process.

In the larger picture, as we might be looking ahead and seeing what could happen, I think it's really helpful to remember that certain parts of the mind may show decline while other parts do not. It's not a universal move toward decline.

Let me give you a few examples. I had one friend, a few years older than myself, who I think had Lewy body dementia, and so was in cognitive and physical decline. It was very clear to him and to his family and friends. But what was so interesting—and he was a longtime practitioner and teacher—was that even when in so many areas of conversation you could see the decline, as soon as we started having a Dharma discussion, it was like that part of his mind came alive. We would have this really clear communication. It was just so interesting to see that the mind has different—I don't know if "parts" is exactly the right word—but different capacities. And it may be that some capacities decline and others don't.

Let me give you another example.

There was a very well-known Cambodian monk named Maha Gosananda. He had done amazing work in Cambodia after the Pol Pot horror, leading peace walks through minefields to try to address all the landmines that were there. So he was doing amazing work, and his main practice was metta, loving kindness, throughout his life. Over the course of his life, he had so cultivated this quality of metta.

I remember one time I was teaching at Spirit Rock in California, and he came to visit. He was already in quite an advanced state of cognitive decline, not really connecting on that level. But his whole being was radiating loving kindness. He was luminous with love, even though his mind, on the cognitive or intellectual level—you could really see a lot of that was gone. But there was this whole other part that was just so incredibly beautiful and connecting.

I think it's important to recognize this: that even as we see limitations and decline in one area, it doesn't mean that it's necessarily the whole of our being. There are other aspects, and we might want to really explore that even before there has been a great degree of cognitive decline. Just to reflect: what are the qualities that can still be here, that will still be here? And cultivate them.

In a way, in looking forward to where our aging process leads—we're all in the queue; this is just what happens—it would be really helpful to grow our capacity to look realistically at what we can do and what we can't do. Because we will be losing different abilities. For each of us it will be different, but for sure, at a certain age, for almost everybody, we will be losing capacities, whether physical ability or mental ability.

I think it's really helpful if we can come to an acceptance of the fact that this is going to happen in one way or another, and just have a very realistic view: I can do this now, but I can't do this. It's similar to how we might adjust to some physical disability, where we just can't do what we used to do. We recognize that and say, okay, this is the situation. I can do this and not that.

With a certain amount of reflection on all this, and practice of awareness and honesty with oneself, I think it's possible to go through this decline—in one way or another—with a sense of grace rather than struggle. We each have to find our own way. Obviously people have their own unique situations, and some may be more challenging or less challenging. But I wanted to put some of these ideas out as a general framework.

In terms of working with the fear—as we look ahead and see what might be coming down the road—the fear of change, the fear of impermanence, comes from our attachment to things staying a certain way. The fear is not inherent in the change itself. The fear arises because we're attached to it being a certain way. To me, this is a very important understanding because it gives us agency over our own suffering. If the fear were inherent in the changes that take place, that would be unfortunate. But in fact, the fear arises because of attachment in our mind to things staying a certain way. That's something we do have agency over.

We can practice being with even difficult situations. As I was saying earlier, if there's aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible. Now, I'm not suggesting this is easy. With really challenging situations, it's challenging to ask: Can I be accepting of this? Can I be with this without struggle? This is how it is. This is a powerful practice.

Even if it's difficult to sit for long at this stage of life, it's almost like one's whole life becomes a sitting. Whether you formally sit or not—of course, if you can, it will definitely be helpful—but just bringing mindfulness and awareness and interest and investigation to the experience we're going through. As I say, it's universal. It's what we all will go through. To learn how to be with it, to practice being with it—I think it's a tremendous challenge, but also a tremendous opportunity to really live in these last years of our lives with a lot of grace and peace. It's a very rich arena of practice and understanding.

Let me just take another few minutes, and I think Catherine will read some of those questions.

This person writes, "I really enjoyed the discussion about emergent properties and the self, but I'm wondering what happens if we are attached to the emergent property itself rather than the underlying fundamentals."

I think mostly we are attached to the emergent property. I think that's where we get caught, because it's in that emergent property. It's like from those basic elements, what emerges is the being that we are. And so we're going from the level of elements to the level of a functioning being operating in the world, and this is our life. I think that's where the sense of self is so strong.

Going to the level of the elements, it's on that level that it's easier to see the impersonal nature of them. As

I said earlier, we can begin to notice that process of identifying with a thought or identifying with an emotion. That can be pretty obvious to us in our practice as we're being mindful. Whereas it's not so clear or workable to deal with the self on the level of the emergent property, because what has emerged is that sense of a being.

And that's why the meditation, by going to the elemental level and seeing how we identify with various things, can then, as we're operating in this world as a being, as an individual being, we can do it with that deeper understanding. We can live on this level of being with less attachment because of our insight on the elemental level.

Another question comes in. This person writes, "Why is guilt a near enemy of shame? Could you elaborate?"

I used that term "near enemy" loosely because I haven't actually come across the term near enemy with reference to shame and guilt. Usually that term is referred to the different Brahma-Viharas, like the near enemy of mettā is attachment, or as I said last week, the near enemy of equanimity is indifference.

I was using that term, which I didn't find in the text, but it seemed analogous because guilt could be conflated with shame. If we're ashamed of something, it's almost like just half a step to feeling guilty about it. "Of course I should feel guilty—look what I did." But that's missing the point that it's a different feeling than shame, and that the feeling of guilt is unskillful. Even though shame is unpleasant—more than unpleasant, it can be painful—it doesn't make it unskillful. When it arises from something we've done that was unskillful, shame can actually be a wholesome mind state, even though it's really painful. Whereas guilt is unwholesome, it's unskillful.

I was trying to make the distinction and to see that from the feeling of shame, when it does come from something we may have done, a much more appropriate frame would be regret or remorse. And even just in those words, can you hear the difference emotionally between guilt and regret? It is a very different quality. With regret or remorse, there's some space there to work with it and respond in an appropriate way. Guilt—we just get locked into this self-laceration. It's not helpful and it's a lot of suffering.

When I was working with guilt, and when I really first saw it as an ego trip—in the Buddhist texts, Mara represents the embodiment of delusion, and often the phrase "Mara, I see you" is used when you see through something. So when I saw guilt as an ego trip, I developed this technique of wagging my finger at Mara. "Oh, Mara, I see you." And it was very freeing. I'm not going to get hooked by this guilt. But there was regret and remorse, and then I dealt with that.

This next person writes, "How does one thrive in a community of people who do not practice and live a harmonious life with others while continuing to practice without feeling isolated?"

It doesn't need to be a problem, so don't make it a problem. Everybody has their own interests, their own way of how they want to spend their time and what they want to do.

I think the more important question or consideration would be whether, in the community or family or whatever group of people one is involved in, there's a basic support for us doing what we want to do. A kind of respect for our choices. If you're the only one who's meditating and other people aren't interested in it, that's fine. But are they being supportive of your interests, just as you can be supportive of theirs?

And it may be that once they see the glorious transformation of your life, they might be inspired to learn about it a little bit.

I'd be very careful about thinking that one needs everyone in one's circle to be doing the same thing we're doing. It's nice when that happens, but I don't think it's necessary.

There were quite a few questions from people wanting to know how to find a teacher when they live in an area where one isn't available. This comes up often, and I think what's best—and it's really possible these days since so much is offered online—is to do a little exploration through listening to talks. Most of you probably know Dharma Seed, which has thousands of talks from different teachers. Explore a little bit and see who you resonate with, or a few teachers you might resonate with in particular.

Then you could look for any online offerings they may be giving, because a lot of teachers now are doing things online. Or some teachers—not everyone—but some are willing to engage in one-on-one interviews. If there's a teacher you particularly resonate with, perhaps do some online retreats with them or different programs, then reach out and inquire whether they do one-on-one interviews or not. Even when living in a more isolated place, thanks to Zoom, a lot is being offered. It might be worth exploring.

I really appreciate your questions. I spent a fair amount of time going through them and reflecting on them, so I learned a lot from the process. I hope some of the responses were helpful.

One last thought: there were many questions specifically about different elements of practice. As you know, I've been teaching a long time and have a ton of talks on Dharma Seed covering a whole range of topics. If something is coming up for you—how to work with sleepiness or doubt or so many other things—you could go on Dharma Seed under my talks, or any other teacher's, sorted by subject. Then you would get a full talk on whatever topic interests you. That's a resource you could really avail yourselves of.

Thank you all. This has really been a pleasure, and we'll pick up next year.

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