Understanding the First Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:43

Talking last night about the quality of freedom of heart-mind—call it Nibbana, nature of mind, whatever—and how it's only visible here and now in the immediacy of this present moment. Although I would imagine for many of us that our practice is really to come to understand this with sincere intention and enormous effort—certainly not just this retreat but, if we're on the path, it becomes our whole life.

But still, there's a kind of catch-22. As hard, as sincere as we may be, if we keep looking through the same set of deluded, confused lenses on our perception, everything we do to try to understand things as they are, to try to free our heart and mind, just keeps us going in the same round, and we can't really get it. We can't see what we're doing because we're only seeing in the same way. And then, when those moments come—and it can just be moments—when suddenly, "Oh, yeah, that's how it really is," it's so immediate.

I remember reading years ago about some famous Tibetan teacher who was saying to his own teacher, "Oh, why didn't you tell me it was like this? Closer than my own eyelid!" Does that help us? No. Closer than my own eyelid—got it? No, because we keep on looking in the wrong way.

This is from the Dalai Lama: "All things, including nirvana, arise from causes and conditions. To find happiness, it is indispensable to have a correct view of the nature of mind and the world. What is meant by right view is not faith or believing in a particular dogma, but a clear understanding that is reached through thoroughly examining reality. This kind of examination will refute the belief in the independent existence of things, which is the root of our distorted vision of the world and vision of ourselves, and replace it with the right view—the right view which implies a recognition that the nature of Buddhahood"—this is Tibetan language—"the nature of liberation is the essence of our own mind, our fundamental cognitive ability, luminous and pure without confusion."

When we say "our," that's just a way of speaking, but this natural purity of cognition is luminous and pure. Right view also involves identifying the factors that keep us from perceiving this nature, so that it becomes possible for us to abandon them, or at least to stop feeding them. A lot of our practice of mindfulness is about seeing and identifying these factors. And the seeing itself is what's liberating.

Tonight I want to talk about the first of the Four Noble Truths. I'm hoping to have one talk on each of the four, but you never know how it goes. Things get sidetracked, other things happen, but we're starting with the first tonight.

From my limited understanding as not being a scholar, all different schools of Buddhism share the Four Noble Truths as the essence of the Buddha's teaching; they are central to all of them. It's sort of like when

he had to distill it all down: What is it? Perhaps it's a little longer than just "nothing whatsoever is to be clung to," but that's at the heart of the Four Noble Truths. These are the four facts of life.

The Four Noble Truths are: the first, the truth of dukkha, which is what I'm going to talk about tonight, and I'll unpack that word; the second, the cause of dukkha; the third, the ending of or freedom from dukkha, the cessation of dukkha; and the fourth, the Eightfold Noble Path—the path of walking, of life, of practice.

I want to talk about this first one, the truth of dukkha. Each of the truths has an action associated with it. The truth of dukkha is to be understood. That's all. The Buddha said: What do we need to know to free our hearts and minds from these habits of misperceiving that keep us from being so immediate, closer than our eyelid, that keep us looking elsewhere? The first thing is simply to know and understand this truth of dukkha.

Certainly I can't offer a comprehensive understanding tonight, and it's something that we keep understanding and learning with more and more subtlety, more and more depth. In my experience, my whole life, it just keeps on going. There keeps on being more to see in my own mind and heart.

Again, as the Dalai Lama said, this isn't about understanding conceptually a dogma, believing that if we can understand and remember it, that's what's going to do it. Understanding dukkha is an invitation to this investigation into the nature of reality that His Holiness was talking about. And as Greg said, the nature of reality that's accessible to us is this mind-body process that each of us experiences moment to moment—our own, so to speak, mind-body process.

How amazing that all the confusion, but also all the truth of the way things work, can be experienced and revealed by exploring with open-hearted interest this mind-body process. What we come up against when we start, and as we keep going, is this truth of dukkha. So let me offer some reflections, certainly not comprehensive, but some reflections on the first noble truth.

I just want to share that dukkha is often translated as "the truth of suffering," but I don't want to translate it that way. Because when we hear the word "suffering" in English, how closely related is aversion? When you hear that word... yeah, it's pretty hard. "Oh yes, the truth of suffering. That's what people say about Buddhists—they're really downheads. Everything is suffering. Life is suffering." Have you heard that as one description of the first noble truth? Life is suffering. Well yes, let's embrace that. And how does understanding that free our heart and mind? It's like, please, I think I need to go somewhere else.

Suffering as a translation is often used, but perhaps it's not so helpful, not so useful in terms of understanding the real subtlety of what the Buddha is trying to introduce us to. And remember, understanding this—if we really understand it, even just in a moment—in that moment it is freeing us from unnecessary suffering, the suffering of reactive mind and reactive heart, because we're not recognizing accurately.

So I love talking about this first noble truth because the more I understand it, the more ease and peace and contentment I feel with life as it is. This doesn't mean life as it is has suddenly taken on a rosy hue. Anyone who really knows me knows I am not the world's biggest optimist. And it's not like, "Yes, I just see everything moving along and it's all going to be perfect in a perfect world." You're never going to hear me say that. But the understanding, the sense of understanding what dukkha means—really getting it—means not being in contention with reality. And this is incredibly powerful. We'll talk about it in many different ways.

So one way of describing the word dukkha comes from the Venerable Anālayo, who is another really preeminent translator. He's a German monk in the Theravada tradition, but he's done a lot of translating into English. He talks about the word itself—dukkha—and one way of breaking it apart is that the "du" part is like difficulty. Difficulty, not standing well, just difficulty. And one definition of the "kha" part—remember this is from 2600 years ago in rural India—involves an ox cart with two big wooden wheels, just solid wood with a hole in the middle where the axle goes through. So the difficulty of standing badly, the way this cart wheel rolls with this hole and the pole going through it—not smooth, not relaxed. And still today, I've ridden on an ox cart. I'm here to tell you that's a really good definition. It's just not comfortable. It's just not easy. A kind of disharmony, a little bit of friction.

As Ruth Denison, a great teacher who is quite old now, once said, "That little leak in the canoe..." There's always a little something that shows up.

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it as the basic sense, arising from time to time—not every moment—of unsatisfactoriness or incompletion that runs through our lives. It's not that every moment is horrible suffering. It's not that. So this is one way of thinking about dukkha: this unreliability, as Greg uses a word we often use, this kind of incompleteness, this unsatisfactoriness.

And then the Buddha, as he was wont to do, being quite precise, talks about it in three different aspects. And this is where it becomes a challenging, very challenging teaching—both to talk about, to hear, and then to keep looking at in our lives in all these three aspects.

This is Sariputta, the Buddha's chief disciple, describing: "There are, friend, these three kinds of dukkha. The stress, the discontent that arises just due to pain, due to difficult things that happen. The second is the discontent that arises due to change—vipariṇāma dukkha. And this is really when beautiful, pleasant things are occurring, and they do. They're also included within dukkha, not because they're not beautiful and pleasant, but because they're unreliable. They go away. And the dukkha due to formations, which is saṅkhāra dukkha—saṅkhāra being any fabrication, coming together, going apart, this sense of endless coming together, going apart."

I'll talk about each of the three.

In a way, it's the most obvious, and in another way, in terms of really opening to understanding, it's

immensely challenging. I find this in our practice here, in our daily lives, and just in our minds—even being able to wrap around it enough to be willing to look. Not that we can totally understand, but even to meet it.

So this is how the Buddha describes this dukkha dukkha: Birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, illness is dukkha, death is dukkha. We wouldn't argue with this, right? It's unsatisfactory. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair all occur. Separation from what is pleasing is dukkha. Union with what is displeasing is dukkha. Not to get what one wants is dukkha.

Probably, I'm guessing, up to now we could all be on the same page. No one's saying, "Yeah, I don't think that's dukkha. That's great. I love not getting what I want." But what the Buddha is saying is that this is simply a fact of life. This is what occurs at times to everybody. Everybody. No one here gets out alive.

And so this is where people go, "Okay, well that's really inspiring." But mostly what I'm here to talk about—my way of approaching this—is not to try and convince you, or me, that this stuff really happens. Rather, it's to look at why we need to understand, why the Buddha thought, "I need to tell you this so that you can understand it," because that's how our mind relates to it.

In terms of this first dukkha, the dukkha of pain, the dukkha of loss and despair and lamentation, what the Buddha's talking about—where we can explore, where we can investigate—is in our personal, moment-to-moment experience in our mind and heart of dukkha dukkha. I'm going to use "suffering" for dukkha dukkha: unpleasant, painful, difficult things occurring in our own mind or occurring to us from the so-called outside. Maybe it could be grief. It could be sadness. It could be illness. It could be job loss. It could be someone externally really treating us badly. It could be systemic. It could be cultural. The teaching is not saying that bad stuff doesn't happen—and I'm using "bad" in our normal way.

But when the Buddha talks about understanding, about not being in contention with reality, I want to say that in terms of the bigger world—the sense of the incredible amount of violence, hatred, injustice, homophobia, racism, poverty, economic inequality, you name it—the freedom really comes from our being able to truly be with this dukkha without fighting with it. Remember, he's talking about the immediacy of what's occurring in this moment. What's happening in this moment.

Two of the ways we get really lost in reactivity: One is the obvious one of aversion, anger, fear—moving into some realm in our reaction either to what's happening or to ourselves, blaming ourselves or hating others, or just all-out denial, so that our heart and mind is overwhelmed by anger, fear, aversion. That's perhaps the more obvious way.

Another way we sometimes hear more intellectually until we really get it on a cellular level—and then we understand differently. But often when we talk about how freedom comes from not being in contention with this moment of reality, we hear it as a kind of passivity. That the Buddha is saying we can't respond or try to change anything in this world or in our life. Have you sometimes felt that that's what the teaching

is? When we use the word "acceptance," it's often heard in that way. "I just have to accept." And this can lead into either a kind of self-blame—whatever bad happens is my fault—or else it's hopeless, a kind of victimhood, or else a reactivity to that: "What do you mean we can't change? That's crazy."

That's not what the teaching is saying at all. Understanding in a moment, not being in contention with this moment's experience, is what allows for clear seeing, the clear recognition of what's occurring. And that can allow, in the next moment, if a response is appropriate or possible, for that response to occur. How the mind-heart is awake and present in this moment becomes a cause, a condition for what arises in the mind-heart in the next moment. So if we're filled with aversion, feeding aversion, feeding anger and confusion, that's much more likely to lead into the next moment. But when just in a moment we can drop into "this is what's happening now"—and yes, it's horrible, we're not saying it makes it nice, this is horrible—the immediacy of presence, not the concept, then that moment of non-aversion, of clear-seeing wisdom, allows for clearer recognition and a more appropriate response.

So I'm saying at the beginning—hopefully I'll have time to talk a little at the end—but I just want to really make it clear as I move into talking more about the freedom that only comes from total presence with this moment: that acceptance, that non-contention, is not passivity into the future. It's not stupidity, or rolling over like a doormat and not responding at all. It allows for really clear seeing and a strong response.

One way that this not being in contention—this not-passivity—works is by recognizing that we all, at different times, will experience to different degrees all that stuff the Buddha mentioned. And we each, to differing degrees, have our personal experience, our cultural experience, our familial experience, our community experience—whatever it may be. Different for each of us.

The Buddha is talking in terms of these Four Noble Truths, of this First Noble Truth, and all of that is true. And it's not at all a justification or an apology for the injustice and the violence in the world. It's not that. But the place we can start to free our hearts and minds is right here. And that takes a willingness to drop in right now, when I feel—you know—"I can't bear to be with this." Okay, what is it I can't bear to be with? Just exploring it with kindness. Not in contention.

A place I find really instructive to look at in terms of this balance is the Buddha's life itself—little parts of his life after he was enlightened. What did he do with the forty-five years of his life after he woke up and became the peaceful one, free from suffering, free from confusion?

He made choices. He did not live forty-five years of passivity, hanging out in some realm of heavenly beauty. The suttas tell us maybe he could have done that—that was a choice he could have made. I mean, who knows? I don't know. But that's in the suttas: that was a choice he could have made.

But the choice he made was to tune in to the beings, the humans in the world. And this is part of the vastness of a Buddha's mind—it can empathetically feel what's going on. And seeing the suffering, he didn't say, "Well, yeah, that's just how it is. Just be with the suffering. That's how it is. Not in contention

with reality." No. His clear seeing, the heart—the jewel in the heart of freedom, in the heart of understanding dukkha—is compassion. It is this ability to bear witness to the difficulty, the unhappiness, the dissatisfaction in our own mind and heart, and to be present with that in others.

When our mind, our heart, our response is not clouded or distorted by aversion, by ill will, by clinging, then we can make choices. We don't make them—intention makes them. Let's not even go there any further than that. But choices are made. Choices arise due to causes and conditions arising in the mind, and they coalesce into an intention in a moment. And then the Buddha had the intention to share what he knew, out of compassion for the world. That intention would keep arising for forty-five years.

So certainly not passivity, but quite ongoing engaged activity for the good of beings.

If an understanding of dukkha meant "it's all hopeless, nothing can change," he wouldn't have bothered, right? I figure he wouldn't have bothered. If the understanding of reality meant "it's like this in this moment, and it'll always be like this—change isn't possible, so heck with it"—he wouldn't have gone teaching, walking up and down India barefoot, begging for his meals every day.

Think about it. Does that sound really very comfortable? When you think about waking up, do you think about how you're still going to have your backache? He did. There are suttas where he had to lie down and he goes, "Ananda, you give the talk. I have to go lie down. My back hurts." Or he'd have a headache. Stuff happened. You know, his kinsfolk on both sides—his mother's and father's families—went to war over water rights. His awakening couldn't stop the stupidity and the violence and the greed in the world.

He couldn't change the world. I mean, here we all are, 2,600 years later, really sincere, really wanting to cultivate wisdom and kindness and compassion. And that's beautiful—what a great thing that this is a path that's still alive. There are many paths, but this one is still here. Yet he couldn't fix the whole world. He couldn't even fix his own kinspeople.

But he didn't just sit there and think, "Well, they're killing each other. What to do?" He did what he could do. He went and talked to them. He really mediated. He did help them come to some conclusion. He did stop that particular moment of violence based on greed and water rights and fear.

So he was active. It wasn't a life of passivity. It was action based on compassion, based on clear seeing, from an ability to be with all these painful things happening and then to respond in a way that's sensible, that's appropriate—that isn't put off by the suffering but isn't lost in it either.

When we perceive correctly, the heart-mind is free, it's open. There's that moment of purity, the potential, just for a moment, to be here so fully that whatever's occurring is simply recognized as it is. It doesn't become a source of suffering for us. We don't then act out of it in ways that cause suffering for others.

I'll stay with dukkha dukkha—talking about why this is so difficult for us. Because again, it's obvious that all this happens. And yet still, so often, moha, delusion, shows up in our minds in various ways. One way is

this kind of denial: this isn't happening, or it's not going to happen. Or we know it intellectually, but we don't really let it in.

That we're each going to die is the classic example, right? I know it. The older I get, it's a little closer than it used to be, I have to notice it—but not really. Not yet. There's like twenty more years, whatever. There's a way it's just not quite in there.

How often when something goes wrong in our immediate life—a loss, an illness, we hurt ourselves, or something really appalling happens to us from outside while we were just minding our own business—the sense of denial, the feeling that this is not supposed to happen, is often so strong. Even just with illness, which I have a lot of personal experience of, it's quite easy for the mind to slip into thinking, "Yeah, I know, but if I was really pure enough... if I was practicing correctly, if I had enough understanding, this illness, this bad thing wouldn't have happened. Somehow I did something wrong."

There's often, when someone is ill or suffering grief or loss, a sense of shame. The dukkha dukkha, the suffering, can take us into a sense of alienation. In a way, we each suffer alone. If I'm really having a migraine, there can be empathy, but no one else can really have it with me. Not that I would wish someone to have it with me, but no one really can. So in that way, it's true—you're experiencing what you're experiencing in this moment.

But the next moment, someone else is experiencing their suffering. We all experience all these aspects: loss of what we love, being together with what we don't like, old age, birth, sickness, death, the stuff that goes on in the world, the violence, the injustice. We're all impacted in different ways.

What's so fascinating is how, at times, there can be this sense of "no"—when bad stuff happens, it's a mistake, it's wrong. And often our tendency is to turn it against ourselves. It becomes this kind of self-judging: what did I do wrong to be experiencing this?

That's aversion, right? You're aware that's aversion. That's the habit of mind: unpleasant leads to aversion. Push it away.

Blame inside, blame outside. Because this isn't supposed to be happening.

This is one of the places where this becomes challenging when we think of the injustice in the world. Because if we say in the moment, whether it's supposed to be happening or not is a moot point—it *is* happening. In this moment, it is happening. This particular moment can't be any different because it's already here, happening. That's what not being in contention with reality means. It doesn't mean saying it's right, it's appropriate, let's support it to continue. It's saying: this is what's happening. And when the heart, the mind, is meeting it with aversion, fear, blame—any sort of aversion—it pushes away the experience such that we can't recognize accurately. It keeps us in that cycle of more delusion, not recognizing accurately or being able to respond appropriately.

And it's amazing, though, the power of denial. Sometimes I think I should give a whole talk on it. It's an amazing power in the world. Have you ever noticed—if you've been in a relationship that lasted some time and then broke up, probably no one here has had that experience—and at the end of it... In the beginning, everything's so lovely. That's why you get in the relationship, right? You don't get in it going, "Oh, this is going to be horrible." You really think it's going to be great, and the person's so wonderful.

Then at the end, when it ends, whichever way it ends—good, bad—you can see, I mean, I've seen for myself, the things that really came together to make it break apart, that wasn't new information. That was something I knew the day I met the person. Me and the person, we knew, but oh no, no, no, that's not even happening. It's like, I don't even know that. That's not really true. I'm not even going to look at that. It's almost like my mind can almost see itself doing that: I'm just not going to go there. And that'll just make it not be true. If we ignore it enough, it won't be true. It doesn't work that way. But denial is amazing.

I read years ago a little article in the *New York Times* about some small town in Spain. The mayor said the cemetery was getting too full—there was no more space to bury people who die. So the mayor proclaimed a temporary moratorium on death until they could find more land for a new cemetery. I mean, this was serious. This was not funny news. This was a serious article in the newspaper.

So we can go to this place of feeling isolated, when in fact the opening into these aspects of dukkha-dukkha, as Ajahn Sumedho likes to point out, actually can be something that unifies us as human beings. He used to start his talks with, "Welcome, sisters and brothers in old age, disease, and death." Like, we're all going to go through it. We are. Why be ashamed when we're sick, or something is falling apart, or we've lost our job, or one of our really unpleasant mental habits has suddenly come out our mouth and now everybody knows what a mess we really are? You think they didn't know. We're the only ones pretending we don't know.

But this is life. We're all sharing in it. Really, it doesn't have to be a way to be ashamed or alienated, but a way of connectedness, of unity, of inclusion. Not non-inclusion—inclusion. This is really the heart of empathy that arises from a deep understanding of suffering in our own experience. And this heart of empathy is the heart of compassion. The Dalai Lama talks about this a lot.

So this quality of denial—just, this isn't happening, it's not supposed to be happening, only good things are supposed to happen, and if something bad happens, it's wrong—however way our mind works with it, that's one basic element of delusion, of moha, that serves the purpose of keeping us from recognizing accurately. It comes from the belief, as I think Joko Beck said, the belief that I can somehow hold myself separate from this unpleasant and difficult experience. Have you noticed that? Just in practice here.

This is what I love about being on retreat—you can have simple examples. Someone will come in and say, "Well, I'm all upset, but the thing I'm upset about is so stupid." And we go off into how stupid the thing is. Never mind that it's stupid. Turn around and see. This is how the mind works. This is a great place to observe it.

We think we can hold ourselves separate from this unpleasant experience, which might just be a recurrent sound that we hate. We experience it as unpleasant, and the last thing we want to do is simply open with awareness into the experience of hearing. "I don't want to hear that sound. I don't want to hear that sound." We do all the things we do precisely so we don't have to just open into hearing what's unpleasant.

When there's a moment that we can do this—and you can't do it by an act of will; you try, but you're still caught in the unpleasantness—but the moment when something lets go and you just drop into, "Okay, unpleasant sound is like this"... you get a sense, "Oh, that's just what's happening." Unpleasant doesn't have to morph into pleasant for everything to be okay. That's just how it is. Unpleasant is like this. But we can't hold ourselves separate. We think we can rearrange the world to stop it.

Because I know we've talked about this, but secretly, way in the back—and I find it comes up in my mind all the time too, despite everything I know, even cellularly—secretly it'll come up: it's all about heading for pleasant. It's all about moving in the direction of more and more pleasant experience.

No one comes in and complains when they've had a really pleasant sitting. Do you? You don't come in and say, "My practice has gone to hell. I was just sitting there and it was bliss and there was no pain. It's really horrible." It's a rare being who comes in and complains about that, right? But you can spend days lost in that, cultivating wanting.

So this is a really deep habit of our mind, this aversion to the unpleasant.

One of the suttas I was mentioning in a meeting with someone the other day that I love, where the Buddha talks about this habit, is the one about the two darts. What he says is so poignant to me: a normal worldling, an unenlightened person, the only escape they know from unpleasant feeling is to go lusting after a pleasant sense experience. Does that sound familiar? That's like, in the world, without opening to understanding our mind and heart, he's saying that's the only escape people know.

So something's unpleasant—it could be vastly unpleasant, or just a little bit unpleasant. Just a little bit unpleasant at home, and you jump up and go to the fridge, or get on the phone, or turn on the TV—just to not feel it. Or here on retreat, you go into a fantasy. Have you noticed that? A pleasant fantasy. You come back and ask, "What's going on?" Well, my little finger's a little tight, you know. It's unpleasant. I mean, I've had that experience, really. It's just the habit of mind.

So the only escape a worldling knows is to lust after pleasant experience. This becomes a habit that underlies the mind, the Buddha says. The avoidance, the resistance to unpleasant, and the lusting after pleasant, and not understanding what's going on. This is so deep.

But the willingness to just, with our steady mindful awareness, meet each experience equally—that's what breaks this habit. And it's what lets us start to see how that habit is working. It's like, "Wow, look at that."

We can do it the other way too, not always going for the pleasant. But this is one of the ways we sometimes get into, kind of dharmically, in our practice, a misunderstanding of dukkha. We think, "Well, okay, it's not about chasing after the pleasant."

And this is another aspect of the truth of dukkha—the fact of change, viparinama dukkha. Sariputta, who was the Buddha's chief disciple, in one sutta gives what's called his lion's roar of awakening, where he declares, "Yes, I know this to be true." And one of the things he says is that all feeling tone—all feeling, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in our mind—all feeling is included within dukkha.

Now, if you think of dukkha just as suffering, that's, again, we're into, "Oh my God, he's saying there's nothing pleasant, there's nothing beautiful. It's all just suffering, it's all just horrible."

This is the misunderstanding. But the second aspect of dukkha—unreliable, nothing to hold to—is that it changes. There is beauty in this world. There is happiness in sense pleasures, in beautiful experiences. The Buddha is not denying that at all. It's only when we ask from them something they can't give—a reliability, a lasting happiness, a sense of self-gratification—when it goes, as the Buddha said, separation from what is loved, that will happen. It absolutely will happen to every single thing, any moment that we love. The same will happen with the moments we don't love, because no moment lasts. Nothing lasts. We don't like that too much when it's pleasant. It's that unreliability, that nowhere to take a stand.

So the Buddha is saying, or Sariputta is saying, all feeling, all vedana, is included within dukkha in that it's unreliable. He's not saying there's nothing beautiful. In another place, a poetic translation of another sutta, he says, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it." Do you get the difference?

So we're bringing in the steadiness of awareness. Mindfulness meets the unpleasant, meets the pleasant, meets the neutral. Just being with what's presenting itself. This is not being in contention with the reality that's presenting itself in this moment—any of the changing sixth sense experiences.

This is why we emphasize steadiness, continuity. The more and more mindfulness starts to get its own momentum through all the activities of the day, there's no way you cannot notice: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—just changing all the time. They're all happening. And if we are avoiding the unpleasant, glomming onto the pleasant, we're never going to see accurately. We keep spinning in this cycle of unsatisfactoriness.

So this sense of just landing in this moment, as it is. And then this moment, as it is. Not trying to explain it all—just here, here, here. That steadiness of awareness reveals the way things are. And then that sense of "I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience" starts to drop away.

But we're so deeply conditioned, with really a lot of fear of the unpleasant and of pain. I certainly am. And I'm not saying we should now be able to say, "Okay, now I'm just going to open to all the suffering in my life, all the suffering in the world in this moment." We can't do that by an act of will. And there are

definitely many times when the degree of emotional pain or physical pain or mental pain arising in my heart-mind, in my body at this moment, is occurring more strongly than the strength of awareness to meet it in that moment.

But that's a momentary thing. We tend to go, "Well, that's just too much. I can't be with it. It's over." But I'll go back to migraines, because I get them. I remember years ago when it was just so unbearable. I would just roll around. It was unbearable. I just wanted to not be conscious at all, or just out of it.

I'm still not saying I like them, but I can see a real shift at times. Everything's just moment to moment, nothing steady state. But there are times when there's that pain and instead of the mind going, "Oh my God, this is unbearable, I can never be with these moments"—it's just what it is. I'm not analyzing or trying to do anything, or trying to get compassionate. The habit of heart, of mind, of total aversion and fear toward the unpleasant is much less strong than it used to be, at moments.

And then there are times when you can say, "Okay, it's like this." I'll be going around doing what I'm doing, sometimes having fun and talking, and then there'll be a lapse where it's like, "Oh my God, shoot myself"—and that'll come in. And then there'll be times when the mind can be with it again.

The bigger picture knowing—this seeing how the mind works—is also part of awareness. Not having some idealistic view, which we can also get lost in through practice. "Okay, now I know I should be with everything that's occurring, and if I get into aversion, that's bad. I'm wrong. I didn't do it right." We're back to the same old, same old—taking it personally.

Aversion is unpleasant. "I did it wrong. I should be able to always be perfect." It's so slippery, isn't it? It's so slippery how these things come in.

One way I've noticed this kind of misunderstanding manifest in a dharmic context is when we start to hear that all feeling is included within dukkha. We taste for ourselves the pain that comes with attachment to pleasure. We start to see—perhaps for the first time—how the habit of mind goes chasing after one pleasant experience after another. There are times when we simply recognize: this is going nowhere.

But rather than just noticing that, the mind flips into aversion. And I wouldn't be surprised if everyone here has had this experience—we have it a million times. We start to see craving and go, "Wow." Then we start to see it ten billion times a day. Anyone have that experience? And then we think, "This is horrible. This is hopeless. This is endless. Oh my God, I have so much craving. I'm a horrible person."

That's where we go. Self-judgment is just aversion—denial of the first noble truth. Stuff's not supposed to happen.

Some people then almost start to shy away from connection with the beautiful, with the pleasant when it's happening. Almost deliberately noticing more the unpleasant in practice and thinking somehow that's a

kind of wisdom. "Well, it's all going to end anyway, so there's no point even bothering with the pleasant, with the beautiful."

I've been through stages like that in practice. We used to call them dukkha stages. I thought it was a sign of cleverness, but it wasn't. It was a mark of ignorance.

For example, there's one stage in practice where you're really seeing a lot of endings. You see the beauty, the pleasant—you see it go. You see the unpleasant come—you see it go. There's just nowhere to stand. I remember walking into my room where I was practicing on a long self-retreat. I had a nice plant hanging up, and my mind goes, "It's just going to die." No appreciation whatsoever—just, "Oh, that's going to die." I remember a couple had just gotten together on staff at IMS. They were walking down the driveway holding hands. My mind said, "Give them six months." That's just how the mind kept operating, thinking it was a sign of cleverness. "I'm not getting attached because I know it's all going to change."

It's a phase. If you can skip it, may you.

So it comes back to steadiness—appreciating the beautiful, but the wise one does not strive after it. Recognizing the unpleasant, but the wise one doesn't have to run from it. Recognizing the neutral, not making anything of it. Steady, steady, steady. And we learn to recognize—this is where we really start to see the nature of our mind and heart, the nature of reality.

The Dalai Lama again: "Buddhism essentially consists of two things. The view, which means a definitive understanding of the interdependence of all things. And action, which can be loosely defined as nonviolence. But if one were to summarize the Buddha's teaching in one word, we would have to say that it is universal interdependence, of which nonviolence is a natural consequence."

We start to see things as they really are when we're not so caught in the unconscious habits of preference and fear and denial. Unfortunately, the only way to that is through the practice of really opening wholeheartedly into this moment as best we can.

And this moment and this moment—whatever, however subtle, however gross, it doesn't matter what's happening. That moment where we just meet experience, not to fix it, not to have a great insight, just to be here. That's a shift in that moment from the habit of aversion and clinging and delusion to that open-hearted, clear mindfulness.

The Buddha said, "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will. On that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

One's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both. That's another poignancy in our habitual response to the difficult—and I mean the really difficult, and even the little nudgy difficult. That sense of keeping separate: bad, wrong, get away, not seeing. Whether it's all the way to fear, hatred, revenge, or

just the subtle "ah, no, let's pretend this isn't happening"—these are all forms of dosa, forms of ill will, that keep us from being able to recognize as it really is the interdependence of all things. We can't see even our own good, or the good of another, or the good of both.

That's why there's so much emphasis on direct knowledge, direct seeing, and then response out of a mind and heart freed, just in a moment. We can't always tell whether it's filled with ill will or wanting or not. But that's what we're learning here, in all these simple little moments. That's why, if we just fixed things every time we were uncomfortable—well, we try that. That's our basic way of going through life. And that's part of the structure of retreat: you sit, you walk, so that we have to look at this stuff. Not as a forcing, but to really understand.

So don't believe anything you read or anything I say. I'm just trying to encourage us all to keep looking, to keep seeing, so that we're not blinded. The truth reveals itself moment after moment after moment.

This noble truth, when it's understood—this noble truth of dukkha, of this unsatisfactoriness running through—recognizing it just in a moment, that moment has the potential to really release our heart and mind from this cycling confusion of suffering and hatred and isolation and alienation. It doesn't have the power to make everything okay in the world. It doesn't have the power to make everything okay in this mind and body. By okay, I mean pleasant, nothing going wrong. But it has the power to shift our whole understanding of what peace is, what freedom is, what suffering really is.

Let me say just a little bit about the third type of dukkha and another aspect of delusion, which is inattention. Again, this is why we emphasize the steadiness of awareness. Inattention—where we just don't notice things.

The third aspect of dukkha is sankhara dukkha, which you could describe in different ways. This is kind of subtle, so don't go wacko thinking about it, but one way to put it is the perpetual incompletion—things come together and go apart. Another way of describing it is the relentless nature of life. You have to get up, and you have to brush your teeth, and then you eat, and then you have to brush your teeth. You get up and you have to pee, and then you have to drink something, and then you have to pee. And then you have to drink something, and then you have to take a shower. It just keeps going like that. That's what life is like, every day. And there's a lot of inattention to that.

Now, when people hear this, there's often a misunderstanding: "Okay, so I should notice every moment? Oh, it's unpleasant, I have to pee, and you have to go." It's not that. But it's about stopping the habit of making things up and then wondering why we're not satisfied with life.

Have you ever gone on a vacation to a lovely spot, and some of the moments are beautiful, and some are nice, and some moments you don't feel good, and some moments you go out to dinner and you really weren't in the mood, and the conversation isn't great, and you didn't like the food—but you're in Italy, for God's sake! And so you feel like you've got to really appreciate it. You're in a beautiful spot. It doesn't

matter if you're really unhappy that day. You just gloss it over. You don't know. You come back and say, "That was a great vacation. It was a great vacation."

So what you can do here is just explore eating. Eating's a great place to investigate, unless you have huge issues around it—then don't use that, use something else. Explore sleeping or whatever. But choose something that in our mind we think, "Oh, that's great, that's really where I find happiness."

So chew. Next time they serve a chocolate brownie or something, notice how long, when you're chewing on it, does it really taste good? Chew, chew. There are two chews, and then it's just mechanical movement. Do we keep paying attention then? No. We start thinking about the next bite, don't we? And we think about the next bite until this massive glob is gone, and then we go for the next bite. We say, "That brownie was great." And we wonder why we're not quite in alignment with reality.

Then you might think, "I don't want to look that closely." No, we may not. But believe me, that's really more freeing. Then you can eat as much brownie as you want without needing it to give you more than it can give you. It can give you what it can give you. And then you can put it down when you've had enough. That's sankhara dukkha. And the delusion part is that we just don't pay attention. There's this inattention.

This is what keeps us believing we can have pleasant, pleasant, pleasant—because we're just not really noticing the alternation, the ceaseless alternation. But it doesn't have to be a problem. It frees us. It really does.

When I first started my first three-month retreat, I remembered—I don't have a big thing about eating, but still, I was always on time for lunch, put it that way. There was one guy who would come strolling in twenty minutes after lunch started, and some things would be running out, and I thought, "God, he must be enlightened." I was so amazed. I never really knew who he was. I didn't talk to him ever after. But I just had this sense of, "Wow, how amazing. He must be enlightened."

Then, twenty years later, I just noticed that without even thinking about it, I would come into the meal whenever I came into the meal. And if it was late and the beans were gone—hey, no big deal, the beans were gone. It just really didn't matter. I could like it or not like it, it really didn't matter. It was pleasant or unpleasant, but I wasn't looking to it to give me more than it could give me. There's such freedom around that. We still appreciate, but you're not looking for it to provide something beyond what it can.

That's a simple little example of how the steadiness of attention frees us. It doesn't erode our enjoyment of life. It allows enjoyment to be more true, more natural, more connected.

So I have two minutes to mention again that opening to dukkha is not about passive resignation or non-action in response to our own particular circumstances or in response to the world. The seed, the beautiful jewel in the heart of understanding dukkha, is compassion.

The Dalai Lama says compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is, and this comes

from being with our own experience. Where else can we learn? And this naturally widens and strengthens with a sense of empathy that gradually spreads to all beings.

When we're able to just be present—just for a moment, don't make it your whole life—in that moment, without the need to correct samsara, that experience, just in that moment of the purity of heart-mind, allows for clear recognition and seeing. It allows us to recognize that if the appropriate response is perhaps there's nothing compassionately one can do, then we can bear witness. This is a deep expression of compassion. Just to be with yourself in your suffering. To bear witness to it, to be present with it. That's something many of you are talking about—rather than hating and blaming ourselves or trying to run away.

Yeah, this really... sadness is sad. This is painful. This is an expression of the sadness that we all at times experience. Can I just be with it, with kindness? That's an expression of compassion.

And when we can bear witness with ourselves, sometimes that's all we can do with another. But there's a difference between being able to be with someone as they're going through or expressing their suffering, and the need to fix it because we're uncomfortable. These are two different things.

And then, if there is appropriate action—when we're not caught in reactivity, the response can be one of enormous activity, courage, wisdom, strength. Compassion is not at all passive. The understanding of dukkha without needing to be in a reactive stance actually allows for whatever way our personality wants to express itself as an expression in the world.

I'll end by reading something written by James Lawson, who guided the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Nashville in 1959 and 1960. These were kids in college—African-American young men and women who organized and carried out the Freedom Rides through the South in the years after. Incredible actions of courage and bravery based deeply and profoundly on love, compassion, and nonviolence. As the Dalai Lama said, when we understand our interdependence, nonviolence as a way of action is the natural response.

James Lawson wrote:

"We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the manner of our action. Nonviolence, as it grows from Judaic Christian traditions, seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear. Love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice. Peace dominates war. Faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality. Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Such love goes to the extreme. It remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility."

Knowing that this deep understanding and commitment to love, nonviolence, and interdependence—which needs to be renewed moment after moment after moment—led to incredible

actions of courage and bravery, and in essence, to change injustice. Based not in anger, not in hatred, but out of this understanding, this love and compassion that comes from understanding.

And the way the Buddha teaches, it begins with simply being willing to have the intention to try to land in this moment. That's all. You don't have to do it. You don't have to be perfect. Just the intention, in this moment, to be nonviolent towards your own experience.

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