The following short essay describes where I am now. Other descriptions can be found on my web page: http://www.math.umass.edu/~rsellis.

Automatic Pilot and the Power of the Teaching

A remarkable confluence of events involving the meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein and my reaction to an auto accident on the Massachusetts Turnpike reinforced once again the power of the teaching. At 8 a.m. on a winter morning, as I approached exit 8 on the Massachusetts Turnpike on my way to a meditation program in Worcester, a new experience unfolded before me. For the first time in 27 years of my riding on the turnpike, traffic was backed up from the highway all the way to the toll booth as trucks and automobiles, vans and motorcycles slowly snaked their way east. At the time I was listening to a tape of Joseph Goldstein explaining the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, mindfulness, and right concentration.

“We’re on this very same journey, ascending the mountain of spiritual insight. We have already discovered the secret of its invisibility: the fact that the truth, the law, the Dharma is within us, not outside of ourselves, and that we begin from where we are.”

Just as Joseph was speaking these words, I entered the endless queue of traffic stretching to the horizon. My first reaction was to go on automatic pilot by turning off the tape and worrying about getting to the meditation program on time. I could easily be delayed an hour or more by an unforeseen event such as an accident or construction. However, the mindfulness practice has taught me something. Rather than allow myself to be drawn in, I realized that in Joseph’s tape I had the life raft to keep me from spiritually drowning in a vortex of unskillful worry and stress. I turned the volume of the tape louder and paid attention even more closely to his words.

“Right understanding deals with certain natural laws which govern our everyday lives. One of the most important of these is the law of karma, the law of cause and effect. Every action brings a certain result. Things are not happening to us by chance or accident.”

Joseph said “accident,” the same word that the turnpike worker used when I asked him what was causing the traffic delay. “An SUV rolled over about a mile up the road,” he replied as two police cars and a screaming ambulance rushed past me in the breakdown lane. I said a prayer that the driver of the vehicle was not harmed as I crept slowly forward, actually feeling calm and centered despite the ever more real possibility that I would arrive late in Worcester. I completely let go of my stress as I settled into the
moment, realizing that there was absolutely nothing I could do. Staying open and relaxed was by far the best way to cope.

After about 15 minutes, I reached the scene of the accident. An SUV was being towed away as the driver was being led to the ambulance by one of the policemen. The driver looked shaken but not badly injured. All of a sudden the road opened up, the blockage of cars and trucks and vans and motorcycles miraculously disappeared, and I was on my way. This is how freedom feels, I said to myself just as Joseph was explaining the power and importance of generosity.

“Giving is the expression in action of non-greed in the mind. The whole spiritual path involves letting go, not grasping, not clinging, and generosity is the manifestation of that non-attachment.”

As I flew east on the Massachusetts Turnpike without another vehicle in sight, I realized that both meditation practice and dealing with the delay on the turnpike are metaphors for each other: finding oneself in a blockage, letting go, finding the opening, or rather having the opening revealed in a moment of release. I also realized that dealing with the delay on the turnpike taught me more about stress management than I could learn in any meditation program.

Joseph ended his explanation of right understanding with the following words, the meaning of which I continue to meditate on both in my practice and in my everyday life.

“Right understanding also involves a profound and subtle knowledge of our true nature. In the course of meditation practice it becomes increasingly clear that everything is impermanent. All the elements of mind and body exist in a moment and pass away, arising and vanishing continuously. All phenomena are in constant flux. Deep insight into the selfless nature of all elements begins to offer a radically different perspective on our lives and the world. The mind stops grasping and clinging when the microscopic transience of everything is realized, and when we experience the process of mind and body without the burden of self.”

I reached the meditation program at 8:55 a.m. On time with five minutes to spare. The readings for the program included the following exercise.

“Make an effort to ‘capture’ your moments during the day. Notice when you go on ‘automatic pilot’—when, where, etc. Can you notice times of blocking and numbing? What pulls you off center?”

I took my seat, removed my shoes, shut my eyes, and began to follow my breath.