

Concepts and Reality ("Big Dipper")

Dharma talk by Joseph Goldstein 4/12/88

...What does it mean, "selflessness?" It seems like there is an "I." There are two things, which cover or mask or hinder our understanding of selflessness. The Buddha talked of it in terms of different kinds of perception of solidity. One kind is the solidity that comes from continuity of things. So, for example, we hear the sound of a bell. And when we are not paying very careful attention, we hear the bell and we hear that sound as one thing, as one experience, because it is changing so rapidly that unless we pay careful attention we don't see that one sound as actually a continuous process of vibration arising and passing. It is covered by that illusion of continuity. Or we take a step or we reach for something--if we are not paying careful attention the movement seems like one unit, one experience.

Suppose you are outside and you are looking in the distance and you see this black line on the ground. At first it just looks like perhaps a string or a stick. And then you move a little closer and you see this string or stick is beginning to move. Well, maybe it is a snake. But it is still seen as one unit. You come a little closer and you see that it is not a string and it is not a stick and it is not a snake. But actually, it is a line of black ants--separate ants, distinct ants, one right after the other. But unless we get close enough, we do not see the discontinuity. And when we get in even closer we can see even what the ants are carrying. Close attention breaks the illusion of solidity of continuity.

The other kind of solidity which masks our understanding of selflessness is called solidity of combination. That is, in our experience there are many things of a composite nature joined together, and unless we can observe closely enough to see the component parts, all we see is the composite aspect of it. The most meaningful example of this, the one that is most essential for us to penetrate and understand is this composite nature of mind and body. When we take this, this experience of mind and body, to be a self, an "I," a "Joseph..."

Let's do a little experiment, just to show you how much interest there can be in just the smallest details of things. Just hold up your hand for a moment. And very carefully, just bend your finger, very slowly. It's a miracle that it bends! How does that happen? To ordinary perception, what is going on is that I am bending my finger. There is a finger, and it's mine and I am bending it. So there is this whole sense that there is a composite "I" that is at the center of this, who is doing this, who has it, who owns it.

When we look carefully at this whole process of bending the finger what do we find? We find that first there is the desire in the mind to bend the finger. Without that wish in the mind, the finger does not bend. You have probably never seen a corpse bend their finger. There is no mind there, there is no will, there is no intention, there is no volition. That is a component of this whole process, that desire, that volition to bend. Ok, because of the volition, there is an impulse and there is an actual bending which takes place. What is the experience that you have? How carefully can you feel what is happening? There may be a little stiffness, there may be a little heaviness or lightness, maybe a little vibration. When you look carefully, there is a progression of changing sensations. And so what we have called "I am bending my finger," which is the surface of things, all of a sudden we find that there is no "I," there is no mine, and there is no finger. There is a desire, there is a mental phenomenon, there is an intention which comes and goes and then there are all these changing sensations. Through careful observation we go past the realm of appearance to go past this illusion of the solidity of combination, the compositeness

of things, and we see actually what is happening.

Because of this solidity of combination, we get lost in a whole proliferation of concepts and ideas. You can see in this one little example how many concepts come from not seeing clearly: concepts of finger, of hand, of arm, of body, of "my body," of self, of "I." This whole world of concepts comes because we are viewing the surface of things, we are viewing the appearance of things. And so vipassana and the real development of wisdom is to go beyond the realm of appearance. When we are trapped in the world of concepts, what happens is that we think things that are there that are not actually there. Go up to anybody on the street and ask "Do you have a finger?" Anybody would say "Yes." And that is the conventional wisdom; and for the sake of convention it's fine, and for the sake of communication it's fine; but it fools us, it deceives us into thinking that that is the reality and it is not the reality, it is a mere convention. We get lost in this realm of ideation and we take that to be substantial.

What keeps us from a deeper realization are our attachments to this world of ideas. We have gotten very comfortable in this reality. And for the most part it seems to describe our experience well enough. But actually it is like living in a world of shadows. It prevents us from seeing the true nature of phenomena. It prevents us from seeing the selfless nature of things.

So what are some of these concepts that have trapped us, have seduced us, that so dominate our lives? They are common, common ideas we have. One is the concept of time. We have created an idea of past and future and we live our lives burdened by this concept. When we look very carefully and we observe carefully what the past actually is, what do we find? We are sitting in the meditation hall minding our own business, watching the breath, and all of a sudden thoughts come up--thoughts of past memories, recollections, remembrances, and we put a concept on them, we create a concept "past" and apply it to this whole category of thought. And then with the great skill of mental gymnastics, we take this concept of past which we have created around this particular category of thoughts, we take this concept of past and somehow toss it in back of ourselves someplace as if the past is a reality back there from which we are coming. But really, what is it? It is just a thought in the present moment. How else can you ever experience the past except as a thought or an image right now?

And we do the same with the future. When we are sitting or walking and these thoughts come and...planning--how many plans do you have? Lots! And we sort of create from this proliferation of the planning mind, we create this idea, we create this construct of "future." And then again we sort of toss it out ahead of us as if the future is a reality which we are going to march into. But the only way we experience it, the only way we touch it is as a thought in the mind. Do you see the difference in the way we can live our lives when we see it for what it is?

If we are taking these concepts, if we are empowering these concepts with this heavy duty reality of past and future, it is HEAVY! And how many of the dramas, even the most intense dramas, the heart wrenching dramas, how much of that has to do with taking something that is actually a thought or feeling in the mind and creating a whole past around it or creating a whole future around it? The thought or image in the mind is very light, very light, like a bubble. It just comes, and it is there for a moment, and then it goes. But what we do with it! No wonder we get tired. It is a tremendous relief to actually see, to see clearly, just what this whole idea of past and future is. And you see how it works; this concept works so strongly in conditioning our present reality.

You can see it in a very simple way on retreat--you know, there are probably times when you are doing sitting or walking meditation and a thought comes: "Five more days; I'll never make it." You know, you start counting how many more liftings [of your legs while walking]

there can be and it just seems endless, and you get depressed and discouraged. That whole mood has been created by a thought. It is a thought of the future. If you see that simply as a thought-- "Oh, a future thought"--there is no conditioning there. But when we don't see it for what it is, when we take the future as some reality... that is heavy. And the reverse might be true, maybe your practice is in a wonderful space, everything is going really well, and you think "Only five more days; I wish I had three more months." And that is a whole different kind of feeling. Our concepts condition how we are experiencing the present moment; because we do not see them for what they are, they delude us.

Concepts of time also play into our interpersonal and social relationships. This story I read in *Psychology Today* was about discussing time and how different people relate to time. Some time before their marriage, Prince Charles and Princess Di were visiting the King of Morocco. They were paying a social call, and they went into the throne room to see the king and they were kept waiting for about 15 minutes before the King came in. And they were quite upset by this. Later, on at the time of their marriage, they did not really want to invite the King to their wedding but they felt they had to, so when they invited him they sent a note asking the King to please be on time. This was related to the advisors to the Moroccan King and they could not understand why anyone was upset. They explained that the King was never late--when the king arrived, it was time. Very different notions of time!

Take a look carefully at this particular construct in the mind. Whenever you feel there is a burden, a heaviness, a weight, take a look to see if in some way or other it's connected with an investment in this concept being real--whether we have gotten lost in the idea of past, or lost in the idea of future. There are many other concepts which condition our experience, which mask the nature of things.

There is a concept of self-image or role or image of others. I was practicing in Australia this last time; I was doing some walking meditation outside by the parking lot where the cars are parked. I was walking back and forth and I happened to notice there were a lot birds hopping around. And one car had a chromed bumper. And I noticed this same bird every day, every time this one bird walked under the bumper of this one car, it glanced up and saw the reflection of the bird in the chrome. And it kept flying into this bumper, hitting itself and getting knocked down, flying into it, hitting it and getting knocked down, flying into it and getting knocked down. And I was watching, and it did not do it once or twice or three times, it did it for a long time. We do the same thing. We are bumping into these images we have created.

Another time when I was practicing with a well known teacher, and I was doing some walking meditation outside, and I happened to look up at the window and saw the teacher standing, watching me while I was walking. I started walking a lot slower, stood up straight, tried to look very mindful. I was walking back and forth, and I looked up again and he was still there. And I could not imagine why he was watching me. And after about a half hour more of this, I looked a little closer and I realized it was a lampshade! My guru the lamp shade! We create all kinds of suffering!

There are endless stories of these kinds of images that we create. Another kind of concept that is very strong is the concept of ownership; we have the idea that own things, the idea of possessiveness. We own a house, we own a car, we own a piece of land, or "my" husband, "my" wife, "my" children. Even our language it is such an important part of how we communicate, this idea of "my" or "mine." What do we mean by this? What does it actually mean to own something? What does it actually mean to own a piece of land? You can put a fence on it, you can build something on it, or dig into the ground, but what actually does it mean? The concept

does not have anything to do with the actual relationship to that piece of land. That is something outside of the concept, and yet we are so strongly attached to it. Just imagine how you would feel if you came into this hall and someone else was sitting on your zafu [meditation cushion]. It has happened on retreats, and it is a major trauma! A zafu!

And the Buddha spoke of how it cannot even be said that we own this mind and body. If you owned it, you would be able to say "Ok, thoughts, no more today." And if you owned it, you could do that. And if you owned the body, you could say "Ok, no pain during sitting meditation." One of the meanings of annatta or selflessness is that things are ungovernable, they do not happen according to our wish, they happen according to the laws which govern the process. So when conditions are there for the pain to be present, the pain will be present. When the conditions are there for it to be gone, it will be gone. The body gets older, it gets sick, it dies; we have no control over it. This idea of ownership, of possessiveness is just an idea and it has its uses. Like all these other concepts of image and time and ownership they all serve a purpose in our conventional reality, so I am not suggesting we throw them out. I am suggesting that we see them for what they are so they do not burden our lives and so they do not mask the deeper truth.

This concept of age, gender.... how old are you? 35, 45, whatever. When you are just with the breath, when you are just feeling the breath go in and out or rising or falling, how old is the breath? How old is the pain in your knee? Age is just a concept which serves on a particular level, but when we get down to actual reality of what is happening we see that it is totally a concept.

Are you a man or a woman? We are one or the other--on a certain level. On another level, is your thought male or female? When you hear a sound is that masculine or feminine? There is another whole level of reality where these narrow identifications that we have, they begin to fall away, there is an underlying unity, a commonality to experience. But we get so trapped; we get imprisoned by our concepts--concepts of time, of ownership, of possessiveness, of gender, of age.

The most fundamental concept, the root one, the cause of all the trouble is our attachment to the concept of self. Just like all the others, this is a construct of the mind. We have created this idea of self, of "I", and we live our lives as if it is true. And as long as there is an "I," as long as there is a self, we have to protect it, we have to defend it, we have to gratify it, we have to aggrandize it, we have to negate it, all kinds of things we do revolving about an idea.

If you take a torch with a flame on top of it and you whirl it around very quickly, it appears as if there is a circle of fire. And it seems like the circle has a certain "entity-ness" to it; it is a thing, this circle of fire. But there is actually no circle of fire. It is just this moving very, very quickly. This mind body process, the elements of thoughts and feelings and sensations and sights and sounds, are happening so quickly that it creates a picture of the self, a picture of "I," and until we can refine our awareness enough to break through this solidity of continuity and this solidity of combination, until we can actually see what this process is moment to moment, we are lost, we are imprisoned in this particular concept or idea. And it is a tremendous burden.

Another way of understanding this concept of self... Later tonight go outside and look up at the sky, and if you are familiar with the constellations at all, you will see the Big Dipper. A nice big collection of stars. This is the mid-retreat exam now. I'm going to ask you a question: is there really a Big Dipper? There is not. There is no Big Dipper. There are some points of lights which we call stars, and what we have done, we have taken out, we have separated out, one particular group of points of light, and we have put a concept on it: Big Dipper. What is a very interesting experiment to do is to go outside, look up at the sky and see if it is possible not

to see the Big Dipper. It is very difficult. When you have become so conditioned to see patterns in a certain way, to have these concepts so strong in our minds, it is very difficult to simplify our perception to see just what is there.

In exactly the same way that the Big Dipper is a concept, the idea of the self, the idea of "I" is also a concept. What we are is a constellation of changing elements of mind and body and then we put this idea of self on it. A teaching that Jack Kornfield mentioned the other night speaks very directly to exactly this understanding. He said "We live in illusion and the appearance of things; there is a reality, we ARE that reality, when we understand this we see we are nothing, and being nothing we are everything. That is all." We live in illusion and the appearance of things: we live in a world of concepts, our own mental constructs. There is a reality and we are that reality, when we understand this we see we are nothing. Being nothing, we are everything; that is all. This is what our practice is about--coming out of the illusion and beginning to touch what is actually true.

What is the reality that he is talking about? The Buddha described it in a very beautiful and simple way. He described four aspects of reality in such a way that we can see the truth of experience without the concept of self, that that concept is something extra and burdensome.

The first reality which we can experience directly is the reality of physical elements--in the breath, in the body, in movement, in the physical world outside, we see, we hear, there are certain sensations that we actually experience--the heat, the cold, the vibration, the pressure, the warmth. And so, a direction for our practice is to go from the concept of hand, or arm, or leg or body, from the idea "I am moving; I am walking" to the reality of "In lifting, what is going on?" This lifting, this pulling, this stretching --that is real. "I am lifting my leg" is a concept. So all this emphasis in the practice to touch directly physical sensations is a powerful force bringing us to a deeper level of understanding.

The second reality which we can touch, which we can experience, is that of consciousness. Consciousness means that faculty which knows different objects. We know a sound, we know a sight, we know a sensation, we know a thought. The knowing in the mind is consciousness. Now this is very subtle because even when we can begin to understand that the physical world, the physical elements are changing, we often fall into the view that there is one consciousness which is observing it all, that "I am the witness; I am the observer." That is what the self is, the one who is knowing this. It is at this point that penetrating the solidity of continuity is so important. The reason that we take consciousness or knowing to be self or "I" is because we are not yet perceiving that consciousness itself is arising and vanishing many, many times a moment. It is not one thing; it is not a single state. It is not something we are born with and stays with us until we die. And as the meditation progresses, as your observing power becomes refined, there is something which I call NPM's, which is "notings per minute." In the beginning, the NPM's are quite low. Maybe there are 5 NPM's or 10 NPM's. As the observing power gets stronger there are 30 NPM's, 60 NPM's, a 100 NPM's. We begin to see things happening very, very quickly. And at a certain stage in practice there is the actual observation of consciousness itself arising and vanishing with each new object. And so the sense of "I" being the observer or the witness totally disappears. There is no permanence; there is no solidity in that at all.

So there are material elements, there is consciousness, and there is another whole group of experiences which are a reality we can touch. And that is a group of mental qualities; they are called mental factors, and they arise in every moment of consciousness and color that moment of consciousness. So for example, we hear something. There is hearing of a sound-- the sound is a material element, the hearing involves consciousness. In that moment of consciousness perhaps

anger is there--we don't like it; or desire is there--we do like it; or mindfulness is there--we are noticing it. These are all qualities of mind, factors of mind, which condition or color the consciousness. What makes this so interesting to observe in the practice is that we begin to see that greed arising in the mind has the nature to stick to the object. But it is not "I," not self, not mine, it does not belong to anyone. Greed is a factor in a particular moment, arising in that moment, coloring that moment and passing away. Anger arises in the mind. It has a particular function. It condemns. Anger is not "I," is not self, does not refer back to anyone. It is an impersonal quality arising and functioning and passing away. Generosity, love, wisdom, are all faculties of mind. They arise, they color things in a particular way, and they vanish. There is no self to be found.

So then one might ask the question "Where does this idea of self come from?" If what this is, what we call self, what we call life, if what it actually is upon direct observation is a constellation of physical sensations and moments of consciousness and different mental factors, how come this belief in self is so strong? The idea of self arises from the working of a particular mental factor and it has a very appropriate name. The name of this factor is "wrong view," and the function of "wrong view" is to identify either with the object or the knowing of it. So for example, thought arises in the mind and we are not mindful about thought, and "wrong view" is present, the whole feeling of it is "I am thinking; this is my thought." And when we are mindful of it, thought arises and there is a simple noting "thinking, thinking," not "I," not mine, not self, it just comes and goes; it is no problem at all. The self or "I" as a concept; is created by this factor of mind which identifies the things, claiming things as being "I" or mine. The great power of mindfulness, in every moment of mindfulness, is that "wrong view" is not present. And so in every moment of noting simply what is there--a thought, a feeling, a sensation, the breath--in every moment of clear mindfulness we are actually freeing the mind from this concept, this strongly conditioned concept of self. And as one Sri Lankan monk very accurately put it "No self, no problem."

The last reality--there are the physical elements, there is consciousness, there are the mental factors arising in various combinations--the last reality which we can touch and which is the most subtle and the most difficult to comprehend is what the Buddha called nirvana, the unconditioned, the unformed, that which is beyond this process of conditioning, this mind/body process. Imagine you are in a room, and all of a sudden a refrigerator that has been humming loudly in the background suddenly goes off. What is your feeling about that? Usually it is a feeling of relief. We may not have even known that it was humming along, but in the moment of its going off there is a quiet, there is a peace. Nirvana is like that peace.

Our whole practice is to free the mind from those mental factors which cause suffering--that is, those factors of greed, of hatred, of ignorance, of "wrong view." In every moment of awareness we are actually purifying the mind of those particular factors; they are not operative at that time. Even at a time when, for example, you may be experiencing anger, notice the difference of being in the anger, and noting the anger. In that very moment when you are noting--anger, anger--in that moment, the mind is not angry. There is tremendous power for purifying and transforming this process of consciousness, and as we come to a place of greater balance, of less reactivity, as we free the mind from this greed and hatred and ignorance, what happens is that the mind comes to a place of great balance and great equilibrium out of which the opening, the unconditioned can take place. And that moment of realization has tremendous transforming power in our lives. It uproots from this stream of consciousness this strongly held personality belief of "I" and self. And so our whole relationship to this mind, to the body, to other people, to

the world, is transformed.

The practice is very profound. It is easy to forget that as you go from sitting to walking and you wonder why you are doing it. Every moment of clear awareness is taking us on this path to the deepest kind of freedom.

Let's sit for a few minutes...