

# A Simple Turning in Place

## Forty Years in the Dharma

Joseph Goldstein

*At a program held at the study center in September 2008, Joseph Goldstein was asked to reflect upon his long experience with meditation and the Dharma. These words have been extracted from that presentation.*

**M**y first real inquiry into any kind of spiritual dimension happened when I was a freshman in college. I became obsessed, as only a college freshman can, with the effort to figure out whether or not God existed. My mind was filled with it, day and night. It felt like my whole life depended on coming to some resolution of this great question. I felt so deeply that if I knew God existed, my life would look one way, and if not it would look quite different. Then after a couple of weeks of this inner questioning, something happened—unfortunately, I can't now remember what (perhaps it was an upcoming exam)—and the intensity of the question seemed to fade away.

### Early explorations

Then, in my junior year I was taking a course in Eastern Philosophy and reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the great Hindu classics. As we read this text, one line just jumped out at me: "...to act without attachment to the fruit of the action."

I did not really know what this meant, but there was something about it that resonated deeply. I think it was some intimation of the whole notion of non-attachment as a spiritual path. I had come from a really small town of about a thousand people in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, and non-attachment was not something that was spoken much about—in fact, not at all. So for me it was a completely revolutionary idea.

Many years later, I heard the Dalai Lama expand on this core teaching, but with more subtlety and depth. He said the true worth of an action is not measured by its success or failure, but by the motivation behind it. Mostly in

our culture, actions are measured only by their outcome. Here was the Dalai Lama pointing to something else entirely, which was the importance of the motivation guiding the action.

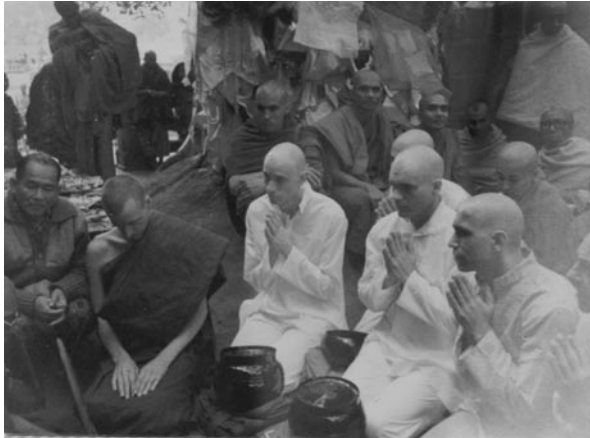
We all know we can not entirely control the outcome of our actions. There are just too many different influences—other people, society, politics, economics. We may decide to do something and engage in it with great passion; but if we are overly attached to the outcome, it is going to be a setup for suffering. One of the few things we do have direct access to, however, is insight into and purification of our motivation. Is it based on generosity, on good will, on wisdom, on compassion? Or is it based on self-referencing, on greed, on anger, or aversion?

Judging from myself and people I know, I think we assume that most of our motivations are pretty good. But we do not often stop to examine them. Motivations are subtle, sometimes mixed, and often hidden. We may not be as saintly as we feel ourselves to be. Although we may have a whole series of mixed motives, if we are not lost in or identified with them, we can let the unwholesome ones go and act from what is skillful. Before we speak, what is the motive? Before we give something, what is the motive? This is a core theme of how we practice in the world. There is a Buddhist saying that "Everything rests on the tip of motivation."

### Turning inward

Later in my college career I was riding on a subway in New York City, and there was a group of young people on the subway car who were in one of the first Peace Corps training groups. This was 1964 and there was a lot of excitement about this new vision of service. I got to talking with these people and I invited them back to my apartment. After three and a half years of school, I was ready for some adventure. I applied to go to East Africa—I had this Hemingway-like vision of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and living in the

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but there was a whole system for doing it!***



*Joseph at ordination in Thailand*

African bush. But karma intervened, and the Peace Corps sent me to Thailand instead. In retrospect, I'm very grateful.

It was in Thailand that I received my first real introduction to Buddhism. I started going to discussion groups for Westerners led by two monks, one English and one Indian. I was fresh from studying philosophy in college and my mind was full of ideas; I asked so many questions that some people actually stopped coming to the group because of that. Finally, perhaps out of desperation, one of the monks said, "Why don't you start meditating?" This was the first I had heard about it. Being in Bangkok, meditating at a Buddhist temple—it all seemed very exotic. So the monks gave me some beginning instructions, I got my paraphernalia together, and I sat down, setting the alarm clock for five minutes.

Quite surprisingly, something happened. Not some great enlightenment, but the revolutionary (for me) understanding that there was a systematic way to turn the attention in upon the mind, instead of just using the mind to look out at the world. It was a simple turning in place, but it seemed astonishing. Can you remember that moment for yourself when you had the first direct glimpse of the mind itself? Not only could I actually watch my mind, but there was a whole system for doing it! I was so excited I invited all my friends to watch me meditate. And now, more than forty years later, I'm still doing it.

While I was in the Peace Corps, I taught English at a school in Bangkok. After a year there, I decided to undertake a literary project, to read all of Proust's *A Remembrance of Things Past*. It is a massive book, in many volumes, and it took me almost a year to get through it. The last part of the book is about the nature of time, the theme that prompted Proust to write his masterpiece. Perhaps I had been prepared in some way by having read those thousands of pages, or perhaps it was the rudimentary beginnings of my meditation practice, but when I got to the end I was really struck by his insight that the past is in the present, that the way we experience the past is as a thought or feeling—a memory—in the present.

In that moment of understanding, somehow the mountains of past and future fell off my shoulders. Those of you who have done meditation practice know how much of our time we spend in the past and future, not only in meditation but throughout our days. Thoughts of past and future are running our lives, because we ascribe to them a reality that in fact they don't have. They are just thoughts arising in the mind. When we see this, they become quite light. So it is a tremendous opening, really seeing into the nature of how we experience time.

#### Discovering the power of thought

Thought is one of the most fascinating and seductive aspects of our lives. How many thoughts do you think in a day—fifty thousand, a hundred thousand? What is so amazing from the perspective of liberation is that we rarely pay attention to the nature of thought. Mostly we are just lost in them. They create different feelings and emotions in us, they move us to act or they don't move us to act. We are being driven in our lives by this torrent of thoughts, sometimes loud, sometimes very soft, completely conditioning our lives. Here is where we can appreciate the amazing power of mindfulness. The English word, "mindfulness," is pretty prosaic. But if we can connect to the quality of mind it is pointing to, we begin to get

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a sense of its tremendous power. Mindfulness means really noticing, paying attention to what it is that is arising moment to moment.

When we bring mindfulness to thought a revolution takes place, because we begin to see that there is a way of being aware of thoughts arising in the mind, rather than simply being lost in them. The idea is not to stop thinking, but to see the difference in your own experience between being lost in them and being aware of them. Be mindful of the difference between when you are lost in thought, and that moment of waking up from being lost.

That moment is critical. Most people awaken and say “Oh, I was lost again, what a terrible meditator I am.” They just get involved in self-judgment, which is simply being lost again—such judgment is really useless. We all get lost in thought many times a day, but insights arise when we highlight that moment of waking up. Delight in it. Honor it. You are already aware in that moment. And as many times as we notice we are lost, that many times do we awaken.

Thoughts in themselves have no power at all; the only power they have is what we give them when we don't know them as thoughts. When we recognize them, we have a choice. Do I want to continue that pattern? Is it skillful, is it wholesome, is it for my well-being, for the well-being of others? Is it not skillful, is it unwholesome? And most of all: Can I let it go?

### Experiencing zero

Right at the end of my Peace Corps stay in Bangkok I was sitting in a garden with a friend who was reading to me from a Tibetan text. We were both getting interested in Buddhism, and as he was reading, my mind was becoming very concentrated. Then the text went into a very liberating understanding, at the heart of many Buddhist texts, describing the very nature of mind itself: The mind is unformed, it is without color, without shape, it is like space, unborn—look into your own mind. And in one moment of hearing the word “unborn,” the mind suddenly opened to what might be called the unborn nature of the mind.

Afterwards, when thinking came back, I characterized this experience to myself as “Oh, that was like experiencing zero.” This “zero” is simply using numbers as a metaphor. If you think of “one” as being self, this zero is the unborn, the unformed, the unarisen. Now when we hear the words, “It felt like zero,” for many people that might not seem appealing. Who wants to be zero? There is a mathematician named Robert Kaplan who wrote a book on the history of zero, with a wonderful title: *The Nothing That Is*. When I saw that title, I knew I had to read the book. The first line of the book captured what that experience was about: “When you look at zero, you see nothing. Look through it, and you see the world.”

So this experience of zero, or the unborn, transformed the way I was seeing the world. It deeply undermined the conventional view of self, of “I” or “me.” This process of seeing and understanding selflessness, or *anattā*, is one of the jewels of the Buddhist teachings. At first, it was a little disorienting, because in my mind I kept saying, “There is no me, there is no me, there is no me.” But then, who was getting on the plane to leave Bangkok after two years? And somebody still had a lot of things to do.

The great lesson here is that at different times in our lives we all may have transforming experiences of one kind or another, something that has turned our mind in a certain way and opened us to other possibilities. For me, the lesson was so powerful that it inspired a tremendous enthusiasm for continuing the practice and for going deeper.

I came back to the States after the Peace Corps, having had this transformative experience, but I had no idea what to do. I tried to practice by myself in several places, trying to recreate that experience— not a very good idea!—but I was just getting more confused. At a certain point, I realized I needed a teacher, and decided to go back to Asia.

### India

Some friends of mine had been in India, so I thought I would stop and see them on my way back to Thailand. But after spending time

in various ashrams in India, I did not find any teachings that resonated. I went back to Delhi, thinking I would get a ticket to go on to Bangkok. But then, something quite unusual happened. As I was walking down the street to the airline office, some force just stopped me from taking the next step. I was really startled; nothing like that had ever happened to me. So I turned around, and decided to stay in India, going first to Benares and then to Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment.

In Bodhgaya, I met a teacher who had just come back from about nine years in Burma. His name was Anagarika Munindra. He was just beginning to teach vipassana [insight meditation], and within a few days of meeting him, he had me totally hooked. He said, "If you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it." That's all. There was nothing to join, no big philosophical system; it just seemed like common sense to me. Sit down and observe the mind. So I spent most of the next seven years in India doing just that, sitting and walking.

Munindra-ji was my first Dharma teacher, and he did not fit my image of a Dharma teacher at all. He was a little guy, dressed in white, moving quickly, and very engaged with life. In the bazaar, he would be bargaining for peanuts with the vendor, and really getting into it. One time I asked him, what are you doing? He said, "The path of Dharma is to be simple, not a simpleton." The other thing I appreciated was that he was tremendously open-minded about the Dharma. He was a very curious person himself, and his curiosity translated into an openness with his students. There are many gurus in India teaching all kinds of things. Munindra said, "The Buddhadharma doesn't suffer in comparison to anything, so go, explore, see for yourself." His unwavering confidence in the Dharma inspired me tremendously. I think we can trust that; we don't have to hold tight to our particular vision of things.

After his meditation training in Burma, Munindra-ji did six years of intensive study of the texts, so he was a great scholar as well as a meditation master. He said he did that study because he did not want to rely on other people's



*Joseph and others with Munindra*

interpretations; he wanted to read the Buddha's words himself. He could recite long passages in Pali. I really learned the value and importance of study from him. When we study, it expands our understanding not only of our own experience, but of what is possible.

After Munindra-ji, I studied with Sri S.N. Goenka. As informal as Munindra was, Goenka-ji was pretty formal. When he was in the room, you could feel a powerful presence. Courses were more formal; he would come in and everyone would bow. At first I watched all the projections and comparing in my mind: "I didn't have to bow to Munindra; why do I have to bow to Goenka?" It was all just my mind, making this stuff up. By the end of the first retreats with Goenka-ji, I was very happy to bow.

At that time I also studied with Dipa Ma, who was a student of Munindra's in Burma. She was an extraordinary woman. She had a lot of suffering in her life, very early on. She lost her husband and two of her three children, bringing a huge amount of grief that she said almost killed her. At that time she was encouraged to go to one of the monasteries in Burma. Within weeks, she had attained to high stages of concentration, and advanced stages of awakening. She was one of my greatest inspirations in practice.

Dipa Ma was a small person, but her heart was vast. When you were with her, there was a feeling of profound peace and stillness, combined with the most amazing love. One

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person described her hugs as being surrounded by “her great, vast, empty heart, with room for the whole of creation.” Her inspiration for me was an intimation of what is possible.

### Practice in Bodhgaya

There are Buddhist texts that describe the perfect meditation space: secluded, peaceful, away from villages, good food. The place I was staying in Bodhgaya, the Burmese Vihara, was exactly the opposite: it was on a major road, with buses and trucks going by all day long, and opposite a public water tap, where the village women came to



*S. N. Goenka*

wash their clothes. In the surrounding villages, they had loudspeakers that often played Hindi film music day and night. The food was really poor. I was sleeping on a wooden rope bed about five feet long (I am well over six feet). The first few weeks there I didn't even know enough to get a mosquito net.

And I loved it. I had so much gratitude for that place, which honored meditation practice. I had the feeling that I could be there for the rest of my life. The Buddha talked about how our meditation is like swimming upstream. When we find places that support that, it is a tremendous blessing.

There are some few people who concentrate easily, but I was not one of them. I would sit and meditate, and basically be lost in thought for an hour. Of course, one advantage of that is the hour goes quickly. I also found that I could not sit cross-legged for even five minutes; it was just too painful. So I started sitting in a chair; but since I am tall, even normal chairs are not that comfortable. So I put the chair on bricks, put cushions on the chair, and then put

a mosquito net over the whole thing. It looked a little like a throne—or a shoeshine stand.

I was really embarrassed when one of my teachers would come in. But it worked. That remains my mantra: Does it work? Even though it was weird looking, I found a position that allowed me to settle down and be at relative ease with the body and learn to concentrate a bit.

### Mettā

During one of my brief visits back to the States while I was in India, I saw the film *Charlie*, based on the book *Flowers for Algernon*. It is about a guy who is mentally challenged, and then has an experimental operation, becoming quite brilliant as a result. After some time, however, this effect wears off and he



*Joseph with Dipa Ma*

returns to his former state. The film shows how people related to him at different times, often with a mocking cruelty. When I saw this movie, I recognized different unwholesome patterns in my own mind, times when I had been unkind; as a result, when I went back to India, I asked Munindra to teach me mettā, the meditation on loving-kindness.

After about two months of cultivating mettā intensively, I was really happy. I had never experienced such happiness. My heart was so full of loving feeling that I thought this was

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the way I would spend the rest of my life. But conditions change more quickly than we can anticipate.

As I mentioned the food in the Burmese Vihara was poor, so I had bought some extra fruit which I kept on a shelf just outside my room. At that time there was a Nepali man at the Burmese Vihara who was studying with Munindra-ji. This man had brought a little servant boy with him from Kathmandu to help cook his food. One day, as I was sitting in my room practicing mettā, “May all beings be happy and filled with love,” I heard a rustling by the shelf. The very first thought in my mind was, “That kid is stealing my oranges!” Then, “May all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful.” I went back and forth between these two thoughts, and the contrast was so absurd it was revealing. And it turned out that the whole scenario was a total fabrication of my mind. There was no one outside my room at all.

With practices such as mettā, we may be in places of bliss and happiness for a time, but very often they reveal the shadow side of our minds as well. Carl Jung said, “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure however is disagreeable, and therefore not popular.”

Sometimes the big developments on our journey can come when we are just slogging along. I had been in Bodhgaya for quite a while, but had reached what felt like a plateau in my practice, and it all just felt flat. It is very discouraging when this happens; it is not an easy time to practice. But it is a time when we can really learn what Right Effort is. The Buddha talked a lot about Right Effort, but what he said is easily misunderstood. It is often interpreted as forcing, or struggling, or straining, which does not help. Right Effort is more about staying relaxed, staying open, and just persevering.

I remember telling myself at those times, “Joseph, your job is to just sit and walk. Just surrender to the Dharma.” I learned I could let

go of expectations, let go of wanting. When I did, the practice got a lot smoother, because then I stopped judging myself. Self-judgment and self-doubt are among the biggest obstacles on the path.

### **Naropa & catching the wave**

After about seven years, mostly in India, I was having back problems and decided to come home. This was 1974. I had no idea what I was going to do upon my return. After a cross-country trip in a back-of-the-truck camper, I ended up at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. This was like a Buddhist Woodstock. Trungpa Rinpoche, Ram Das—whom I knew from Bodhgaya—and thousands of other people interested in Buddhism converged on Boulder for that first summer session of the Institute. The energy around Buddhism, Eastern philosophy, religion and meditation crystallized there, and it was a tremendously exciting and invigorating time.

The whole vipassana scene in the U.S. really emerged out of the interest generated that summer. People started setting up retreats in different places—in California’s Sequoia National Forest, in British Columbia, in South Carolina, and Wisconsin. It was like catching a wave. After a year of going around the country teaching ten-day and two-week retreats, in 1975 we taught the first three-month retreat in Bucksport, Maine. That was followed by ten years of steady teaching, riding the wave of enthusiasm for learning insight and mettā meditation. But after many retreats all over the world, I felt that something was missing, although I was not sure what it was.

Then in 1984, I was teaching in Australia and happened to see the Winter Olympics on television. You may recall that at the 1984 Winter Olympics Torville and Dean became the highest scoring figure skaters of all time (for a single program), receiving 12 perfect 6.0s. I was in an open and receptive state of mind, and somehow that idea of perfection—in any field—and the training it required, inspired me to do more practice.

**Compassion is the activity of emptiness, the expression of selflessness.  
They are not two separate things.**

These moments when we are motivated to take stock are important. What do we most value? With work, jobs, family, it is easy to get caught up in the busyness of our lives and avoid asking that question. What do we want to accomplish? What do we want to do with our lives?

The idea of taking extended time off from teaching for practice was a little scary. I had these thoughts—quite ridiculous as I look back on it now—that if I stopped teaching no one would want to come to retreats anymore. But the urge was strong, and from that time on I have taken one to three months each year for intensive practice. That is when I first sat with Sayadaw U Pandita, when he came to Barre for three months in 1984.

Sayadaw U Pandita, as you may know, is a very demanding teacher. We slept only four hours a night and had interviews six days a week. Although he manifested great compassion, he was not into psychological coddling. I once told him that going to an interview with him was like going to the dentist. In his next public talk, he said in his deep and sonorous voice, “Some yogis [meditators] think that coming to see me is like going to the dentist.”

Sayadaw was very clear about what was going on in our minds. He saw the defilements arising, and he would reflect this back to us. But often I would feel judged, and then judge myself for being a terrible yogi. A while later, something shifted, and in one interview when Sayadaw proceeded to list all the defilements in my mind, I just started to laugh. I saw, “Yes, that’s what’s there, all right.” It took a while, but when I was eventually able to let go of feeling judged, I could also let go of self-judgment. When you get to that place in your practice, it is a huge opening. When we stop judging ourselves we actually delight in seeing what is in our minds, even the negativities. We would much rather see the defilements than not see them. It is a kind of joy, which is why I could laugh when they were illuminated.

### Confluence of traditions

I sat many retreats with U Pandita in the early 1990s and really learned a great deal about watching my mind without judgment. But then I had that feeling again, that there was something I had not quite integrated. At that time, Lama Surya Das, who was a friend from my time in India, was studying with Tibetan teachers in Nepal. He introduced a few other friends and me to some of his Tibetan Dzogchen teachers—Tulku Urgen (father of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche), Tsoknyi Rinpoche, Mingyur Rinpoche, and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, another great Dzogchen master. Later, Nyoshul Khen came to New York State for a two-month retreat at Dai Bosatsu Zen Center. So here is a flash point in American Dharma: a group of mostly vipassana students doing Tibetan Dzogchen practice at a Zen monastery. That was symptomatic of one of the movements of One Dharma in the West—a movement of an emerging Western Buddhism, where people learn from various traditions.

At the retreat at Dai Bosatsu Monastery, Nyoshul Ken gave a talk on relative and ultimate *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta*, in Sanskrit and Pali, literally means “awakened heart.” It refers to that aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all beings. Relative *bodhicitta* is that compassionate aspiration. Ultimate *bodhicitta* is the understanding of emptiness, the wisdom side. I had experienced the value of each of these, but I was missing the understanding that put them together. This is exactly what Rinpoche said in his talk. I then understood on a much deeper level that compassion is the activity of emptiness, the expression of selflessness. They are not two separate things.

The more we understand the selfless nature, the more compassionate we are. The more compassion we have, the less self-reference there is, so we understand the empty nature better. Then Dharma practice really begins to feel integrated. We can practice this compassionate emptiness. We can practice it in a Burmese house, in a Tibetan house, in an American house—it does not matter. The nature of the Dharma is the same.