

all the religions, with the Old and New testaments being evolutionary components of our spiritual relationship with God.

If all who feel we are connected to each other, to nature, and to God join in a planetary Pentecost, we shall be transformed together in this lifetime. I believe in the peaceful Second Coming as the solution to the world — not the exclusive Coming in which people will be destroyed, but the inclusive Coming, in which God in the heart of everyone will gently rise and we shall all be changed.

## Awakening to the Dharma

by JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN



*“Cultivating an active mindfulness of one’s  
experience, moment to moment, is the path to awakening.”*

I HAD MY FIRST CONTACT WITH BUDDHISM and meditation when I went to Thailand. The first time I sat in meditation was for just five minutes, but even that glimpse was exciting and transformative. It opened a new possibility of understanding. I saw that almost everything else I had studied had been an exploration of externals. This experience of meditation turned my attention around: It gave me a sense that there is actually a path through inner experience, and this has been borne out in ways I hadn’t dreamed of at that time.

For me the word “God” refers to something quite different from what may be meant in different traditions. Buddhism does not have a theistic notion of God as a being outside oneself. In the Buddhist tradition, the

word that most closely translates as God is “Dhamma” (“Dharma” in Sanskrit), which means “Truth” or “Reality.” This includes the truth or reality of our everyday experiences as well as the transcendent truth of the unconditioned, which is beyond the phenomena we normally know, beyond all our normal ways of thinking.

Most of us live in a world of conceptual perception. We put names and language on our experiences, often confusing those concepts with the experience itself. The practice of the Dhamma has as its goal a clear awareness in each moment of experience as it actually is, a state where one can drop beneath the level of concept to a clearer seeing of things as they truly are. For example, I may be sitting in meditation and start to feel some pain. In a usual mode of perception, I may think, “My back hurts” or “My knee hurts.” In doing so, I create a concept of a knee or a back as well as a concept of the self who is experiencing that pain. In an intimate connection with the Dhamma, however, I drop these concepts and become one with the simple sensation that is arising in the body.

As I drop into this nonconceptual level, I perceive the process of these elements of experience differently, particularly in periods of intense meditation. For example, I may be looking at my desk. On the level of *concept* I may see desk; on the level of *direct perception* I may see color and form. On the level of deep concentrated *awareness*, however, I may see a reality that is not normally available to ordinary perception, just as when we view things through an electron microscope a new level of reality

becomes apparent. On this unusually deep level, one sees constantly changing elements with no solid core, continuously arising and dissolving — being born and dying. There is absolutely nothing static, secure, or substantial within them. As we observe the mind and body in this way, we come to a different kind of understanding. The notion of I or self or solidity of the body completely disappears.

When this awareness is practiced continuously, we come into an increasingly deeper connection with the Truth, or the Dhamma. This connection also brings about a deep balance of mind from which we may experience that which goes beyond what we can know through the senses and through the mind. This is what Buddhism calls the “Unconditioned” or “Nibbana” (in Sanskrit, “Nirvana”). This transcendent experience is difficult to talk about conceptually, because words cannot express what is not known via our normal senses. When the mind reaches a certain place of balance, it can open to what is beyond the process of incessantly changing mental and physical elements altogether, coming to a place of stillness, silence, and peace. The Buddha called this “the unborn, the undying.” He said that here earth, air, water, and fire do not arise; length, breadth, change, and imperfection could not be. We know the true nature of the Dhamma in this opening, and we know it when we are following the path leading to this realization.

Deep experiences of the Dhamma have changed the reference point for most of my day-to-day experiences. I

had perceived experience as referring to a self, to someone who was having it, for example, "I'm thinking" or "I feel angry, happy." Everything referred to a sense of "I." Now, instead of referring to a self, experiences seem to be more a sense of simply "phenomena arising and passing" without anyone behind them to whom they are happening.

A short teaching of the Buddha expresses this idea succinctly: "In the seen, there is just what is seen, in the heard, there is just what is heard, in the sensed (smell, taste, and touch), there is just what is sensed, and in thought there is just what is thought."

An amazing simplicity comes when we no longer create the concept of self or I behind experience. Life becomes so much less identified with any particular thought, sensation, emotion, or situation as being I. We are no longer imprisoned by the tight and narrow construct of self. With this awareness, our experiences become spacious and peaceful.

The process of understanding "selflessness" is progressive. There are still times when other forces, such as greed or anger or fear, may arise in the mind; there may still be temporary identifications with these elements. Although the root of self-idea has been cut, there is still much work to do on the spiritual path to live totally in this selfless domain. This becomes the ongoing work of a day-to-day spiritual practice.

Cultivating an active mindfulness of one's experience, moment to moment, is the path to awakening: taking a step, standing up, reaching for a door. When we're

not mindful, different things happen. We can be going through the daily activities of life completely lost in thinking about the past or the future, about our hopes, our worries, our anxieties — without being present at all. On a somewhat more attentive level we may actually be present in our bodies, but still have the sense of "I'm standing up," "I'm sitting down," or "I'm doing this." Even though we're more present, we're still reinforcing the sense of someone solid and unchanging being there. On a deeper level of mindfulness, where our attention is very careful and deliberate, we begin to experience the reaching for a door, not as "I am reaching" but as a series of constantly changing sensations. Even in simple movements we can see so many things, so many different sensations coming and going — phenomena arising and passing — without adding the concept of self.

There are many ways to go about one's search for a personal relationship with the Dhamma. One traditional way is to leave the world and become a monk or a nun, to lead a life of renunciation such that one's lifestyle supports this experience of the deepest reality. However, this is not an option for most people.

A form that has evolved, which I think works well for many people, is the practice of intensive meditation retreats. People start with one weekend and then progress to retreats lasting from ten days to a month. During these retreats, people devote themselves full-time to intensive practice. Throughout the day they alternate between sitting and walking meditation. The intensity of the meditation is all that happens; there's no reading, no

talking, no studying. It's all done in silence. In our fast-paced culture, a retreat provides a counterbalance to the rest of our lives and an opportunity to explore the usually unseen aspects of ourselves. It provides a space for us to develop, quite strongly, the power of the mind, the power of concentration. The challenge thus becomes one of learning how to integrate these two aspects of our lives: how to leave an intensive meditation retreat and carry the truth that we've seen inside ourselves into the business of our daily lives.

This integration is an ongoing process. Over and over we come on retreat, go deep in our practices, go back into the world, and explore how to integrate what we learned. Once or twice a year we go through this process. Over time the increased integration begins to happen and we begin to live it more and more deeply in our daily lives. This is how we make the Truth our own — by bringing it to life each day from our deepest experience of the Dhamma.

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# Embracing God, Embracing Life

*"An intense experience of mystery is what one has to regard as the ultimate religious experience."*

— Joseph Campbell