Expressions of Freedom: The 3rd Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:44

So tonight, as I promised, I will talk about the third noble truth. I'll be using words from different masters and teachers, just to give different flavors. But this is from the Buddha:

"What now is the noble truth of the extinction of dukkha? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving. It's forsaking and abandonment, liberation and detachment from it. The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion—this indeed is called Nibbana. And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there's nothing to be added to what has been done, nothing more remains to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms nor sounds nor odors nor tastes nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such a one to waver. One is steadfast in heart, and one who has considered all the contrasts of this earth, and is no more disturbed by anything in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay."

What I love personally about that definition is that it's very experiential, accessible by the wise, moment to moment—and that includes us. He's describing a state of heart and mind freed from craving. That's what he's calling freedom from confusion, from suffering: the cessation of craving. I really like that because that's the angle from which I want to speak about it tonight, rather than trying to describe some state that we can really start looking for. It's basically saying what we've said all along: turn around, look at your heart, look at your mind. See what's going on. See if this is true.

Because when we hear about freedom from craving, from hatred, from delusion, minds tend to think ahead along the end of a path. We think, "Well, that's down the road, some other lifetime, never going to happen to me," and we just throw it into some idea. But what's so cool about the nature of what we call mind and heart in our moment-to-moment experience is that he's not talking about a distant state at all—a state other than this moment of the heart, mind, consciousness, awareness being free from these torments. I'm going to use "torments" or "kilesas" rather than saying greed, hatred, and delusion every time. That's what I mean by torments.

So it's not like some distant steady state. What we're calling mind is, as Ajahn Analayo describes it, not a steady state. The mind is not a self-existing steady subject that takes objects as content. When we say "the mind," in English it sounds like one steady thing, doesn't it? Just like when we say "the body," we think of a solid, unchanging thing, and the mind too. But the mind is not a subject—it's an activity. It's the process, the moment-to-moment arising and passing process of cognizing the flow of events. Just as the events and objects at the six sense doors are arising in every moment, the cognizing function, which is the function

we call mind, is also arising and passing in every mind moment, of which there are ten million in the blink of an eye.

So when we talk about a moment of mind, of heart, free from greed, hatred, and delusion, this is what makes it accessible to us. Because the so-called mind isn't some solid thing we've got to somehow transform and make other than it is now. We can actually use our practice to look into the quality of the heart-mind in this moment. Does that sound familiar? It's what we've been talking about the whole time. Because it's changing all the time, this means that—not the final never-arising of the torments again, we're not saying that—but in any moment, a kind of taste of this freedom is available to us, accessible to us. There are many moments in the day, believe it or not, when there's not greed, hatred, or delusion, not craving in the mind, in the awareness. We often don't notice it.

So Nibbana is directly visible. This is from the Buddha: Once a Brahmin approached the Blessed One and asked him, "You say Nibbana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see." He's not saying down the road, ten lifetimes from now. Immediate, inviting one to come and see. "What does this mean?"

The Buddha said, "When a person is impassioned with lust, depraved through hatred, bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion, then she plans for her own harm, the harm of others, the harm of both, and experiences in her mind suffering and grief. But when lust, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, he neither plans for his own harm nor the harm of others nor the harm of both. She does not experience in her mind suffering and grief. In this way, Brahmin, Nibbana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise."

I would really invite us to listen to what the Buddha is saying, not get caught up in concepts, but just take it in. Directly visible. Immediate. Immediate means only right now—immediately here, nowhere else.

Not something that we have to get. It's not something at all. But if we really are interested, if we look and begin to see what is worthy of application, exploring what is the quality of heart and mind in a moment when there's wakefulness and it's free from craving—just start to explore and see. What does this mean? What is this experience? Is that something you even know?

And I want to say it is, but we overlook it so often.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, the Thai forest monk and meditation master we've spoken of often. He was quite a scholar. He died in the 1990s. This is from a long talk he gave to Thai people called "Nibbana for Everyone." He was specifically—he was a bit of a radical, I think, as we've said, radical within a very constrained context of Thai Theravada Buddhism. But still, in that place he was a radical. And he's speaking to Thai people who had come to think Nibbana just means when a completely enlightened person dies—that's Nibbana. That Nibbana has no relevance to any of us, or to lay people, or to anybody these days. That's something they talked about in the old days. So that's why he's talking about Nibbana for everyone.

I'm not going to read the whole thing—lucky you—just a few things I picked out.

He says, "Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any kilesa, without any torment. Nibbana is cool." Now he's punning here, because from what I understand, in Thai they use the word Nibbana to mean actually to cool something off—like the rice is Nibbana-ed, for example. So he's punning, but he's also making a good point.

Nibbana is a natural condition, the cool state of mind, of heart, when it's free from kilesa. Buddha termed this the cessation of suffering, which means the extinction of the heat from the kilesa, from the defilements. And just as you hear this, don't think about it so much—take it in. When you're impassioned with lust, bewildered by confusion, doesn't it feel like burning, burning in the mind? Anger—that one's even more obvious.

He goes on (I'm skipping): "When you look further, we will see that the defilements also—greed, hatred, delusion—are also conditioned things, compounded things, coming together from conditions, going apart when those conditions cease. Things that have birth and death." And so this shows that the kilesas occur, and when the conditions that cause them are not present, they simply become extinct. They just become extinct. And although the extinction is temporary—in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily—the phenomenon has the real sense of Nibbana even though it's not the lasting one.

Can you relate? Does this make sense?

"Hence, temporary Nibbana does exist"—this is the Thai master—"for those who unavoidably have some impurities that still arise in their minds."

But he goes on to say, "Anyone can see that if these torments were with us all day and all night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them?" You take that in, and now you may be thinking—if you have a cynical mind—"They *are* with me all day and all night, every second without ceasing." But I think his point is a good one. It's not the case.

He says, "Under such conditions, living beings must either die or really go crazy. So let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of kilesa, of defilement, are not burning. And as a matter of fact, we can say that these periods last longer than when the fires are burning. We survive because of the nourishment from this kind of Nibbana. This nourishing condition is thus normal to what may be called life, mind, heart."

"So why don't we know or recognize or feel thankful for this type of Nibbana?"

That's the million-dollar question. Why don't we even recognize?

So that's one reason I like to talk about this third truth from this angle—because I know in my own life, my practice, whatever, in all the reading and talking about the sense of freedom and the nature of mind and Nibbana, the habit of my mind is craving. Looking for the missing thing that's going to bring me to

completion. Not noticing, not turning around and noticing that what's occurring in my mind at that moment *is* craving—even though the object is some idea of Nibbana or freedom. And then suffering so much from trying to understand what that could mean.

Does anybody relate to that?

So no, no, you have no idea what I'm talking about. Lucky you. There's a lot of suffering going on there. But then you turn your head and go, "Oh, this is crazy." And then there's the voice of Mara: "It may be craving, but you've got to really crave to figure out nibbana. You can't just go, 'This is craving,' and walk away. You can't do that."

So I want to come from this angle, and I'm reading from a lot of teachers. It's not just me throwing in the towel of defeat and saying the best we can do is notice craving in our mind. This is really about starting to see that when craving is not present, that absence is the intimation of freedom. So can we even let it in? Can we notice what Ajahn Buddhadasa called "temporary nibbana"? Why don't we?

And again, the most simple ways—just the simple moments of what I would call now, in my current language, purity of consciousness. When the awareness is there, not distorted by greed, hatred, delusion. We've talked about this a lot, right? Mindfulness. But we still tend to kind of focus on the object of the mindfulness. So it's like starting to shift the field of attention so that we can actually begin to notice what is occurring that we tend to overlook.

I'm sure many of you have heard this really well-known, famous sutta of the Buddha's from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Luminous is this mind, or heart, brightly shining, but it is distorted, it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This unlearned people do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind, the heart. Luminous is this mind, this heart, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way does really understand, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

What was for me kind of an aha moment in my own practice was realizing these two descriptions—luminous is the mind, but the brightness, the natural luminosity of mind is covered by attachments, and then the mind is brightly shining when it's free of attachments—the aha moment was when I got it: that's not necessarily sequential. Even when the luminous quality, the brightness, the radiance of heart and mind is not recognized because of the attachments, the kilesas, that radiance is completely undisturbed. Both can be going on simultaneously.

And the simple way I think about it in my own experience is this: our habit, you know, the kilesas, it's like they make a lot of noise when they're present, right? Greed, hatred, confusion is going on, and all the papañca kicks up, and all the stories, and all the "me." We really notice that stuff. Maybe we're aware of it, maybe we're not, but our attention really gets sucked in. Meanwhile, there's the shining quality of mind noticing that. But the kilesas just make so much noise that we're in the habit of getting completely

entranced and involved and reactive to whatever particular object it is that's occurring at any of the six sense doors. That's kind of where our attention tends to bend, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What do I think about this? What am I seeing? What am I hearing? It's kind of how we talk about our lives.

Even when you come into an interview and I'll say, "What's happening?"—really, that's the wrong question. Big picture, it doesn't matter what's happening. You saw this, you heard that, you felt this, you thought that, another thought, another sight, another sound. That's all that's going on, all day long. This one or that one, what difference does it make? But that's how we talk, and we miss the luminous quality of the heart-mind when it's not distorted by the attachments. We forget to even look in that direction.

I'm not saying we should see some incredible, brilliant nuclear sun. I'm just talking about a very simple quality of the mind, the heart, in those moments when we're not obsessed, distracted, blinded, caught up, seduced—whatever word you want to use—by whatever particular sense object, including mental ones, is occurring.

So it's sort of like we learn to shift the direction of interest, or expand the direction of interest, so we're not just staying, relating and reacting to every single object that comes.

I remember one time I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, very tough teacher, very demanding, very great master. And it's the practice where you're noting every moment whatever's arising. I can't remember what I was reporting in the interview, but clearly I had some kind of complaining tone in my voice. I mean, one wouldn't dare really complain, but clearly I was dissatisfied with what was occurring. And he just says to me, "So what do you want, different objects to note?"

I was like—that was so right on. That's exactly it. Yeah, I want better ones. That's how we're spending our life, wanting better ones to note. And we just keep on spinning, spinning, spinning, and we miss this luminous quality of the heart, the mind, when it's free from attachments, because we don't even think to notice that.

So very simple, when you're here these next days. Now, I don't mean turn around and be looking for some experience—not that. But what we're cultivating here is the quality of awareness, consciousness knowing what's happening, and then the awareness knowing what we're knowing. And as we've said like ten million times, wise attitude: mindfulness, just that complete presence without adding anything extra, without wanting, without aversion, without the overlay of concept or "me."

And this is what Ajahn Buddhadasa is talking about—moments of coolness. Just start to notice them. It's often little moments when anything could be happening. It's not a fantastic sitting, necessarily, at all. It can be a time when you're just walking up to the dorm and there's just no sense of any problem. You're just quite present.

Even then we tend to attribute it to conditions. We often attribute it to the particular object: "Oh, but just

then, the bud on that bush was so lovely, and I just felt this moment of peace appreciating the bud and the softness of the breeze and the sun." And so again, we're throwing all the peace outward to the conditions and not noticing that what was going on is just a moment of pure simplicity of presence.

Kind of like in Zen they just call it the is-ness. Just this. "Just this" could be like the moment I described. It could be taking a step and your toe hurts. It could be coughing. It could be drinking tea. It could be having what you call a great sitting or having what you call a horrible sitting, or just before you fall asleep at night. Many, many of these moments of just the simplicity of presence. Notice that.

Yes, craving will come in, or aversion will come in, or something else will happen, or some yogi walks by and ruins the moment for you. But if you keep the awareness going, you can just notice the change. And if you can notice what made the change—did that yogi walking by really make the change? What's the difference in the mind?

So we notice the difference when the heat from the defilement is again arising. And if you can manage not to take it personally, but just be exploring this difference, this is beginning to recognize. This is the coolness, this intimation of freedom from suffering—immediate, inviting one to come see for oneself.

We look too hard for the big blast, blow it all off, and we never have to deal with this stuff again. Sorry. But more and more and more moments—it becomes more trustworthy. And when we get sucked back into the reactivity, that's much more noticeable. "Oh, wow, this is a defilement, this is the suffering nature again." But we start to know more and more that this coolness—mini-Nibbāna, whatever you want to call it—this coolness, this heading in the direction of the peace of mind and heart that's not disturbed by conditions, we start to get a sense of it, an intimation of it, beginning to trust that it's immediately accessible here and now.

You don't need to be different. I mean, there's nothing different—every moment you're different—but it's not something to gain. Starting to really explore this, that sense of—I don't know, we use the word purity. One friend described it once, these moments of just the simplicity of kind of pure awareness, pure meaning not distorted by kilesa. She described it as feeling squeaky clean, you know, like when you're cleaning a window and you can't see anything and it just squeaks with cleanliness. I somehow like that—just squeaky clean, nothing in the way.

So we can start to explore this, recognize this, see why it is that we don't. Sogyal Rinpoche said—again, this is why we don't—"At the present moment, our mind faces away from itself. Our attention bends towards whatever we experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, or texture. The mind leans towards it."

Do you get a sense of that sometimes? I was talking about craving just at the end of my talk last week—just that subtle movement of mind to kind of fixate on an object can be craving. The attention, Sogyal again: "The attention is also caught up by thoughts about the past, about the future, about the present, when in fact everything takes place in the present."

This is from Huang Po, Chinese Chan master.

This pure mind, this pure heart, shines forever with the radiance of its own perfection. But most people are not aware of it. We think the mind is just the faculty that sees, hears, feels, and knows—just a kind of functioning. We notice the functioning, not the purity of the aware mind itself. Blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling, thinking, they don't perceive the radiance of the source.

Not to make this into some big "source thing" to look for, but just to notice from time to time, with interest, when whatever's arising, that way the attention tends to bend towards it. We don't notice the awareness that's noticing. That's what we've talked about so much—just noticing the knowing, that's all. We're talking about radiance, purity. It's not some huge nuclear sun. It's just this purity of the capacity for knowing, arising out of nothing, going to nothing, nothing you can hold to, no thing—but this radiant source.

And this is the poignancy, really, of craving, of aversion, of reacting to experience: it keeps us so busy and engaged with experience that we don't notice where it's arising from.

Even our mindfulness practice—I mean, whatever we do, however we practice—you've noticed this: the habits of our mind show up in how we practice. The way we act in big situations in life, after a while you realize that's coming up exactly in how you're relating to feeling the breath. It's really amazing. Something so simple as just noticing what's occurring, and all the major traumatic habits of our life show up.

So, even in the choiceless awareness form of mindfulness practice, where we're just noticing whatever's arising by itself—we talk about this because you really begin to get a sense, a little less sense of "me doing" and more just receiving. Stuff's occurring, stuff's occurring. There are times when the awareness is what's obvious, not so much the object.

But even this approach can become meeting, meeting, meeting, meeting—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, noting, noting, noting, noting. That's mindfulness, and it can be quite balanced mindfulness, sammasati. But it can—and I'm speaking totally from personal experience—have just this subtle sense of "me doing," which is craving. Any sense of "me" is a craving. "Me doing." So it seems incredibly mindful. Every moment is mindful, but the sense of "me doing" is just so strong by the end of the day, by the end of the retreat. You go, "What? I don't quite get what's going on here."

So then I'm going to try and not do. I'm going to just receive—things are coming, things are coming—but it's not very clear. "I should be better." And all the while, we're focusing on technique and focusing on object. That's all skillful means. I'm not saying we can throw that stuff out. But let's not forget to keep noticing the awareness that's doing that, the mind that's turning towards—that it's not a thing, but just that activity—not quite so caught up in the objects.

Bhikkhu Anālayo, that very brilliant German Theravada monk and translator, has a theory. He says one of the reasons Western meditators may progress more slowly than their Eastern counterparts—now, I don't know if that's true, but he did a lot of his practice in Sri Lanka, so this is his opinion; I'm not necessarily

endorsing it—but this is the point: our tendency to become absorbed in the content of awareness rather than continuing to attend to the process of awareness.

That's exactly the point I'm making. When you come to an interview and I say, "What's happening?"—I'm making that same mistake. I'm going into the content of awareness. But really what we want to attend to is the process of awareness, over and over and over. And that gets more and more interesting, more and more obvious.

You have to think about it; it just becomes more obvious. And then you'll notice when the process of awareness is really distorted by kalesha.

A lot of people have been describing now, in our meetings, how all of a sudden they realize there must be aversion in the mind because they were having these really negative thoughts about everything they saw and people who walked by. And it's great, because maybe a year ago we wouldn't have even noticed that it was the process of awareness getting distorted. We would have just really thought there's something wrong with everybody and everything—the sun and the bushes—or something really wrong with me. Instead of saying, "This is a momentary arising of aversion that's distorting perception in awareness." And what comes together can go apart.

If we get interested in the process of awareness rather than doing battle with the aversion, we're back in a moment where awareness is like this, aversion is like this. There can be that squeaky clean process of awareness even with aversion or wanting as the object, when it's not all mixed up with the awareness, when we can see it.

This is from another Thai forest master, Ajahn Tate. He speaks of "the mind"—and again, even though it's just this changing process that awareness comes from, just saying "the mind," my mind goes back to solidity because of how we're used to thinking. So just to remind you: the mind is the process of knowing.

He's saying the mind and the defilements, the kalesha, are not identical. This could be good news. If they were, purification of mind would be impossible. The mind makes up imaginings. It imagines things that harness the defilements to itself—meaning it imagines things that hold the defilements to itself—and then becomes unsure as to exactly what is the mind and what is defilement. Do you get a sense of that? Like you can't tell the difference.

So this is his metaphor: Water in its natural state is a pure, transparent fluid. But if dye is added to it, it will change color accordingly. If red dye is added, it will turn red. If blue dye is added, it will turn blue. But even though the water may change color in accordance with the substances introduced into it, it actually never forsakes its innate purity and colorlessness. So if a wise person is able to distill the colored water, the water resumes its natural state. The dye stuff can only cause variation in outer appearance, not in intrinsic nature.

When we say awareness doesn't care what it's aware of—or someone said to me, "What about if

awareness cares equally about what it's aware of?" I said, okay, that works too. Awareness cannot be stained or damaged or harmed in any way because the object of awareness is some really disgusting thought or mood. And it's not made better by being aware of really subtle movements of piti. Its natural moment of pure awareness is just what it is.

This is the beginning of that sense of luminosity, of radiance—not always huge, because there's so much subtle confusion covering it—but just begin to get interested. Intimations of this. You begin to really see it's not some far away possibility. If you're looking for the big bang, yes. But if you're willing to just touch into the simplicity of is-ness—of just standing here hearing the wind, before it goes to "I'm standing here hearing the wind"—just hearing, just seeing, just being with. Taste the quality not only of the object but of the awareness itself.

Ajahn Sumedho says something I love. It isn't exactly, I would say, kosher Theravada teaching, but he says the practice of freedom is awareness. Consciousness is the doorway to liberation. Now, I'm not equating consciousness and awareness—he might have been. I would say consciousness is just that quality of knowing, the natural quality of knowing. Hearing just happens by itself. Awareness is recognizing that knowing is happening. But he's saying awareness is the practice of freedom. And consciousness is the doorway to liberation, meaning when anything arises in consciousness and is known, it ceases. And then there's freedom again.

This is what's occurring moment after moment after moment, all day long. The Tibetans often have a phrase: all difficult thoughts, emotions, everything that arises, self-liberates in the nature of mind. To me that's exactly the same thing Ajahn Sumedho was saying. Something arises in consciousness, is known by awareness, and is left just as it is.

The conditions change, it vanishes, it dissipates. And again there's peace. It's what you could call self-liberating. We didn't have to get in there with hammer and tongs and fix it. But resting at ease in whatever arises, with this purity of awareness, trusting the awareness, seeing what occurs—it self-liberates.

Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche speaks about this same understanding. Again, this is Tibetan language, but it's the same teaching. He says this is one's birthright, one's nature. It is not something missing to be sought for and obtained elsewhere, but is the very heart of our original existential being. And this, I think, is important: it is actually inseparable from our uncontrived everyday awareness.

So Dzogchen says sometimes in the heart of our everyday moment-to-moment awareness is this potential to be just pure, free. In that moment, there's no problem. Beyond willful alteration, free from conceptuality. Unfabricated, ordinary awareness. That's just what we're practicing here. Unadulterated by effort and modification. Naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural awareness. Totally natural. Stop trying so hard, because awareness is just natural. We've given so many examples of that. What could be simpler than this—to rest at home and at ease in total naturalness? They ask, what could be simpler than this?

Then he says, get out of the construction business. Just rest at ease in whatever arises and stop constructing all this stuff.

The point I'm making here is that our natural, ordinary, everyday awareness is the doorway in. And it's these simple moments when nothing special is going on that we can actually recognize and access it. I don't know if it's just the way things are speeding up, so intense in our culture—I guess not, because this goes back to the Buddha—but we're looking too much for something really shocking, something really incredible, something to really notice. And so in these little moments, it's not enough of an anything. We don't trust that recognizing that purity of awareness, just our natural awareness—not supermundane, super concentrated—our natural awareness is a doorway in. This is really a place we begin to explore the third noble truth, over and over and over.

This is from the Dalai Lama, saying the same thing in his own way: that when the mind is free of negative emotions and tendencies, it understands and knows all phenomena. It is only because there are obscuring veils between the mind and its object that we are unable to know all things. This is the point. Once these veils have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing and being aware is the nature of the mind itself.

It is amazing that it ought to be so simple. Just seeing and being aware—that's going on all day, and we get so caught up and complicated. When I said in some talk ago to Ben, "Why didn't you tell me it was this close—closer than my eyelid?"—I'm always looking way out for something much more. And this is so ordinary, so completely accessible, arising in our experience every moment, that we just overlook it completely.

Our ordinary everyday awareness is not separate. Not removed from life. The practice of freedom is awareness. What I want to say is the more we appreciate just this coolness—just think of it as this coolness, just simple awareness—the heart and mind maybe not plunging quite so much into objects, we start to actually recognize ourselves and the world in another way.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, when the mind isn't obscured, when awareness isn't obscured, we see and know things clearly. That's the nature of the mind itself. When I've been talking about recognizing accurately, the real, the deep freedom that comes—more than just the little moments—doesn't come from going somewhere else, but from recognizing more and more deeply and accurately just the way things have always been. And are now.

It's not something else we have to achieve.

Remember when Greg, quite a few talks ago, read that line from the Buddha? When someone asked the Buddha to distill everything he knew into one sentence, he said, "Nothing is worth clinging to." Remember that? It's a test: nothing is worth clinging to.

This teaching is furthered in that same discourse. Having directly known everything, she fully

understands everything. And having fully understood everything, she sees all signs differently. She sees the eye differently, forms differently, and so with all the sense bases. Whatever feeling arises connected with seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, with mind contact as condition—that too she sees differently. When a bhikkhu knows and sees thus, ignorance is abandoned and true knowledge arises.

Seeing signs differently means seeing without the distortions. Seeing, you could say, the impermanent quality, the not-self quality, the unreliable and unsatisfactory quality. Not something we have to click through and see, but rather it becomes so clear that all arising experience has this ephemeral nature—whatever is conditioned comes apart. Ephemeral, not lasting, but also not self-existing.

This is sometimes called emptiness, but as Ajahn Amaro points out in his book *The Island*, the Buddha didn't talk about emptiness as a thing or a state. Rather, he spoke of all experience as being empty of inherent self-existence. This seeing signs differently, this opening into the empty quality of nothing being inherently solid and self-existing, is actually one of the deeper aspects of freedom. It releases even more fully the tendency to get sucked into and reactive to objects.

Ajahn Jumnian, another Thai forest master who is still alive, describes it this way when speaking about meditation: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is recognized as simply mind and matter—an empty process arising and passing away of its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. And there's no longer any personal doing." This is a moment of balanced mind.

But people often think that this sense of emptiness, empty of self, moves into "who cares"—the indifference aspect of equanimity. What Ajahn Chah describes is true equanimity. It's not a divorcing or separation from our life, from activity, from anything. Emptiness is right in the heart of it all.

Pema Chödrön speaks about this empty quality of the sense of self, of permanence—how any experience is recognized simply when the mind is not clinging. That's all. When the mind is not clinging, not making something of anything, not resting or holding to any experience, she says, "Keep on going. Everything is a verb."

Then she tells this story. Some people have heard it, but I share it because it's funny. Chögyam Trungpa and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, two great masters, were sitting under a tree somewhere in Bodh Gaya together, just so happy to be in each other's company. They sat there beaming, silent, grinning for hours without saying anything. After about three hours, Chögyam Trungpa broke the silence. With a huge smile, he pointed and said, "They call that a tree." And they both just cracked up laughing.

It's a subtle thing, but you see—they know we call it a tree. Yet they see all signs differently. We can recognize tree, we can use tree, and we know it has no inherent self-existence.

Another Tibetan teacher puts it this way: "The experience of emptiness is not found outside of the world of ordinary appearance, as many people mistakenly assume. In truth, we experience emptiness when the

mind is free of grasping at appearance." And yet we fully know all appearance. We fully relate. And the natural response of this heart-mind of non-grasping is compassion.

I want to end by reading two passages from beings who experienced this directly. The first is from a Tibetan wandering monk called Shabkar, who lived from 1781 to 1851. He was very, very famous.

He was sort of like Milarepa in that he wandered all through Tibet, simply practicing his whole life—practicing and creating these beautiful songs of compassion and awakening. What's interesting about Shabkar is that they say he was very poor and uneducated. All of his practice came not from intellectual study or understanding, but purely from his own direct experience. He was also deeply compassionate. He didn't eat meat, which is very rare in Tibet because there's not much else to eat. And he would often try to buy animals that were going to be slaughtered in order to save them—that kind of really profound compassion.

So this is a little bit long, and I'm sorry, but I just love this. It's called "The Fruit." This is one of his songs about his experience of emptiness and compassion:

When one looks at one's own mind, the root of all phenomena, there is nothing but vivid emptiness. Nothing concrete there to be taken as real. It is present as transparent, utter openness, without outside, without inside—an all-pervasiveness without boundary and without direction. The wide open expanse of the view, the true condition of mind, is like sky-like space, without center, without edge, without aim. By leaving whatever I experience relaxed in ease, just as it is, I have arrived at the vast plane that is the absolute expanse. Dissolving into the expanse of emptiness that has no limits and no boundary, all vision, all sound, my own mind, and the sky all merge. Not once did the notion arise of these being separate and distinct.

Now this is interesting:

In the absolute expanse of awareness, all things are blended into that single taste, but relatively each and every phenomenon is distinctly, clearly seen.

This is the paradox that keeps going back and forth. Wondrous.

Toward all the beings under the skies who have failed to realize this, all-pervading compassion spontaneously dawned. The urge to sing this song arose of itself—without entering the narrow rock gorge which is mind watching for stillness and movement, without being caught in the snare of view and meditation created by the intellect, without flying into the dark clouds of dull states of mind, without plunging into the storm of agitated thinking. The great Garuda, my own mind, flew freely into the wide open sky of the absolute expanse.

In this expanse of sky-like evenness, all phenomena, all appearances and sounds of samsara and nirvana are apparent yet empty. They are empty and yet they appear. Although they appear, phenomena are empty, free of the limiting concept "truly existent." Although they are empty by nature, phenomena do appear, free of the

limiting concept "non-existent." In the vast space of the view that is itself spontaneously free from the two limiting concepts—belief in permanence or belief in nothingness—this joyous song burst forth by itself.

Even more vast than the sky is the view of emptiness. There the sun of love and the moon of compassion arose. And again and again I made boundless prayers to benefit the teachings and beings. May all disease and epidemics, all famine and all wars be ended, and may all have happiness and joy.

And this last piece is from a letter from Mingyur Rinpoche, written about a year and a half ago. He's the younger brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Many of you probably know that he went off for three years to do retreat, and he just vanished—simply walked out from Bodh Gaya, didn't tell anyone where he went, didn't take anything with him. He said he didn't even take a toothbrush. He just went off. So really, he's doing today pretty much the same wandering practice that Shabkar or Milarepa was doing.

After about a year and a half, one of his most devoted disciples, Ramatashi, happened to run into him in Nepal and begged to be allowed to come with him. So he went with him for a while. Then Mingyur gave him this letter and sent him away again. I'll just read a few passages, not the whole thing:

"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 felt cold, hungry, and thirsty."

And you know, he doesn't mean a little bit cold, a little bit hungry. He's wandering around in Tibet without a coat.

"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."

This natural clarity of awareness has been with us from the very beginning. It is the essence and nature of our minds. Therefore, one must maintain this flow of pure awareness to the best of one's ability—exactly what we are doing.

While all beings have great wisdom and compassion, this is not always apparent. This is simply because they have not recognized what they already have. Thus, aside from merely recognizing our own true nature, there isn't the slightest thing to meditate on.

"Recognizing the importance of this, I have passed my days feeling joyful and content, wandering through the mountains and valleys and staying here and there. From my heart, I sincerely encourage all of you to practice diligently in this manner as well."

I just love it. It's like today—that's happening today.

This is the last paragraph from the Buddha's description of the third noble truth:

"Hence, the purpose of the holy life does not consist in acquiring alms, honor, or fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the object of the holy life. That is its essence."

Unshakable deliverance of the heart. Rather like what Mingyur Rinpoche was speaking about.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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