*Tricycle Talks*
"Tired of Pretending to Be Me"
Episode #59 with Joseph Goldstein
June 9, 2021

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**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Not too long ago, I attended an online retreat with Joseph Goldstein, cofounder and guiding teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. I'd sat with Joseph on retreat before, but what really struck me this time were the repetitive patterns playing out in my mind and body, whether it was getting lost in stories and caught up in self-judgment or simply being distracted by physical pain, all pretty common experiences on a meditation retreat. Today, I sit down with Joseph, who recently emerged from a three-month silent retreat himself, to ask him questions that have been at the top of my mind. In today's episode, we're going to talk about the value and challenges of long retreat, the wisdom of investigation and curiosity, and why we need to make more room for joy and humor on retreat and off. At the end of our conversation, Joseph will lead us in a brief mindfulness meditation to reground ourselves in the present moment.

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**James Shaheen:** Hi, Joseph.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Hey James, good to be here.

**James Shaheen:** So you just emerged from a three-month retreat not too long ago. A lot of people think, "Wow, three months." What's the value of an extended retreat like that?

**Joseph Goldstein:** Right? So I've done many of these longer retreats over the years, and they're helpful in a couple of ways. One is it gives time for the concentration to build. There are some people who just have an innate ability to dive deep into concentration, but that's somewhat rare. So for most of us, it takes time from wherever we're starting to actually deepen the concentration. A long retreat allows for that. In addition, I found that, by having a longer retreat, it takes a little bit of pressure off the mind. Instead of rushing to get someplace because I know I just have a limited amount of time, the longer retreat I find allows my mind to settle back in a

more relaxed way and let the practice just unfold. Of course, not everybody has the opportunity to take a long retreat, and so to some extent, the same rhythm will happen within a shorter one. It just happens in a more obvious way in a longer retreat.

**James Shaheen:** One of the things I notice on longer retreats is that, after a bit, I'm no longer leaning into the next experience, as you often describe it. That sense of rushing has an opportunity to subside, and then you begin to realize, "I'm rushing all the time." That's one of the many values that's had for me.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yeah, I think that expresses it well, because a lot of the practice, and this is something that may not be emphasized enough, is relaxing back into the moment. Rather than it being a kind of grabbing at the moment or striving in an unskillful way, it's from relaxing back into the moment and letting things unfold and being mindful with that unfolding. So that's hitting the right balance when we can find it.

**James Shaheen:** I hear somebody sent you lox and bagels and cream cheese and cheesecake and all of that.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yeah, James, thank you.

**James Shaheen:** Do I get merit for that?

**Joseph Goldstein:** Oh, absolutely. Lots of merit, especially since I was on retreat.

**James Shaheen:** My merit account was on low, so that really gave me a boost. You said something in the retreat you gave shortly after you got out of your own retreat, you talked about an experience I wanted to ask about. You said at one point that you felt this moment of maybe not dejection, but of being down on yourself and asking yourself, "What am I spending my time doing?" or that sort of thing, the way we get. You, on the other hand, came out of it pretty quickly. I was wondering if you could say something about how you came out of that state of self-judgment, self-recrimination that we often fall into, especially if there aren't others around us to boost us.

**Joseph Goldstein:** I'll just give a little background to that feeling. So as I said, it's a home retreat. I set my own schedule, and one day, I found that, for whatever reason, I was just frittering away some time, and then, at some point, I realized that a little self-judgment came in. It wasn't a big, heavy thing, but it was noticeable. So I saw my mind in a little bit of a down mood because of that, there was some element of suffering in that, in the mind—that kind of contracted feeling. But then I realized—and I've seen this before which perhaps was one reason why I could tune into it quickly—I saw that the story of the down mood was really a manifestation of what in Buddhism is called "conceit."

Conceit, in the Buddhist sense, is not just feeling you're better than everybody else. It's any comparing of oneself with others, or judgment of oneself as being really great, either an inflated view or a deflated view. So in this case, it was a deflated view of "Oh, I'm so bad because I did this." That's exaggerating a little bit, but that was the tenor. And what was interesting is that I was lost in the story about having wasted a little bit of time. And then, instead of being lost in the story, as soon as I recognized that it was conceit—in the Pali language, it's called *mana*—as soon as I saw that, "Oh, this is just *mana,* this is just the conceit of 'I am'"—and in this case, it was "I am" in a negative way rather than a positive way. But as soon as I recognized the defilement behind the suffering or the unease, oh, it's like in the Buddhist texts, often when people see an aspect of their minds that are unskillful: "Oh, Mara, I see you," Mara as the embodiment of delusion or ignorance. And so here was conceit trying to capture my mind to reinforce the sense of self. "Oh, I am this way." And as soon as I reckon, "Oh, man, that's all it is," it was like, "Mara, I see you, you know you're not going to fool me anymore." And in that moment, the whole thing just dissolves and I was just back in the moment watching things unfold.

I think there is a really critical point here: that when the mind is suffering, it's always suffering because of some defilement in the mind, some aspect of craving or aversion or anger or delusion or conceit, something's going on in the mind that's causing the mind to feel that suffering. For as long as we stay in the story about it, it just goes on and on. As soon as we are mindful of the defilement causing it, right in that moment, we can disidentify with that and get into a relaxed state again.

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**James Shaheen:** In the last retreat you talked about what in Pali is known as *papanca*, or the proliferation of thought. Many of us often walk around in a fog telling ourselves stories. In the '80s, there was this song called "Dreaming of Me." It seems very much like a lot of what we do. And you talk about three tendencies that drive this proliferation of thought. Could you talk a little bit about those?

**Joseph Goldstein:** The three tendencies are at the root of so many of these thoughts, which are just creating our inner world. The first is craving or wanting. The second is conceit, the basic conceit of "I am," I am this way or that way. But the very notion of "I am" creates a lot of mental proliferation in our elaboration of that. And then the third quality in the mind that is part of the *papanca* is wrong view. Basically that means the wrong view of self, that there is some abiding core, unchanging me behind the whole process to whom it's happening. And of course, the great gift of the Buddha—enlightenment and our own growing understanding of it—is beginning to intuit and then realize more and more deeply the selfless nature of experience. So those are three tendencies, and they play out in different ways.

**James Shaheen:** So when you talk about wrong view, or this pretty entrenched view that there is a self as we ordinarily think of it, why is that so different from "I am," and how does it relate to craving?

**Joseph Goldstein:** Wrong view is the belief in the sense of self, so it's a view that we're holding, and views when they're deeply held can be very hard to see through. The Buddha pointed out that when a view is strongly held, particularly when it's wrong view even in the face of evidence, it's not going to move people because they're just holding on so tightly to their view. We see this now playing out in the political realm, you know, a lot of strong views about a lot of different things, and often even in the face of evidence to the contrary that doesn't really move the dial at all. We see it in the whole response to vaccination. Many people have very strong views about it. So this is the belief in self. This is a view that most of us have as human beings, very deeply conditioned. And this is the bubble that the Buddha burst in his enlightenment in showing us the way to see through it. So craving and conceit are more ways we're relating or experiences in the moment. Are we relating to a particular experience, with desire, with craving, with greed, with

wanting, or are we identifying with what's arising? Are we claiming, you know, thoughts and feelings and the body, "This is who I am?" So in that moment of identification, it's a process that's happening in the moment, whereas wrong view is kind of the underlying belief.

Just one more perhaps interesting point here is that at the first stage of awakening, you know, enlightenment comes in stages, and so at the very first stage, wrong view is uprooted. It's like that's characteristic of the breakthrough at that first stage of enlightenment. So we have uprooted the view of self, but the tendency for craving and conceit, they're still there. They're not uprooted until later stages. But having uprooted wrong view, we can begin to see craving and conceit themselves as selfless. So even though they're operating because they're deeply habituated, they're like strong habits, we begin to see them in a different way.

**James Shaheen:** I was listening to the talks again that you gave shortly after you came out of your three-month retreat, and you said something to the effect that we shrink from suffering but love its causes. And I have been thinking about that. And so I took as an example craving. And I remember once, a Thai forest monk asked me, "If I could snap my fingers just like that and you would be free of all craving, what would you say right now?" And I hesitated. I wasn't able to imagine myself without wanting things, and that frightened me. And another thing I always remember, and I think I talked to you about this once, is that when I was a child, I noticed that adults did not have toys. So I said to my mom, "When I grow up, will I still want my toys?" And she said, "No." And I thought, I don't want to grow up. I mean, the thought of not wanting my toys. . . . And so, even early on, we're identified with these cravings as sort of a support for our sense of self. Can you say something about that?

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yeah, so I think that's a really great observation. There's one way for us to really develop some insight into that, and maybe after one more long retreat, James, you'd have a quicker, more immediate answer to that question, because one of the things that I find really interesting in practice, in meditation practice, is to really pay attention to those times when there is desire in the mind, there is craving for whatever. It could be craving for a great meal or a perfect relationship or whatever it is. So we're in this kind of fantasy in the mind, if we're meditating, we have this craving or desire arise in the mind, and we often associate desire with

pleasure, you know, especially desiring something that we think will give us pleasure. And so we associate the desiring mind itself with pleasure. But what's really interesting and insightful in meditation is when we watch the desire in the mind when it arises, and we may be noticing, you know, desire, desire, desire, and then at a certain point it will go away, because everything changes. Everything arises and passes away. It's very illuminating to watch that moment of transition going from the moments of wanting and desire just to that moment when the desire disappears, and to pay attention right there. My experience has been—and also that of everyone I've spoken to about this who's looked at this—as soon as the desire disappears and we're watching the feeling, the tone of our mind or the quality of our minds, it feels like a huge relief. It's like being let out of the grip of something. But before it left, we didn't even know we were in the grip of it. But we were, and we were thinking that it's pleasant. But as soon as it leaves, all of a sudden the mind becomes more relaxed, more spacious, more open. So we begin to see that the non-desiring mind, the mind at rest, the mind at peace, is actually much more enjoyable than the mind filled with craving.

There's just one more piece here that I think is important to say. In English, we use the word "desire" in a variety of ways, and this can sometimes be confusing for people, because we might say, "I have a desire to become more loving," or "a desire to become enlightened," or "a desire to engage in social justice movements." That's a very different usage of the word desire than the way we're using it now, because in English, desire has many meanings. You know, it can mean aspiration. It can be a wholesome wish for something. The desire we're talking about, the desire of craving, really has to do with greed, just so people understand and don't get confused by the use of that term.

**James Shaheen:** One of the great things about retreat that I've noticed is that if I reach for my phone, it's not there, so I have no choice but to think about not only that impulse but that desire to get information or make contact or get some sort of stimulation. So I have no choice but to watch that come and go because there's no phone.

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**Joseph Goldstein:** Have you noticed at all the difference in your quality of mind when you were being pushed by the desire, and then when you realize, "Oh, it's not here"? Did you find your mind relaxing back?

**James Shaheen:** At first, I experienced disappointment the first maybe ten or fifteen times. And after a while, I started to wait, "Wait till that happens again." And it happened a few more times, and then it disappeared, you know, the way it does. I was thinking, once, when I was on retreat, it was in 1996 I think, I was up at IMS (Insight Meditation Society), you and Sharon Salzberg were teaching a retreat, and I had this pain in my back, and I tried to sit every which way to get rid of it, but nothing worked. So I decided to actually do the practice, actually follow the instructions and follow the pain. And it's solid, it's fixed, or no, it's not, it's fluid. It burns, and now it's sharp and now it's dull. And I got so into it, and I got so interested in what was happening. And then it went away, and I was waiting for it to come back so I could learn more about it. So that's one of the interesting things about retreat. You're in the crucible. There's nowhere to go.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Exactly. And sometimes, if pain is strong but tolerable, it can actually be a good object to concentrate the mind, because the mind doesn't wander much, right? Of course, sometimes it gets to a point where we don't have the capacity to be with it in a balanced way and so, at that point, it's helpful to see if we can alleviate it in one way or another. But until that point, it's very helpful to really take it as our object of meditation. And just as you described, that was a very good description, James, of what happens.

**James Shaheen:** Well, I wonder where I got that from, but I tend to be a catastrophic thinker, so I have to lean more in the direction of, "Come on, what is going on? Yeah, my back is going to freeze. I'm going to fall over. I'm never going to walk again, so I have to be careful not to shift in my seat." But I was thinking about *papanca*, or proliferation of thought, and we're sometimes just imprisoned in this fog of thought. And we can reach a point of exhaustion. You quoted the poet Philip Larkin, you said, "I'm tired of going around being me."

**Joseph Goldstein:** "Pretending to be me."

**James Shaheen:** "Pretending to be me," that's even better. And I thought, yeah, you hit a kind of low. And there's some pivot point at which you say, "I'm less interested in these stories and indulging them than I am in knowing what's going on." All of a sudden, I'm more interested in being aware than indulging these fantasies—pleasant, unpleasant, neither, nor, it's going on all the time. In the last retreat, you suggested seeding the mind with one of the seven factors of enlightenment. And what kept coming up was that investigation is so central. So Joseph, can you just say something briefly about the seven factors of enlightenment?

**Joseph Goldstein:** This is one of the teachings of the Buddha, and it's really a very clear map or template of the qualities of mind that we need to develop for awakening, for enlightenment. And they're very specific and provide a kind of map for our own development. So the first of them is mindfulness, which is really the foundation of all the others. In a way, all the others will come out of the practice of mindfulness. And then there is investigation, which we've talked about, and effort or energy, rapture or joy, calm, concentration, and equanimity. Now, just one of the interesting things about this map is that of the seven, three are arousing, energetic qualities—investigation, effort, rapture—and three are tranquilizing factors—calm, concentration, and equanimity. So you can get a sense of the Buddha's understanding of the mind and how these two strands need to be in balance, so the energy and the tranquility, and it's mindfulness which balances all the others. So that's how they will fit together.

Investigation is the wisdom factor of mind, and so all of the others are really in the support of developing wisdom. And for me, investigation, it's fueled by interest. So when my mind is suffering in one way or another, generally my first reaction is just interest in wanting to understand: "How is this happening? What's going on in my mind that is causing the suffering?" So instead of it being a problem, it actually has piqued my interest. Then we just begin to ask, "OK, am I holding on to something? Am I not accepting something?" I think it's quite common for probably almost everybody who engages in a meditation practice at one point or another to have a feeling of struggle. You know, it's just not flowing smoothly, for whatever reason. And so at one point, when I found myself struggling, I became interested: "What's going on here? Why is my mind struggling?" And I realized something that has served me so well since then, really:

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Struggle is not a problem. It's a feedback when we're struggling that's really saying just one thing; that something is going on in our experience that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling.

So what are the kinds of things we generally don't accept? It may be discomfort in the body, or it might be the fact that our mind is thinking a lot. This is a common thing that can happen in meditation. We have this idea that we should be perfectly concentrated and still, but sometimes, for whatever reason, there's just a flood of thoughts. If we're not accepting of the fact that that's what's happening in this moment, then we're in a space of struggle. But as soon as we investigate: "OK, what? What am I not accepting? The mind's thinking a lot." Right in that moment, the mind comes back to a place of ease. So this is just one example of countless ones of how we can use investigation and interest in our own minds to actually come to a place of greater happiness.

**James Shaheen:** Joseph, once I was interviewing Sayadaw U Tejaniya, the Burmese monk, up at the forest refuge in Barre, Massachusetts, and he talked about a depression he fell into. And he said, just through sheer force of will, he kind of brazened through it and recovered. And this happened to him a second time, and he used the same tool, which basically was willpower. And the third time, he said nothing really worked. Willpower simply failed; it has its limits. It wasn't going to pull him out of this depression. And all of a sudden he was awed by the power of this depression and its ability to sap him of all energy and strength, and he thought, "Wow, this is interesting." As soon as it became interesting, he began to investigate it. And, as in the seven factors of enlightenment, investigation led to energy.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yes.

**James Shaheen:** And so it progressed. He wasn't looking for the depression to lift any more than I was looking at that point for the back pain to cease, and yet it lifted, because the power of investigating, the energy that followed, the rapture that follows that—can you say something about interest and investigation creating energy?

**Joseph Goldstein:** I think our usual way of thinking is that we need energy in order to make an effort. But actually, it's just the opposite, that making the effort creates energy. So just as a very simple example, which most people, I think, will recognize: If we're feeling tired and just lethargic, and then we make the effort to go out and exercise, the very making of the effort to exercise brings about energy. So investigation takes a kind of effort. It's obviously a more subtle effort than going out to exercise, but it means coming out of our habitual way of being with things when we're investigating something's going on, and then, instead of simply being subsumed by it, we arouse the effort to investigate and that very effort to investigate brings about energy, and so the whole system wakes up becomes more alive. So I think that's really helpful for people to understand that we don't have to wait for the energy in order to make an effort to investigate, that very effort will bring the energy.

**James Shaheen:** So the thing about curiosity is, when someone is feeling very low, it seems to be one of the things that's actually lacking if somebody is so down. U Tejaniya was lucky—all of a sudden he noticed the power of the state. How does one generate the curiosity to investigate, to even want to know when that state isn't present?

**Joseph Goldstein:** Well, you know, it depends on the extent, because being low and low energy, and then really, really low energy—I'm just thinking, for example, of those people who may be suffering from really severe depression, where there's just that low, low energy and no interest. So it may be that other modalities are needed in addition to, or at that point, beside, meditation. So it's not to think that meditation is the panacea all the time for everyone; it depends, really, on what the situation is, and sometimes other modalities can be helpful. But that's an extreme end of things. For people where are experiencing what we might call the normal range of up and down, highs and lows, and they're in a low state, feeling low energy, one of the triggers for me, for heightening my interest, particularly with difficult experiences and difficult states, and low energy would be a good example of this, I sometimes think of it as practice for dying. Because none of us know what our circumstances will actually be, but most likely, we're not going to be full of energy, right? And most likely there may be some discomfort in the body, either mild or major. These unpleasant experiences probably will be happening to some extent, at least in the

dying process. So if we have the aspiration to really die with as much clarity and awareness as possible, and reflecting on that, then that can be the motivation for when we're in this low state, to take an interest in it. And it's like, "Oh, this is an opportunity for me to practice dying before I'm actually dying." And for me, that really awakens that level of interest. If we change the attitude in some way toward the experience, that's enough. Just the change of attitude can bring about a quality of interest for me, relating it to the practice for dying. That's one way that I do it.

**James Shaheen:** Right. You're making a distinction that I heard you make once before. A woman at a public event asked you about depression, and you said it was first important to determine whether you were depressed or whether you were experiencing garden-variety unhappiness. And I realized, "Yeah, I think I have garden-variety anger, greed, and delusion. Yeah, I could work through this," which I always thought was helpful. Am I depressed? Or is this garden-variety? Basically, it's that I'm not getting what I want, or things are not the way I want them to be. But, you know, one of the reasons I was motivated to look at the seven factors of enlightenment was because the Buddha said, and I quote this from your book *Mindfulness*, "One who has not developed and cultivated the seven factors of enlightenment is an unwise dolt."

**Joseph Goldstein:** I love that quote too.

**James Shaheen:** I don't want to be a dolt. I better get on it. But you also quoted Munindra, your teacher—

**Joseph Goldstein:** Excuse me, one minute. I think we should aspire to be a wise dolt.

**James Shaheen:** I think I'm getting there. I think the "dolt" part still applies, but I'm trying. Through all of that noise in my mind, every now and then, there's a little clearing and the seven figures of enlightenment can be contemplated. Munindra said, "It's simple but not easy." And you also quoted Tagore: "It's very simple to be happy, but it is very difficult to be simple." This pretty much describes the practice for me. When I struggle, I'm having difficulty not only accepting but also just being simple.

**Joseph Goldstein:** One aspect of simplicity has to do with just how we're experiencing things and whether really a lot of effort is needed to be mindful. And U Tejaniya, who you referred to before, the Burmese monk, he really gives a very good example. He just tells people to look around and to notice what they see. And he asks, "Does it take any special effort to know what you're seeing?" No, it's pretty effortless. It's just being present. It's being awake to it. But the actual awareness of what's there is very simple and non-effortful. So that's one element of it.

The other element of simplicity, which I find very obvious but often overlooked in terms of what we're actually experiencing moment after moment, is it's only ever six things, and the Buddha described these. There's one discourse, which he called "the All." And he described "the All" in six phrases: the eye and visible objects; the ear and sound; the nose and smell; the tongue and taste; the body and sensations; and the mind and mind objects, you know, thoughts and emotions and images. That's all that's ever happening. It's like a six-piece chamber orchestra. But then, in terms of the mental experience, *papanca* takes over and builds these incredible stories about these six things.

If we want to reconnect with the simplicity of both the practice and fundamentally our lives, there's one meditative exercise that I found very helpful, and this can be done at first even for five minutes at a time, or ten minutes, just to get a taste of it. It can be done even just in walking about or in formal meditation. It doesn't matter. We just hold the question in the mind, moment after moment: "What is being known?" That's all. We just have that question and settle back and notice, moment after moment, what is being known: "Oh, a sound, a thought, a sensation, a sight, a thought, a sound." And so we're just tracking, and we see that it's only these six things that are going on and that they're constantly changing. So we're really developing a very deep insight into the nature of things in this very, very simple exercise. One doesn't have to have practiced for twenty years to be able to do this. It's just remembering to do it. So again, five or ten minutes, walking about or sitting, whatever one is doing, set the intention: "What's being known, moment after moment?" Even if we're enjoying something, that's fine, but we can enjoy without the attachment, without the holding on, knowing of its impermanence. And so it's really through

impermanence that we understand suffering. It's through impermanence that we understand selflessness. Nothing lasts long enough to be an enduring self.

**James Shaheen:** You know, it would be easy for a person less familiar with these ideas to take this in a kind of nihilistic way that there's nothing to ground oneself in. But while that may be true, you talked about how cutting through the proliferation of thought and the stories we tell, experiencing the flow of life as it is, that certain qualities emerge.

**Joseph Goldstein:** First, just go back to this notion of no-self, which is very hard. Impermanence is easy to understand, even if it's on the conceptual level, and we're all familiar with suffering in one form or another at different times, but the notion of no-self or selflessness is really counterintuitive, and it takes time to really absorb the meaning of it. I found one way of pointing to it in a way that's much more accessible is if we think of it in terms of lack of self-centeredness, right? I think that's easier for people to understand when we're not self-centered. And the deepest meaning of that phrase is a lack of self at the center. But we approach it just in our more ordinary understanding of that phrase. So to whatever degree we're moving in the direction of lack of self-centeredness, we're on that trajectory, a natural occurrence of which is greater *metta,* loving-kindness, because we're not so self-obsessed and, quite naturally, when we're not so tightly in the grip of this "I, me, mine," then in our relationships with other people, it's quite natural and easeful and spontaneous to wish them well because we're not trying to protect anything in ourselves. We're not trying to aggrandize ourselves. We're not trying to defend ourselves. So when all of that falls away, there's a natural flow of loving-kindness. There's also—and this is just an extension of that—a much greater feeling of compassion when we come across suffering in the world.

There's a very great Tibetan meditation master of the last century, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said something really beautiful about this. He said that when you realize the empty nature (empty here means empty of self), when you realize the empty nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns, uncontrived and effortless. So it's almost like compassion is the activity of emptiness of self. The mind that's free of that self-absorption, the expression of that mind is compassion dawning, as Rinpoche said, uncontrived and effortless. It also brings about

the quality of *mudita*, which is empathetic joy, just taking delight in the happiness of another, not for what we're getting, but because they are happy. This is, in one way, the beauty of our dharma path that even though there are specific meditations to develop, each of these states just out of the practice of awareness, of mindfulness, these states will grow and manifest spontaneously and effortlessly because we are freeing ourselves, to some extent, from this self-centeredness. It then brings about the last of those qualities, which is equanimity. It's much easier to stay in balance and responsive to situations. It doesn't mean indifference. It means being responsive rather than being reactive, and that's two very different things. So that also comes about as the ego self begins to loosen its grip on our mind.

For me, over all these years of practice, a sense of humor about my mind has been so helpful. Sometimes it's hard to access, but we can always come back to it, even if it's a little after the event: "Oh, look at what the mind was doing!" It's almost a facet of interest. When we're interested in our minds, we can see the humor of it all. There's a book that was popular back in the '60s or the '70s, *Zorba the Greek* by Kazantzakis, and there's one line in that book, I forget the character who says it, but the line is: "Self-knowledge is always bad news." And I think, from a meditator's point of view, to understand that with a sense of humor in that, yes, as we pay attention to our minds, we're going to see the whole show. We're going to see all the skillful things, and we're going to see those things that are not so skillful. But can we hold it lightly?

**James Shaheen:** One of the hardest things for me at one retreat, and we talk about the proliferation of thoughts, was that I was having one repetitive thought, and it was very confining. I developed a sense of humor about it. It was sort of like, "Oh, you again." And after a while, I began to laugh. It doesn't always work that way, but it just sort of serendipitously unfolded that all of a sudden I thought, "This is ridiculous."

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yes. So just to build on that, this is a technique that I've suggested people use who just have a lot of self-judgment, which is not uncommon, and sometimes, on retreat, it really gets magnified and feels like all we are is a mass of self-judgment. So if people come in and are reporting that experience, sometimes, I'll suggest that they spend one day simply counting the self-judgments: "self-judgment one, self-judgment two, self-judgment 598, self-judgment 5,056 .

. . " At a certain point the mind is going to start smiling, right? For just the reason you said, when you get up to some ridiculous number . . .

**James Shaheen:** I did.

**Joseph Goldstein:** We just see how ridiculous it is, and the mind starts smiling. What's so interesting—and this goes back to what we were saying a little bit earlier about how just a shift of attitude can make a huge difference—it doesn't take any effort to stop the self-judgment, but as soon as we have a bit of a sense of humor about it, just that change of attitude removes the two causes for the self-judgment persisting. And the two causes are: one, we believe them; and two, we don't like them, and we want to get rid of them. Both of those feed them. If we want to get rid of them, that strengthens them as much as believing them.

**James Shaheen:** Right.

**Joseph Goldstein**: As soon as we've gotten to the five thousandth self-judgment and we start smiling, then we're neither believing it, nor are we wanting to get rid of it. And that's when the whole thing loosens up, right? So it's actually quite an immediate resolution of that cause of suffering. I would highly recommend for people who are caught by that particular pattern just to try this and to see for yourselves whether it actually can liberate the mind in this way.

**James Shaheen:** Of course, not everybody can go on a three-month retreat. Do you have advice for those who really just can't get away?

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yes, I think that for most people it would be difficult to do a long retreat, especially spontaneously. These take quite a bit of advanced planning to be able to do it. Usually people are motivated to do that after they've become pretty well established in the practice, but all along the way, it's possible to take opportunities to do shorter retreats. It might be half a day or one day or a weekend, and it could be with a teacher. There are a lot of both online and hopefully soon to be in person retreats available, but one could also do it at home. Just set up a schedule of sitting meditation and walking meditation, maybe sitting for forty-five minutes, walk for half an hour, sit for forty-five minutes, for whatever length of time one has any amount of

dedicated practice is very helpful, and it really builds all of these qualities that are so helpful in our lives.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, it's interesting, because as much as we might want to get rid of something and the more entrenched it becomes, it's likewise that when we want to hold on to something—like we experience joy in the practice, and we're thinking, "This is great!"—and then it goes, it's just the reverse. I want to ask one more question, because you brought it up recently, and I always think about this, and it was a bit of a mystery to me. You know, you have an insight. You're on retreat. You have an insight. And you likened it to sugarcane. You chew on it for a bit, and then the juice is gone, and you just sort of have to discard it. And I don't know if you were serious or not, but you said you had a drawer full of notes of insights that you've had that you never look at. Well, I don't write notes on retreat, but I have tried writing them down after retreat, and I have likewise never looked at them. They're so meaningful in the moment. But what happens?

**Joseph Goldstein:** Well, I think what happens is that we move on, that our life doesn't stop in that moment, with that insight, and if we're really in the ongoing flow of our lives, those insights have been integrated into our way of understanding our unfolding life. And so there's no need to keep repeating the insight to ourselves. It has become part of our understanding, and we're not freezing our insight into that one particular box. We've learned something, and sometimes it's deeply meaningful and transformative, and then, as I say, it's absorbed in us. But we want to keep unfolding and understand things in new ways, which will happen if we can let go of attachment to that, you know, let it do its work within us. But then we're just continuing our practice with new insights coming.

**James Shaheen:** I wonder also sometimes whether language doesn't do it justice, right? I think you told me once, "It's not all struggle, James. There's joy." And I mentioned joy before in a more negative context, but really, the practice does bring joy. It comes unbidden, unasked for, like grace.

**Joseph Goldstein:** First, I think it might be helpful for people to reflect a little bit on how they understand the meaning of that word, because "joy" has a lot of different connotations, at least for me. So sometimes when I think of joy, I think of a very exuberant feeling, and that can happen in meditation, and sometimes it does. But there's a deeper kind of joy, which I think is more pervasive. It's just the joy of a deeply flowing river that doesn't have a lot of ripples on it or waves, and this is really the joy of peace. And the Buddha has at one place said that peace is the greatest happiness, or that the highest happiness is peace. And so we might call it a quiet joy, right? And that quiet joy can be underneath all the waves, you know, because there'll be waves, there are ups and downs and maybe times of exuberance and maybe times when we're feeling low, and so those waves just are part of our lives. But I think what the practice brings in our deepening understanding of the dharma and living it, we really settle into this quiet joy that's underneath all of that, and that in I think a very fundamental way really gives meaning to our lives when we're experiencing that to some extent and then explicitly or implicitly sharing it with others. Because the more peaceful we are, even if we don't say anything about it, that's what we're transmitting. And so there's just this beautiful flowering of the dharma within ourselves and then in our relationship with everybody we're with. So for me, that's the kind of joy that really is emblematic of the Buddhist teachings and of our own meditation practice.

**James Shaheen:** Well, that's a really beautiful way to end. Joseph, you're always inspiring, but I can think of an even better way to end. Maybe we could have a two-minute meditation.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Sure.

**James Shaheen:** That was a surprise. Sorry.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Well, I got nervous there for a moment because I thought you were going to say a two-minute song from you.

**James Shaheen:** Maybe you could chant!

**Joseph Goldstein:** I could feel my anxiety rise, right?

**James Shaheen:** I'm the same way. They tell me to keep my mouth shut if I sing.

**Joseph Goldstein:** But let's do the meditation instead.

**James Shaheen:** OK. I'm ready.

**Joseph Goldstein:** So if everybody just takes a comfortable seat for a moment, settled. Take a couple of deep breaths, just feeling the whole body sit and know you're sitting.

Become aware of a body. There is a body. Within that framework of a whole body awareness, you might become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. What's being known as you breathe in? What's being known as you breathe out? No need to make the breath any special way. Let it just find its own natural rhythm. You might become aware of other bodily sensations. What's being known in the body?

Pay particular attention to what's arising in the mind, thoughts or images, simply noticing how thoughts arise and pass away, images come and go.

Be aware of any sounds that may be appearing.

A frame for the whole meditation practice might be these lines from an old Taoist poem:

> Sitting quietly
> Doing nothing
> Spring comes
> And the grass grows by itself

Sitting quietly, doing nothing, the body breathes, feels sensations, the mind thinks. It's all happening by itself. Can we sit quietly and simply be aware of whatever is being known, moment after moment? When you're ready, you can open your eyes, reconnect with what you're seeing.

**James Shaheen:** Thank you, Joseph, that was really great, and great talking to you as always.

**Joseph Goldstein:** Yes, this was a pleasure, James. Thank you so much.

**James Shaheen:** You're welcome. Hope to see you soon. You've been listening to Joseph Goldstein here on *Tricycle Talks*. Tune into our next podcast at the end of this month when my cohost, Sharon Salzberg, and I interview Shannon Watts, a Buddhist activist and super mom fighting for safer gun laws in America. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast. Write us at feedback@tricycle.org. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Paul Ruest and Julia Hirsch, with help from Amanda Lim Patton. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening.