

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