

Excerpts from “Concepts and Reality (‘Big Dipper’)”
Dharma Talk by Joseph Goldstein 4/12/1988
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What keeps us from a deeper realization are our attachments to this world of ideas. We have gotten very comfortable in this reality. And for the most part it seems to describe our experience well enough. But actually it is like living in a world of shadows. It prevents us from seeing the true nature of phenomena. It prevents us from seeing the selfless nature of things.

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The most fundamental concept, the root one, the cause of all the trouble is our attachment to the concept of self. Just like all the others, this is a construct of the mind. We have created this idea of self, of "I", and we live our lives as if it is true. And as long as there is an "I," as long as there is a self, we have to protect it, we have to defend it, we have to gratify it, we have to aggrandize it, we have to negate it, all kinds of things we do revolving about an idea.

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Another way of understanding this concept of self.... Later tonight go outside and look up at the sky, and if you are familiar with the constellations at all, you will see the Big Dipper. A nice big collection of stars. This is the mid-retreat exam now. I'm going to ask you a question: is there really a Big Dipper? There is not. There is no Big Dipper. There are some points of lights which we call stars, and what we have done, we have taken out, we have separated out, one particular group of points of light, and we have put a concept on it: Big Dipper. What is a very interesting experiment to do is to go outside, look up at the sky and see if it is possible not to see the Big Dipper. It is very difficult. When you have become so conditioned to see patterns in a certain way, to have these concepts so strong in our minds, it is very difficult to simplify our perception to see just what is there.

In exactly the same way that the Big Dipper is a concept, the idea of the self, the idea of "I" is also a concept. What we are is a constellation of changing elements of mind and body and then we put this idea of self on it. A teaching that Jack Kornfield mentioned the other night speaks very directly to exactly this understanding. He said:

We live in illusion and the appearance of things.

There is a reality. We are that reality.

When you understand this, you see that you are nothing,
and being nothing, you are everything. That is all.

We live in illusion and the appearance of things: we live in a world of concepts, our own mental constructs. There is a reality and we are that reality, when we understand this we see we are nothing. Being nothing, we are everything; that is all. This is what our practice is about--coming out of the illusion and beginning to touch what is actually true.

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