Understanding Dukkha: The First Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:09

What I want to talk about tonight is the First Noble Truth, because it actually makes me really happy. I get quite inspired thinking about the First Noble Truth. It's both obvious and also quite profound, and we misunderstand it—which is really why we suffer.

The First Noble Truth is the Truth of Dukkha, and dukkha is often translated into English as "suffering." I think that's a limited and not so helpful translation. When we hear the word suffering in English—the First Noble Truth, suffering—it easily slides into the glib "life is suffering," which of course is not what the Buddha was teaching. When we hear suffering, it's pretty easy for the mind to slide into some aversion along with that. It just kind of comes together. And I'm pretty sure the Buddha didn't enunciate and teach the First Noble Truth to elicit aversion in our minds at all, but exactly the opposite.

In each of the Four Truths there's an action to be performed. The First Noble Truth of dukkha is to be understood. Why? Because the understanding—not just intellectual, but really on a cellular level, which is our whole life of practice as we keep going deeper and deeper with it—that understanding frees us. It frees us from confusion, from suffering, from reactions to life that are based on inaccurate recognition of reality.

Just to start with the word dukkha, I really like the way Bhikkhu Analayo, who's quite a scholar, describes or discusses the translation of that word. One way he breaks down the word in Pali is two parts: *duh* meaning difficulty and *ka* meaning actually the hole, the axle hole in the wheel of an ox cart. You might wonder where we're going with this, but these old-fashioned wooden ox carts have big wooden wheels with a hole in the middle where the axle—that pole that runs between the wheels—fits. And it doesn't really fit in a very smooth, frictionless way. It rubs. There's disharmony. There's friction. It's just that little rub. It's never really smooth and comfortable. If you've ever ridden in an ox cart without padding, trust me, this is a very accurate description of dukkha. It just rubs. It just doesn't quite fit.

Another way he describes it is a kind of discomfort, uneasiness, not standing in an easy way. Or as Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it, the basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives. This isn't just the suffering of unpleasant experience—of course that's included. It's much broader and actually more liberating to understand than that. It's this sense of unreliability, that friction, even when everything's all together.

As Ruth Denison, this wonderful German-American teacher, used to say, it's just the little leak in the canoe. There's always just some little something. And even if there's not something, our minds make something when we don't see. This is how sick the mind is: I walked in here, I looked at these lovely

flowers—they're lovely—and I thought, but the last ones, I liked them better. I miss those last flowers. They had that purple. How do we get through life? But this is what the mind does when we're not watching. And then we take it up and we make it really a problem.

Let me read you two definitions from the Buddha. Sariputta, who was the Buddha's chief disciple, was answering a question to someone who asked about dukkha, and he said there are three types of dukkha. First is the stress, the discontent due to pain, due to difficult experience, called—obviously enough—*dukkh a dukkha*. The next is the dukkha due to change, that what is beautiful and pleasant changes, the constant fluctuation—*viparinama dukkha*.

And the other is sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of all conditioned formations, of all compound fabrications—that they're never really going to be satisfying.

Let me talk a little bit about the first two particularly.

The first, the obvious one, dukkha dukkha, is what we usually think of when we think of the first noble truth. It's the way the Buddha described it, the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering.

All of that—and I'm using the word "suffering" here—I would call all of that suffering. We're aware that we don't like any of those things. But what's the Buddha talking about when, after everything he understood, he decided, "This is how I want to package what I understood to teach, to free your heart and mind"? And he starts by saying, you know, all these painful things are suffering. It's like, "Duh!" How is that going to free us?

But what's so fascinating, even just on this level of the very first aspect of dukkha, the dukkha dukkha, is that we don't really understand or believe that this is just how life is. He's simply describing reality the way it is. So we go, "Yeah, right, we all suffer." But when it happens—when it actually happens—how does our heart and mind react?

And this is where it comes to be so freeing. Yes, this stuff happens; that's dukkha dukkha. But the first noble truth that's not understood, that contributes to the suffering the Buddhist teachings can free us from, is the reactions in our hearts and minds. The fire of longing, the fire of aversion that comes from misunderstanding life as it is, from misperceiving life as it is.

And so we keep on, moment after moment—again we'll see and then we'll forget—we resist reality as it's arising in the moment. So much of our experience when we're consciously suffering is that we're in contention with what's happening now. Again and again, we're either pushing away or somewhere looking for that stable state that's going to be reliable. And the Buddha is saying, in terms of all the aspects of dukkha, that there is nothing that's reliable.

Dukkha as one of the characteristics of existence, along with impermanence, anicca, and no separate self, anatta—the Buddha describes these over and over as an aspect of all conditioned phenomena. All, not just some. All conditioned phenomena. So all aspects of experience are included in the first noble truth of dukkha—not just the obvious difficult ones.

And so there's the fire of aversion and the fire of longing. We keep thinking something here is going to be reliable, secure. We don't recognize accurately. And because we don't tend to really deeply, cellularly get it—this is how life is—when something difficult comes, even the obvious difficult: aging, illness, failing at something, losing one's job, something difficult happens, so often there's this sense of, "I did something wrong. How come this is happening to me?" As if blame, surprise, or shame are warranted, as if this is a mistake. And if we could get it right, this kind of mistake would stop happening. Did you come here to stop those kinds of mistakes?

There's a spiritual teacher in California, not Buddhist, but probably many of you have heard of her—Byron Katie. And she has a great line: "When you fight with reality, you lose."

And so this aspect of not recognizing the simple way that things are—all the birth, aging, death, sickness, gain and loss that happens to everybody at some point, over and over—not recognizing it, the way we respond out of not recognizing, is really moha, delusion.

The suffering from these tormented reactions is really from the base root of delusion, which shows up in a couple of ways. It shows up through denial—just denying what's actually occurring in front of our face. Through inattention—we just don't notice. And then misperception—actively perceiving something in a way that's inaccurate. These forms of delusion at different times are supporting, are not understanding, are not living in harmony with this truth of how things are, the noble truth of dukkha.

Let me tell a story, a very simple, simple story. Not some big suffering thing, but this sense of how even when things seem to be going fine, that little leak in the canoe is running through and we don't tend to notice.

When I was growing up, when in my early twenties, I started to realize I had really bought the story that things just get better and better.

You grow up and get your life together, and all of that. But I really was buying it. And I didn't have any obvious horrible thing going on, but I wasn't happy. And I thought, what's the matter with me? I have nothing to complain about.

And even when we do have stuff to complain about, many people here come and say, "Well, this is going on and it's really difficult, but other people in the world have it so much worse, so I shouldn't even complain." It's like we shunt it aside, we don't want to look.

So when I first heard this teaching, I was like—oh, huge breath out. I'm not insane. It's not like I'm some

kind of weird, negative person who can't be happy. It's just that I wasn't seeing the whole picture, which steady mindfulness lets us see.

So I'll tell you this story, a simple one like that. Some years ago, I was on staff here in the winter. It had been very cold, gray, snowy. And so another friend who was on staff, a guy, we decided we wanted to go to the sauna—which is nowhere near here. Don't even get your hopes up. Not that you need one today, but it's like a half hour drive away. So in the cold winter and ice, we said, "Great, we're going to go to the sauna."

Now, I'm going to describe it as it really happened, but not as we saw it. Because what we said was, we went to the sauna, we came out and said, "Wow, that was great." And then we talked about other things. But I'm going to describe what actually happened.

So we decide to go to the sauna. We have to bundle up, we get in the car, and it's really cold for like the first ten minutes till the heat comes on. So we're cold and bundled and driving in this crummy weather and ice. We get to this place where the sauna is. It's not the nicest spa in the world. And then we have to separate. So I don't know what his was like, but the women's locker room was kind of grody—kind of grungy and cold. I always like to be barefoot in there, so it was cold and damp. Take a shower. It's unpleasant. Get in the sauna.

Great. It's fantastic.

Like, how long can you sit in a sauna that is really nice? Yeah, five minutes maybe. Then you start to sweat and get a headache and it's too hot. You think, "No, but I came all this way." So you stay a little longer. Then finally you have to get out and take a cold shower. I hate cold showers. Take a cold shower. Oh God. Then you can go back in again. But it's never quite as good as it was the first time. You can't stay quite the same amount of time, but a little bit. You do that for a while and finally, okay, that's over. Come out to the grody locker room. You're all cold again. By the time you get dressed, you go out. I met my friend who said, "Wow, that was great."

And that's what life is like. It is. It's a constant fluctuation—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

So now you might be saying, why would I want to look that carefully? I want to pretend everything's great. Well, good luck to you. If it worked, none of you would be here, believe me.

It doesn't work, because that's not how it is. It's just not how it is.

My mother was a really lovely woman, very resolutely positive, you could say. One time she visited here when I was on staff. You know, it says "metta" over the top of the building. Now, I don't know where she picked this up, because she respected what we all do here, but she didn't really know anything about it, wasn't that interested. She said, "Oh, metta—that's kind of the opposite of dukkha, isn't it?" I said, "Wow,

where'd you learn that?" And then I described dukkha, and she said, "Oh, but I don't have any dukkha. I don't suffer."

It's not that it's true, but you're seeing here part of what makes retreats so difficult. You're seeing it, all of you—the opening into the unpleasant. Even little, nudgy unpleasant can be really hard, can't it? Never mind the big stuff. And depending on our particular habits, some of us have spent a lot of time perfecting how my mother was: "No, I don't suffer. Going to the sauna. It's all great." We don't want to look at it, because if we see the unpleasant, we feel we'll be thrown over. But that's denial. It's inattention, but also denial—just not seeing what's happening.

I read a book about Russia in the 1990s. The man who wrote this book was interviewing people who had been in the gulag under Stalin, who had survived it. After the Soviet Union broke up, he could find people who would actually talk about it—they wouldn't have really talked about it before. So he was just interviewing different people during that time.

The book was really about that, but to me, it seemed to be about the power of denial. He quoted George Orwell in talking about the courage of perception, the power of facing unpleasant facts. And this writer noticed that during the thirties and forties under Stalin, when so many people were just arbitrarily arrested—we're talking twenty million people, not one or two here or there—those who tried to avoid arrest by lying low, by hiding, moving from place to place, had a very good chance of success. However, people rarely tried to do that. Despite mass arrests, almost everybody believed, "It can't happen to me." It's like how we feel about death. Can't happen to me. So people would deny the bad news because it implies worse news. If I'm about to be arrested, it would mean the whole system has gone mad—which was true. But that's too much to let in. It can't be true. So you just deny the whole thing and don't take appropriate action.

The power of denial is very strong. And even though in some way we feel like this is our protection from the difficult, from the painful, it's actually what keeps us in a sense of alienation, of isolation, of disconnect. There's a sense of believing I can somehow hold myself separate from this unwanted experience, from this painful, unpleasant experience. Do you ever notice that in your mind? Probably not so clearly like that. Something's happening, and we do everything we can to fix it because it shouldn't be here. And somehow I can hold myself separate from this.

When there's still in us this habit—and it's so deep—of holding ourselves separate from the unpleasant... We've talked about this, this aspect of mind called vedana, the sense of recognizing the unpleasant and how easily that moves into pushing away. Recognizing, or not recognizing, when the mind feels something is pleasant, and how easily that moves into wanting. Neutral, and how easily we miss that altogether. It's not a given that this has to happen, but it's such a deeply practiced habit of our mind. It's like in this mind that doesn't really exist, that has no base, there's a deep rut. I don't know where the rut is, but there is a deep rut that the mind just falls into.

Unpleasant... wrong, bad. It's not just, "Oh, I don't like the unpleasant, let me hold myself separate." It's like, "This shouldn't be happening." And you see that even in little things on retreat. The breath is a little tight, and all the stuff that can get going in your mind—what's wrong, how to fix it, the teachings—all because it's tight, it's a little unpleasant. That's all that's happening. But somehow it feels like it shouldn't be this way. It's so deep. And also in life, when something difficult happens.

Often I've seen when someone is ill or develops—maybe not like a flu or something, but some kind of chronic disease, some really difficult thing—that people often feel a sense, and I've experienced this myself, a kind of alienation, of isolation. It can almost be like shame. What did I do wrong that this is happening to me? Or when something difficult happens in life, or we're separated from what we love, it's either that you don't want people to know, you feel ashamed, or the mind throws the aversion out and looks for people or situations to blame. Both of which are aversion, which doesn't see clearly, rather than recognizing: this is what's happening, and we're all together, at different times experiencing really difficult, painful stuff. This is life. It's not some weird mistake.

I remember years ago I developed a kind of chronic autoimmune condition. I was doing everything you do to work with it, but at some point I noticed—and I've talked to a lot of other people who've been spiritual practitioners—there can be this idea, not quite reaching consciousness, that if I was really a good practitioner and my mind really wasn't all knotted up with delusion, I wouldn't be sick. That if you could really practice correctly, your body wouldn't somaticize stuff and you wouldn't get sick. I know that sounds crazy, but I know I'm not the only one who feels that.

At one point it occurred to me: Ramana Maharshi died of cancer. And I just started going through all these examples—everybody dies of something. They get sick, they die. It's got nothing to do with the idea that if you really have it together, you're not going to get sick, your body's not going to get old. Follow it to its logical conclusion—it's nuts. We laugh, but look at what the mind is doing and how in this world of absolutes, we get these perfectionist ideals. It's just supposed to be better and better and good, and if something goes wrong, it's because you somehow blew it or someone else did. And right away, we're in contention with reality. This is denial.

Freedom. Freedom from fear. Liberation of mind is not about getting rid of unpleasant experience. It has nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing to do with it. Yet our habit is so strong.

There's something the Buddha said in a sutta where he talks about the two darts that always moves me, actually, quite a lot—about how these habits get developed. Many of you know the sutta with the two darts, where he talks about the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened one. An unawakened person is as if hit by an arrow of physical pain—they get upset, they lament, they beat their breasts, they scream and yell. It's like they shoot a second arrow at themselves. That's the two arrows. And an awakened person gets shot by an arrow and... nothing. They don't shoot the second arrow.

But following that, he says something I always find moving. He's describing how in a normal person

experiencing a painful feeling, they resist it and resent it. So the underlying tendency of resistance against painful feeling comes to be in the mind, comes to underlie as a habit of mind. Do you get that? We resist the unpleasant, the painful, and so the tendency to resistance of painful comes to be a habit that underlies the mind.

And under the impact of that painful feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because—and this is the line that really gets me—an untaught worldling, a normal unawakened person, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness. So then a tendency to lust for pleasant feelings underlies the mind, along with the tendency to resist unpleasant feelings and a tendency to not know what the heck's going on with neutral—a little different from how he said it.

He says one does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, or the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. That really—I don't know—it's so poignant to me that people in the world, without a path, experiencing something unpleasant, the only escape they know is to go lust after something pleasant. That's samsara in a nutshell. If that's how we grew up, if that's what we've learned, if that's what we've unconsciously taken in—and the Buddha's talking about a deep habit.

No wonder we struggle so much, even when we have the information. We think, "Okay, open to the unpleasant—that's the path to freedom." And we go, "Okay, yeah, okay, maybe." But when the difficult actually comes, it's not like we can just do that. Not so often. Because the habit is so strong: go for the pleasant, that's the only escape. For those who don't know.

But as the Buddha is saying, awakened people do know of the escape, other than just lusting after the pleasant. And the escape begins with understanding this First Noble Truth. Because when we understand that it's not about getting more pleasant or getting rid of unpleasant—when we understand that it's not about thinking that the presence of difficulty in our life is the cause of our real deep suffering, our unhappiness—when we understand that there's no way to be free and happy with these difficult conditions just isn't true. But we can't just take that on board. We can't just say, "Oh yeah, that's a good idea, and now I'm going to do it." We have to keep looking, keep looking, see for ourselves if that's really true.

So this is what retreats are for, in a way. That's why, in a perverted way, sometimes we teachers—when you come in and you're suffering, not when you're suffering big time, but with little sufferings, even if it's big time to you but it's a little thing, not really a life-changing thing—we're like... we're not masochistically happy you're suffering. That's like when Winnie says, "We'll bring you back to look at what's going on here," because this is the path to freedom. If we just said, "Okay, let's fix all the conditions so God forbid you don't have to be together with this unpleasant experience in your mind," that's not doing you any favors.

When I first started teaching—because first we have our own neurosis, yes, hard to believe, I know—but a

big one is wanting to be liked. And it took me a while to really learn that when people come in and they're talking, my job isn't to take away your suffering, which I couldn't do anyway. I mean, if I could wave a wand and it was really gone, that would be one thing. But my job is to support, as Winnie said, the opening into the investigation of what really is the suffering here, to support that with wisdom, because that is the way into freedom from suffering, not by avoiding it all.

So when you start noticing thoughts like: Why is this happening to me? Why now? What did I do wrong? How can I get that other one back? I've blown it. It's all over. I'm out of here—that one comes along—I'm going home right now. This is hopeless. How could this happen? Whose fault is it? I don't want anyone to know, I'm really ashamed of this. All this stuff—it's all the ways that we're taking it as personal.

And you know how alienating, how isolating, how this sense of separation from others and from life arises when we meet the difficult with this way of relating. But what's so touching about dukkha, the First Noble Truth, is that all conditioned phenomena are shared. This is the way it is for all of us. We're all going to get sick. We're all going to fail sometimes. We're all going to have choppy breath once in a while, pain and whatever, our own particular story.

And so as I go on, I'll say that really the opening into dukkha is more and more the opening into compassion. It's the movement from alienation and separation and shame into the opening into all of life as it is. And this opening out of aversion and fear and greed is the opening that purifies the heart and mind. It actually allows the recognition of things as they are, the recognition of liberation, of nibbāna.

So when we are—even in the little thing or big thing, it doesn't matter—able in a moment just to surrender into the difficult, just as it is, to open our mind and heart, to stop resisting, I think you'll find that the sense of it being unwelcome, unbearable, really changes. It really changes. When you're not in contention with this moment of reality, we really can experience the ease and peace of mind and heart.

That is, some say, the natural ease and peace. And even very intense suffering states, it works in the same way.

Just a little example. A few years ago, my sister died suddenly. It was a very intense time—all of it was very intense—and I was her main person, handling everything. So I experienced quite some grief, which is normal, right?

It was very interesting. At the time it happened, I had come off a period of intensive retreat for a couple of months earlier that year, and I just felt like I'd been quite awake in my mind—really present, not resisting things so much. It was an interesting time. And then this happened out of the blue.

I noticed that with that kind of grief, there was no way my mind could say, "This shouldn't have happened." I mean, it happened. You can't say it didn't happen. This is what happened. It's so clear. There was no way I could get into any kind of self-judgment or blame for feeling grief. You know, for those of us who have self-judging as a tendency, we're pretty good at finding all kinds of squirrely ways to bring it up

when it doesn't make any sense. But I couldn't then. It was just—of course there's grief. Of course. Even though it was so strong, it surprised me.

What was so interesting is that over some months, the grief would come and go—nothing stays all the time. It would be very intense. And there was just no resistance in my mind about it. I would really be with it, really intense. And it would really go. It wouldn't last too long. It would just come at all odd moments of the day and night. I had a very full schedule the rest of the year, and I had to keep doing what I was doing. Sometimes it was harder, and I couldn't always do extra things that I would have liked. But again, it's like, okay, this is just how it is. There was so little resistance that it was amazing to me.

At those times when the grief would be coming really strong—and grief is grief, it's not like grief suddenly feels like something else; it's heavy, you cry, all of that—but without the resistance, I couldn't, even at the time, call it suffering. It's just what it is. Not good, not bad, just what it is. I learned so much from that.

I noticed over time, after months, that some kind of resistance, some impatience, started to come into my mind. It would come up with just a little thought—"Okay, you know, let's move on here," or "It's time," or "You shouldn't be feeling this anymore"—whatever stupid story the mind made up. But there would be a little bit of resistance, and it was a completely different experience. Then it became more alienating, more separating, more dragging me down, more isolating. Very interesting.

But at the time when it was just what it was, no resistance, no contention—when I was opening to what was happening—one is also open to all aspects of life. I remember during the peak of that time, some friends in Germany, really dear friends, took me to this incredible garden show. They have one every two years that moves around to different places. It was in Koblenz that year. Acres and acres of all these flowers—it's amazing.

So I was in this grief, we go, okay. But it was so beautiful that it brought such happiness to my mind. I remember thinking, "Wow, flowers are nice and all, but I never totally got it—that flowers are amazing, that they bring so much happiness to the world just looking at them." There was something about it. It's like you just open to all of life when it's like that.

So explore that, explore that other aspect of the First Noble Truth—that of change.

And this is where I really want to ask you to look, because this is where we see that dukkha, the First Noble Truth of dukkha, is not just about unpleasant experience. The Buddha said all feeling, all feeling, *ve dana*, is included within dukkha. And so even now, if we're thinking of dukkha as unpleasant, difficult, then it doesn't make sense, does it? But all feeling is included within dukkha.

This was Sariputta's lion's roar of awakening. It's something he saw. Wow—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It's all included within dukkha because it's unreliable. It's liable to change. There's nothing to hold on to. Like the Buddha said, separation from what is loved. It doesn't mean that we don't appreciate pleasant or that pleasant stops being pleasant. It just can't offer us anything more than that fleeting moment of

pleasant experience.

So not just buying this, but look, explore. The Buddha said that dukkha either ripens as confusion, ripens as bewilderment, or it ripens as search. So when you're in resistance, in contention with experience—whether it's unpleasant or something beautiful has changed, and you feel that, you're fighting with reality—let the dukkha ripen as search.

Ajahn Chah put it a different way, saying that there's two kinds of suffering: the suffering that leads to more suffering, and the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. So take your pick, moment to moment. And the ripening as search just means get interested. Look.

It doesn't mean we start being afraid of pleasant or the beautiful. The Buddha said what is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it. A lot of times people get into the reverse of chasing after pleasant. This is a major dharma practitioner propensity—to almost hate the pleasant, right? God forbid I should feel something pleasant because I might crave. And craving's bad, we know craving's suffering, so we're pushing it away. But that doesn't work either. It's seeing what's really so, not trying to manage the world. That's the same way of trying to manage the world. It doesn't work. And then we think pleasant's bad—it's not.

Or people start thinking, well, everything just becomes kind of all the same. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—it's all dukkha, so what's the point? And that's a way that we can get a little bit lost. In fact, some years ago, I actually think it's a way that we misunderstand the First Noble Truth, and we can actually fall into a kind of aversion to life. Aversion to the pleasant, aversion to life—it's all dukkha, so what's the point?

And there are periods—and this will really cheer you up—there are phases in practice, in deep practice, where sometimes it's like having the dukkha lens on. Where maybe we haven't really been, like my sauna experience, where you start seeing the steady awareness, not just noticing the unpleasant, not just noticing the pleasant, but the steady continuity of awareness. You start to see the constant changing—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—there's nothing to hold. There's nothing to rely on for happiness. The unpleasant too is changing, but you can't hold to anything. So what's the point?

With the dukkha lens, I remember well one retreat I had. I'd walk into my room, and I had a plant hanging. I'd walk in and I'd go, "What's the point? It's just going to die." And really, it wasn't funny at the time. You're just seeing that's true, but it's not complete, right? I mean, it would be nice to water it and let it live for a while in the meantime.

Or I remember seeing a couple on staff who had just gotten together—this was a long time ago—and they're walking down the driveway holding hands, and I'm thinking, "Yeah, well, good luck." I gave them six months. Recently I found out they're still together, just so you know. But who knows if they're happy?

But this kind of dukkha lens that gets on is not... I thought I was really kind of clever, seeing in this way,

kind of busting myself out of attachment. But it really isn't.

It leads to something unbalanced, a kind of nihilism, and it feeds aversion. It's not what the Buddha was talking about.

I love that he speaks in terms of the pleasant, that pleasant feelings are included within dukkha. But he's saying there *is* pleasant feeling. We just need to understand the gratification in it, the danger in it, and the escape. Even though he talks so much about the dangers of sense pleasures, he never said they're not pleasant, never said we can't appreciate them.

There's one sutta where he's talking about his practice before he was the awakened Buddha. He was really exploring what the gratification in the world is. And he said, whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, that's the gratification. If there were no gratification in the world, beings would not become enamored, in love with the world. But we do. There is gratification—he's not saying there isn't. But mostly, like worldlings who only know to seek pleasant feeling when it's unpleasant, we stop there. We don't keep searching.

So that's the gratification—pleasant feeling. But he keeps looking. What's the danger? The danger is that the gratification is impermanent, subject to change, unable to give us any satisfying, reliable happiness. This is the danger. And the escape is the abandoning of desire and lust for the world. He's not saying we hate the world and it all becomes one dull gray thing, but that we abandon the lust for the world.

Without craving, we often think something's missing. Something *is* missing, but the thing that's missing isn't actually what was bringing us to feel alive. It's poignant to me that so often the craving, the wanting, the attachment is what we're so used to, what we so connect with the pleasant, with happiness. When that's gone, at first we don't recognize that the peace and ease of non-contention, of really opening fully into this moment, is such a greater happiness than this more raucous happiness of attachment, of craving.

So I think this putting an aversion lens on is just something to bear in mind, to be aware of if that's happening for you. Because as I say, I thought it was so clever, but it's just aversion. As the Buddha said, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, by aversion, and does not understand as it really is the escape from the arisen ill will, on that occasion—and it's only moment to moment—one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both.

When you notice you're sliding into this ill-will aversion lens, it doesn't mean avoid the unpleasant, but turn your awareness to that. And if it seems like you're getting blinded by aversion—maybe a really difficult emotional state or a complex emotional pattern keeps coming up, for example, here—you can explore it, be with it, be open to it, like the grief I was describing. But then it keeps coming, or it's at night and your energy's low, and you can feel yourself getting sucked into a vortex of it. Do you ever feel like that? You can kind of know what's happening, but it just pulls you in. Ill will, aversion, fear becomes beyond overwhelming, and the more you try to be mindful, the stronger the ill will gets.

When you notice that, that's when we talk about skillful means. Refresh your awareness. It's not the same as running from the unpleasant, but that's when you really see it's not helpful to just keep feeding the aversion. You can't see accurately. So at that point, deliberately shift your attention to something more neutral. It's not running away—it's refreshing the awareness. Whether it's opening to hearing, feeling the breath, going outside and doing some walking, being with the sound of the wind, whatever it is. You're not abandoning awareness, but you're moving away from just spinning in the ill will.

Even with our best intentions, the habits of our mind to react to the unpleasant with aversion are so strong. The denial, the resistance, being in contention with reality—it's such a strong pattern. But keep noticing, because the steadiness of awareness, this continuity, is what sets the conditions for liberating wisdom to arise. All you have to do is be steady with awareness and you'll see this constant fluctuation of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. It just keeps changing.

At times, the fact that there's nothing lasting in our experience to rely on for happiness can engender fear. But keep looking—fear is just another mental state too. This leads to real freedom when we're not looking for happiness to what can never give it. Happiness is available. It's such a sense of not being in contention with reality, opening into how things are in this moment.

The last thing I want to say is that in some ways, I think the real jewel at the heart of our experience lies in understanding the First Noble Truth, in fully opening into just this moment of reality—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—without unrealistic expectations, without pushing away.

The jewel at the heart of this understanding is, of course, wisdom, but it's also compassion—deep compassion. The Dalai Lama often says that compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering truly is. And this insight begins and strengthens from being with our own experience of suffering.

I've seen over and over in my own life how a particular experience of suffering—going back to that grief, that particular experience of grief or pain or illness, and we've all had our own stories—feels particular to us: my story, my past, my situation. When we stay in that resistance—"Why me? Why this? Why now?"—not understanding that this is simply the way life is, the effect of that resistance is to feed the sense of alienation, discontent, loneliness, separation, failure. Take your pick. That's the suffering—the suffering of isolation, of being the separate, isolated, lost little self.

But when, even in some moments, there's this opening into our own particular experience of grief or suffering or pain, you find that it's like magic. Not just in the first moment, but it opens out of being *my* particular grief to *this* particular expression of grief, which is an aspect of life shared by all humans. This is a particular expression. This moment of happiness is a particular expression of happiness that at one point or another is something all humans experience.

When we're not afraid to be with our own illness, our own aging, our own grief, then we're really able to

be fully present with an open mind and heart for the grief, the illness, the pain of someone else. Because we know it. This is life.

Instead of trying to navigate our separate lives, putting on a good face and getting the most we can out of it, there's this sense of release. Pema Chödrön talks about how when we're trying to avoid suffering, we walk around tensed up our whole life as if we're sitting in a dentist's chair. We put that down. We're just open to whatever this experience of life in this moment presents—if it's my grief, if it's your grief, the grief of the world, the pain of the world.

There's a whole other talk on compassion, so much more to say about it, but you can really feel this for yourself, can't you? If you've had a particular difficult experience, say a chronic illness—I've had that—many people come, really very sincere, caring, wanting to express their sympathy. But I could really tell the difference. Some people cared and wanted to help me, wanted to do something, but the feeling underneath it was, "This is so uncomfortable to be with, let's fix you." With all the caring in the world, but that not understanding: yes, this is how it is. This is the First Noble Truth. Sickness is going to happen. I can be here. But no, it's too uncomfortable because we can't be with our own.

And then when someone else would come and you'd feel, "Yeah, it's tough, isn't it?" Sometimes there's nothing else to say or nothing else to do, but we're able to be really present, heart-to-heart, bearing witness. Because we know this is how it is—in ourselves and in others.

Openness to dukkha ripens as freedom.

I want to end with a little letter from someone that really inspires me, conveying this sense of how when we understand that life is both the beauty and the suffering, and that opening to all of it brings us deeply into wisdom and compassion, this luminous nature of heart and mind.

This is from Mingyur Rinpoche. Do you know who Mingyur Rinpoche is? He's a Tibetan Lama, the brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche, quite a practitioner, and a well-known teacher around the world. Almost three years ago now, he set up his whole teaching organization globally, but then he let everyone who runs his organization know he was going to go off for a three-year retreat.

He went off. He was in Bodh Gaya in India, about to start his retreat. Everyone thought he was just going to go to a monastery and do the retreat there. But what he did was, in the middle of the night, he just left. He told no one where he was going. He just left and went off to be a wandering yogi on retreat where no one knew where he was.

Online, his brother Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who's a great teacher, said, "He just left. He didn't take his toothbrush. He didn't take any money. He didn't take his passport. He didn't tell anyone where he was." It's easy for me to say, but I can't imagine doing that. Yet there are people still doing that in this world.

He went off and no one heard anything from him. Tsoknyi Rinpoche was saying, "Our mother—I'm

worried about our mother. She's so worried about him." After about a year and a half, one of Mingyur Rinpoche's really close Tibetan disciples happened to see him in Nepal, in Kathmandu.

And he said he looked so skinny, he just saw him from a distance, he had a beard and he looked so skinny, he didn't recognize him right away. But something about the way he walked was familiar. So Tashi followed him along and then he realized—oh my gosh, it's Mingyur Rinpoche.

And so he begged Mingyur to let him come along with him. He gave him food. He gave him warm clothes to wear. And he stayed with him a while. And then Mingyur asked him to leave and gave him this letter to bring back and post for his friends.

So I just want to read this little bit from his letter. And now he's off. He's still off doing that now. No one knows where he is.

So he says: "I myself am wandering without any fixed location, staying in isolated mountain hermitages and other such places. I have experienced feelings of happiness and suffering, rising and falling like waves on the surface of the ocean. At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I have felt cold, hungry, and thirsty. Even when I have begged for alms, I receive nothing but insults and harsh words. At other times, I have received food and clothing effortlessly without even asking for them. And in my mind, it felt as though I were enjoying the pleasures of the gods.

"While I have experienced both happiness and suffering, the most important thing is that a deep and heartfelt sense of certainty has arisen in the depths of my being, such that no matter what happens, I know that the true nature of these experiences, their very essence, is that of timeless awareness and vast compassion.

"Suffering ripens as search. Search ripens as freedom."

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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