Nature and Cause of Suffering

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:24

Last night Stephen spoke briefly about the Four Noble Truths—the first teaching that the Buddha ever gave, and really the core teaching.

If you recall, the first truth is that of the unsatisfactory nature of our life. Not just painful, but unsatisfactory. The second truth is that the cause of this—the word is *dukkha*, which we translate as unsatisfactory—the core cause of this is the movement of craving in the mind. It is the cause of suffering or unsatisfactoriness because we crave what is insubstantial, ephemeral, not lasting. We crave for happiness where it can't be found. The third truth is that there is an end, a cessation to this movement of craving—a liberation, freedom, peace. And the fourth truth is the Eightfold Noble Path, the way that the Buddha laid out for us to develop, to touch more and more deeply the truth of who we are, this truth of freedom.

Tonight I want to talk mainly about these first two noble truths.

It's said that the Buddha, after his years of practice and his full deep realization, his great wisdom, was at first not so inclined to teach. He was reflecting on this depth of truth that he had realized and thought that this truth is profound and very hard to see—that a person cannot come to it by thinking about it, but only by direct experience. The wise will understand this truth of our being through only direct experience. But he continued: this generation, where he was alive at that time 2,500 years ago, this generation relishes attachment, delights in attachment. So it's hard for them to see this truth.

I guess things haven't changed very much.

Thinking this, he thought, well, what's the use? I might as well just hang out in the bliss of *Nibbāna* for the rest of my life. He thought he wouldn't be understood. So the legend has it that a Brahma being from one of the high Brahma realms came down and begged the Buddha to teach out of great compassion for the world. And it's said that the Buddha used his all-seeing wisdom to survey the world. One of the things he saw, and what touched his great compassion, is that everyone just wants to be happy. All of us, deeply in our heart—what do we want? We want to be happy. Yet through our blindness, through not understanding, he saw that people were doing, in their efforts to be happy, just the opposite of what would make them happy. In pursuing happiness, they were doing it in a way that was only bringing more suffering. Out of great compassion, he decided to teach, to share what he had discovered, and so spent the next 45 years of his life doing that.

The truth is hard to see, not because it's somewhere else, not because we have to somehow be different in

order to see it. It's hard to see because we look to the wrong things for happiness. Because we see in an incorrect way. Because we don't look at what's really happening now and so don't see the truth of things.

That's why I want to talk about the first two truths. I love talking about them because the understanding of these—the truth of the unsatisfactoriness and of craving—is so liberating. It is the key to understanding what happiness is, what truth is.

When we touch our true nature, in that moment, the truth of who we are beyond body, beyond mind, beyond this duality, this sense of me and you—in that moment, craving doesn't make any sense. There's nothing to crave. And so it's not a problem. But paradoxically, what blinds us to touching this truth of who we are is just this movement of craving in our minds, in our hearts.

So I feel it's very important—it's vital, actually—for us to inquire into this process of craving, to really come to understand it, to see it for what it is: this movement of mind, this cause of suffering. And in inquiring into craving, we also begin to see what leads us into craving in the first place. That is our not really deeply understanding the truth of *dukkha*, of the unsatisfactory nature of things.

Not understanding this truth of the unsatisfactory nature of existence, we basically keep thinking that there's some experience, some physical object, some emotional or mental or physical experience that we can have that is going to be ultimately satisfying, that's going to bring us lasting happiness. We don't put it that way so broadly in our minds, but through our not investigating, that's the way we're acting. And so we keep craving, we keep looking for this satisfaction where it can't be found, and we keep suffering. We keep being confused, we keep feeling shut out and separate from who we really are, from peace.

I think that's what the Buddha meant when he talked about how everyone wants to be happy, but we keep doing just the opposite—what will only bring us more confusion and suffering.

So let's examine these two truths, and just look a little bit at how our misunderstanding of these facets of existence continues to bring about confusion and suffering.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was an Indian wise man, said once that the obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain.

And that's the first two truths in reverse: fear of pain, desire for pleasure.

So this first noble truth, the truth of dukkha or unsatisfactoriness—the unsatisfactoriness of pain, the unsatisfactoriness of impermanence, that what we love, what we cherish, changes, goes away, or we change.

When I first started hearing about this, the thought that came was, "Well, suffering is no big secret. Why is this such a big truth to proclaim? All you have to do is pick up the newspaper any day and read it, talk to five people you meet on the street. It's pretty clear that there's a lot of suffering and unsatisfactoriness in the world. So what's the big secret?"

But when we really start inquiring into it in our day-to-day life, begin to look at how we're relating to our experiences just on a mundane, day-to-day level, it's quite fascinating to me to continue to see how limited—at least for me—my ability to open to the absolute truth of unsatisfactoriness or suffering is. The tendency to deny and avoid is enormous. So I see why the Buddha proclaimed it: to wake us up, to start paying attention to what's really happening. Not to develop a depressive, aversive relationship to life. In fact, it's just the reverse. He's saying, let's look at what's really going on in order to wake us up, in order to open us to the potential of living in truth at this very moment, rather than living in denial, rather than living in fear, even if we're not aware of it.

So what are some of the ways that we deny? Just a couple of examples, and you can find them in your own life. Go through a day and we're doing it all the time. But these are real obvious ones, where we deny another's pain right in front of us, or deny our own internal pain.

Once I was in the hospital and a doctor was doing a procedure on me that was relatively painful—not killer, but relatively painful. And he was having trouble doing it, trying it over and over and over. It was really hurting. I was pretty on the edge anyway, so I started crying some. He just looks at me and says, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

It's really interesting. Looking at it on another level, it's the same process exactly. I notice when I go to India—I was just in India a couple of months ago—it's a very painful place. So I pay attention to when I first get into a city, and one, especially a Westerner, is accosted by beggars. Really, not just kind of panhandlers, but truly emaciated people, lepers, people who are quite maimed, in really poor condition, obviously in great need. And it's not just one or two. If you give any amount of money to one, you can literally be mobbed by a group of them.

So I pay attention: how long can I really stay open to this suffering, to connecting with these people? And it's sad—it's not long. Maybe in ten minutes I notice I'm shutting down, I'm kind of averting my eyes, I'm walking past a little more hurriedly. Maybe the next day I start out open again.

So what's going on? Why do I shut down? Why did the doctor have to deny my obvious pain? I feel that to open to the immensity of pain in another, the immensity of pain in the world, triggers off the same immensity of pain in myself. And to the extent that it's too much for me to handle, sometimes we just don't want to acknowledge it. Sometimes it's really overwhelming; sometimes it's just more than we can open to and handle at a time. So I'm not saying we should immediately open to all the pain in the world.

But just watching that process of shutting down and why—and can I then bring my attention back and feel that pain and know that that's okay? Pain, suffering is part of life in this mind and body on this planet. I don't have to be afraid of it.

But the question might come up: why do we have to open to this pain? What's the point? I thought I was doing okay. But really, I know you all don't think you're doing okay or you wouldn't be here going through

this torturous process of sitting and walking and watching everything that arises. I know I wouldn't do it if I thought everything was completely okay.

So notice—I notice when I shut down to the beggars, when I shut down to pain, my own and others' pain—what's the effect of that? I no longer make contact. There's no longer a sense of connection.

I'm actually shut down to the truth in that moment. Because the thing is, we can't shut down selectively. We tell ourselves, "I'll shut down to pain, but I'll stay open to compassion and joy and appreciation." It doesn't work that way. When I shut off to the truth of this moment, there's disconnection, separation, a sense of being out of touch.

And one learns that in shutting ourselves off, in denying—whether consciously or unconsciously—the truth of this moment when it happens to be painful, that's actually in the long run much more painful and difficult. It leads to much more isolation and confusion than actually just acknowledging that this moment is painful and allowing that experience to be as it is. Because what's so amazing is that often that also opens into great compassion and appreciation and joy. But the basic reason is this: in shutting off and denying what's happening in this moment, there's no way we can touch the truth of who we are, because we're denying it.

So we begin to notice how and when and why this denial of what's happening takes place.

We deny as well the dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness, of change. We all know intellectually that everything changes. But I just watch it in my life. For example, I recently moved into a new house that was freshly built. And within no time, I'm noticing the black marks on the wall and the little cracks appearing as the house begins to settle. There's this real sense of, "They did it wrong. They made a mistake." But they didn't do anything wrong. Everything decays. It changes. That's the nature of things. If I can't acknowledge and allow that, I'm going to suffer.

This culture—and this culture is crazy—we're in one mass denial of the fact that we're aging and dying. Just the other day, several of us fell into this conversation about facelifts, and it got quite intricate about what's involved and what goes on. At the end of it, one of us said, "We must be getting old. We've known each other for a long time, and we never had this conversation before." What's going on in our culture that we need to do this? We need to deny what's happening right in front of us. Why is that so scary?

This denial gives us a really skewed view of the world. I know I grew up with a really unconscious, skewed view of life. There was an unspoken assumption in my house that I didn't even recognize until I was about twenty-five: you're supposed to be healthy, you're supposed to be happy, you're not supposed to have a lot of emotional mood swings. And if you're unhappy? "Well, don't be sad. Come on, smile." So the unspoken assumption was that there was something really wrong with me. If, having a quite blessed life as I did, I could still feel miserable and discontent—well, maybe there's something wrong with me as a person. It led to a lot of confusion and frustration and self-blame and self-judgment.

That's why this teaching of the First Noble Truth—the fact that there is unsatisfactoriness inherent in our existence—came not as a depressing thing but as a huge relief. It was like, "Oh, right." It acknowledged my experience. I didn't feel so crazy anymore. Finally, an explanation of what's really going on. Because it's not just talking about the obvious painful or changing situations, which God knows is enough—and we still manage to hide from even that at times. But it also helped me begin to tune into the unsatisfactory nature of experiences on a more subtle level.

Let me tell you a little story. It could be almost any experience, but this was when I really woke up to it and realized why I felt so crazy, why I thought I should be happy and wasn't. One fall, a friend and I—I was teaching a three-month course in Massachusetts—belonged to a health club where we would go swimming and work out. We were really tired that day. It had been a long week, and we decided to go swimming to refresh ourselves. We got really happy at the idea.

So I'll describe blow by blow what actually happened, rather than what I thought was happening. We got in the car, drove for half an hour, arrived—it was really cold—got out and went in. The dressing room was quite chilly, and I'm very susceptible to cold. So I was freezing getting into my bathing suit.

Took a shower, walked out to the pool—I was even more freezing. Got into the water, which wasn't particularly warm, so I was quite uncomfortable and shivering. I started swimming really fast, and after about two laps, I got warm. For about one lap, I was really enjoying it. And then my arms started to hurt, and it just started to be boring. I thought, "Well, I can't wait to get in the sauna."

So I dragged myself through a couple more laps, got out—cold again—went into the sauna, relaxed, and thought, "This feels great." And it felt great for about five minutes. Then the wooden board started to really hurt my back. I got really sweaty, kind of dizzy, developed a headache. So I decided to go out. I went out—it was really cold. I sat there and cooled off. "Oh, now I'm cold. I'm going to go back in the sauna." I went in the sauna. It felt good for about two minutes. Then again I started to sweat, got dizzy, went out, took a shower—it was cold—got dressed, went upstairs, and met my friend. He's a man, so he'd been in the men's room. He said, "Boy, that was great!" A typical experience. And I would wonder, how come I don't feel really incredibly good now?

Of course, again, you might say, "Well, who wants to look this closely? It's really depressing." And I want to say again: it's not. It's not depressing at all. It's quite the reverse. It's quite liberating. It's seeing what's actually going on, and it allows for much more appreciation of what's actually happening—when I'm not trying to twist the experience to meet some idea I have of how good it ought to feel, how it ought to be, how it should make me happy for good.

The Buddha said at one point that he teaches one thing only: dukkha and the ending of dukkha. This beginning to see on a more subtle level the unsatisfactory parts of our experience serves as a way to wake us up. It's like we begin to really pay attention. We begin to come back into the present moment. And when we're paying attention and alive and present, that's when we open to the truth of who we are—not

when we're trying to twist our experience to meet some idea or expectation.

A real simple example from retreat, just from talking to a few people here: you might find that you sometimes go through the day always leaning into the next experience. You come to the sitting, you sit down, and within five minutes you've got this thought: "Forget this one, but I can't wait till I get to the walking." You get out to the walking, and after ten minutes it's like, "God, this is driving me crazy, but soon it'll be lunch." You get to lunch and it's okay, but it's not really quite doing it for you, so you think about your nap. And it just goes like that—leaning into the next thing, leaning into the next thing.

What's going on? That movement in itself is quite unsatisfying. It's really quite a suffering experience to always be waiting for the next thing because this one isn't doing it. That suffering in itself can wake us up. Come back. What's going on right now?

You'll almost always see that when we bring our full attentive being into this moment, there will be something unpleasant happening right now. I don't mean every moment there's something unpleasant. I mean when you find yourself leaning into and wanting the experience to be different, and you come back, there's almost always something unpleasant. Maybe something just really mildly unpleasant.

A slight unpleasant sensation in the knee, a little bit of boredom, a little bit of restlessness going unrecognized. Somehow the sitting just isn't meeting our expectations of what we want to be happening. And our conditioning is so strong to avoid, to deny the unpleasant, that when we're not aware of tuning into that, we just immediately start leaning into wanting the experience to be different, looking forward to the next thing.

When we look at it, the suffering that comes about from this moving out of our present moment's experience is often so much stronger than if we just opened into the fact of restlessness. Okay, there's restlessness. It's unpleasant. And that's okay. It's not such a big deal.

So we see in looking at an experience, just a simple experience like this, through bringing attention and mindfulness to the unpleasantness, we see in operation the second truth: that the cause of the real suffering in that experience isn't the unpleasant twinge in the knee or the restlessness per se. It's the craving—this leaning forward, wanting the experience to be different, to be better, looking for something to always be pleasant, as if that's going to bring us happiness.

This movement of craving is the real suffering. It's the real blinding factor in our experience. It's born of denial of unsatisfactory or unpleasant experience, born of denial of the fact that things change, that everything changes. By themselves, neither pleasure nor pain enlighten. Only understanding does.

So can we bring our mindful attention to this movement of craving in order to come to understand it, to come to be free of this misperception that happiness will come about through craving?

When we talk about craving or desire, I want to clarify a language thing. In Pali, the language that these

Buddhist texts are written in, there are three different words that in English tend to all be translated as desire. What I'm talking about, this movement of craving, is a word that literally translates into English more as *thirst*. It's like when you're really just thirsting for something—for sense experience, for an idea, for a pleasant sensation, for anything. Just this craving that pulls you out of yourself.

There's also the desire that simply knows you're hungry and you need to eat, that you're sleepy and you need to sleep—just taking care of the basic facts of our existence without this thirsting in the mind. That's not what we're talking about. And there's also a type that's translated as desire that's really the desire for freedom, for understanding—perhaps what brings us to this practice, to our spiritual path. And that can actually be quite helpful.

So in talking about craving as the cause of suffering, I'm talking about this energy, this thirsting for experience, for things to be different.

How can we explore it? How does craving arise in a moment? Because as with any experience, it's something that arises due to conditions. It lasts. It passes away. It's not permanent. It's not something always lurking in our experience. It comes and goes. And we can come to understand that.

In all of our field of experience, there are only six possible types of sense objects. Six types of things to crave. It really reduces it to a minimum when we look at it this way. There are sight objects, sounds, tastes, smells, touch or sensory experience, and mental experience. And that's it. Everything else is just ramifications of that, which we prettify and make more complex.

These different sense experiences are arising and passing as we sit, as we walk, as we move through the day—coming and going quite rapidly as we begin to notice. When there's an object, a sense object, for example a sight, that comes together with a sense organ like the eye, and there's consciousness of that called sight consciousness, that's what we call contact—that moment of those three coming together. In that moment of contact, a feeling arises. It's either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

Say there's a smell and it's pleasant. From that pleasantness, craving can quite naturally arise—just this movement towards that pleasantness. With mindfulness, we can be quite aware of this whole process, seeing it clearly, and it doesn't really go any further. There's not a lot of proliferation about it. It's no big deal. It's not a lot of suffering. It doesn't really take us away from this moment.

But when we're not aware of it, and it happens quite quickly, the craving strengthens. Now there's a smell, it's pleasant, you start thinking about how hungry you are, you imagine pancakes, you start thinking about what you'd like to have for lunch, you start thinking about your ideal breakfast. It gets really complicated. The craving and all the thoughts and associations start proliferating, and you end up in this really solid fixation on something. Suddenly the present experience—just sitting and being with the breath, which a minute ago was very peaceful and calm—is not okay. It's really unsatisfying.

Yet what is interesting is that when we don't really inquire into this process, we tend to take it for granted,

There's something about this craving—for the pancakes, for example—that when we don't look at it, somehow there's something we kind of like about it. Have you ever noticed that?

The Buddha, in describing this truth of craving, says at one point that this craving is accompanied with delight, finding pleasure or satisfaction now here, now there. Somehow, when unexamined, we kind of like to crave. We think it's pleasant somehow, and so we don't recognize the danger of what's actually happening. And what's actually happening is that the craving is blinding us to the truth of this moment.

For example, that craving for food, the extended food fantasy—it seems kind of pleasant. I know so many times we're sitting and it's really hard to pull back from a fantasy because it feels nice. We think it's really enjoyable. But what's the effect? Pay attention to what the effect is when something finally does snap us out of it. We wake up and here we are, still sitting here. "Oh no, fifteen more minutes to go." It's unpleasant. We're much more out of touch. The breath seems really dull. Our sensations are hard to get in touch with. We're much more discontented than ever.

We go to lunch, and instead of blueberry pancakes, there's lentils and steamed vegetables—which we normally love. But because we had something else in mind, we're really disgruntled and dissatisfied with what's actually there. Much more out of touch, unable to appreciate what's actually happening in this moment.

This is what craving does. It distorts our perception—our perception of what is craved and of everything else. There's a saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. Craving distorts our perception. We can't appreciate what's really happening.

So our mindfulness practice is not to condemn craving or ourselves, not to judge, but to begin to see this process clearly, to begin to understand it, and through understanding to come to liberation from it. Krishnamurti said, "Unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable."

So let's investigate together for a moment. What is craving? How do we actually experience this movement of craving, of grasping?

We're sitting, for example, with the breath. Experience after experience arises. We note it, and it passes. There's the breath. There's hearing. We note it. There's a sensation. We note it. It diminishes. There's a sound. We note it. It diminishes. No big deal.

Then suddenly, one experience is sort of isolated and grasped onto. This one is it. This one is really important. For instance, the sound. What does it feel like just in that moment, this movement of craving?

I personally experience it almost as a physical sensation, as if somewhere inside there's a movement of leaning forward and tightening, grabbing onto that sound. It feels unpleasant, and I feel unbalanced. Whereas before there was a calm, clear seeing, suddenly the inner experience feels unbalanced.

And then comes a stronger identification with the wanting—all this proliferation, these constructions,

explanations, stronger desires, self-image, judgment. Everything gets stronger and more complicated and much more unpleasant.

So, for example, there's a sound, a movement of craving, really grasping onto it. "Oh, that's a bird outside. That's so beautiful. I'd love to go outside and see that bird." And it just gets stronger, and pretty soon it's really hard to sit still. The whole sense of the hall is dark, it's dank in here, it's really depressing, it's so beautiful and spacious outside.

It's really strange to be in such a beautiful environment and just be sitting here inside in the dark. I should go out and appreciate the bird. Oh, what's the matter with me? I came here to meditate and I'm just using this as an excuse. And it gets into self-judgment—a really solid sense of me and other. It's a lot of suffering.

If at some point we actually leap up and run out of here, ostensibly to go see the bird, if you're paying attention, you'll see we're really leaping out so that the feeling of craving will come to an end. Because it's so unpleasant, we act on the craving basically so we don't have to feel the experience of craving itself. That's what happens when we get the object we're craving—to end that uncomfortable state.

So notice when this experience of craving comes up. It probably will come up sometime before the rest of the night is over. Our perception is distorted. Our mind is unbalanced, kind of wavering, unsteady. We can't really see what's clearly happening.

I'll give an example. The other day I was with a friend and craving got triggered. Someone mentioned the words "chocolate milkshake." I had been perfectly happy the moment before, peacefully sitting in the sun. But someone said "chocolate milkshake" and then mentioned a place to go get them. I know this isn't fair to mention to you as yogis, so I'll just say the ending now—the place was closed and we never got it. So you've got nothing to envy.

Craving got established and we sat around talking for fifteen more minutes. I was getting more and more uncomfortable. I was no longer happy sitting there. I had to get out and go get a chocolate milkshake. So that movement of unpleasantness drove me and my friend into the car.

We're driving. The place is closed. Real disappointment. We decide to go down the whole strip of Yucca Valley looking. This is how craving distorts our perception—you know how when you really want something, you twist around what you see until it fits what you're wanting, even though that's not what's there at all? So we're driving and my friend is trying to read all the signs. He goes, "Oh look, Yogurt Cup! Yogurt Cup!" I looked over. It said "Urgent Care." It was a little hospital. This is what happens.

So we distort our perceptions. We can't appreciate what's in the moment—which is, I was quite happily appreciating sitting in the sun until this craving arose. When we're with a strong craving and not mindful of it, which clearly I wasn't, we don't have clear judgment. We're driven to end the craving. Do anything to get rid of this feeling. Hop in the car and drive around all day just to not have to feel craving.

A third way that the movement of craving distorts our experience is that again, it takes us out of what is true, out of being able to be present in the moment. It becomes impossible to know and experience our basic interconnectedness, the ultimate unity, the perfection of what is in this moment. Because when one thing is isolated and grasped onto, there's an immediate separation of that from everything else—of me and what I want out there to make me happy. You become lost in the experience of duality.

Again, a simple retreat example. I know James mentioned the other morning this phenomenon of vipassana romance—someone you know nothing about, that you're just incredibly drawn to, the object of a lot of craving in the mind. So imagine you're doing walking meditation very carefully, pretty calm, very peaceful, feeling the sensations, just very present. And suddenly there's a sight. We recognize that sight as the object of our vipassana romance, and strong craving arises, leading to a whole series of thoughts. We're not mindful of it, obviously. The craving gets stronger, culminates in this really strong grasping. I need to go talk to that person. How am I ever going to make it through the rest of the retreat?

In that moment, if you were just to stop and notice what was happening—how aware are you? How connected are you with the actuality of your experience? How aware are you of others, of the surroundings, of the beauty of the desert, the wind on your face?

The mind becomes locked onto its object, and there arises a strong sense of separation—"I need that." In this state, there is no peace. There is no ability to appreciate what's actually present. And in fact, this strong separation extends to everything else, because other people simply become objects standing in the way of gratifying our craving, rather than beings with whom we share a basic unity.

Contrast this experience, which is actually quite unpleasant and deeply separating, with the same experience of walking when the mind is quiet—in touch with the sensations of lifting, moving, placing, occasionally noting hearing, the wind on your face. No big deal. Nothing special going on. But often in such moments, we notice times when we feel so exquisitely alive, when perception becomes really quite clear. Some walking meditations for me have been the happiest moments of my life. And what was happening? Nothing special, except that the mind was at peace. There was no grasping, no aversion—just the ability to be totally present with what is, with a real clarity of perception. We can only know and appreciate what's true, what's present, when the mind is not clouded by grasping.

This completeness in the moment, this taste of non-grasping, becomes less rare as we continue to practice, as we continue to wake up and bring our mindfulness, our awareness, to what's happening right now, no matter what that is. Through this power of mindfulness, this waking up, the underlying tendency of the mind to grasp at the pleasant begins to weaken, to fade.

As you sit, as you walk, it may not seem like much when a moment of craving arises—say, wanting a sitting to be a certain way—and you become really mindful of that. You note the craving, and it weakens, dissipates. Nothing really happens; it goes away. And again, you're calm and present in the moment. It doesn't feel like any big deal, because we're kind of looking for big lights to go off. But actually, this is a big

deal. Because in this moment, there is a movement out of blindness and distortion into clarity and freedom. This is really what our practice is all about.

There is no lasting sense pleasure, opinion, view, no solid thing that is "I" that is going to make us lastingly happy. As long as we're looking for that, so long will we be lost in craving, cycling around and around. But the more we're able to open to and acknowledge whatever is here in this moment—pleasant, unpleasant, painful, beautiful—the more we can see the movement of craving and not need to act on it, not get lost in all the proliferation. We come back and simply open to what's true here and now, and the more our potential for living in the truth of who we really are becomes activated.

Suzuki Roshi once said that renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world, but in accepting that they go away. With that acceptance comes the potential for great appreciation, joy, and compassion—appreciation of what's beautiful, and the understanding that it's really okay that things go away. We know that's not the true nature of peace, the true nature of who we are.

One of the helpful qualities of retreat—and this is really exciting—is that we get to experience this process of craving and grasping without being so driven by it. In our lives, as I said, the experience is so unpleasant that we just jump to act on the craving, to get rid of feeling it. And in most cases, there are so many potential things to crave—sense objects, mind objects, views and opinions—that we can keep moving from one to the other. This kind of hides the fact that the real suffering is coming from this very process of chasing after something to make us happy.

Here on retreat, we've really limited all of that. The cravings will still come up. Maybe instead of for a spa, it's for two apples at tea time. But it's the same process. Because we've so limited activities, you're sitting here and craving comes up, and there's not really too much you can do about it except sit and come back and feel what it feels like—the experience of craving, of grasping. It's not pleasant, and that's a lot of the reason we think it's so hard to be here. We're sitting here lost in craving or aversion, wanting things to be different.

But it's a rare opportunity. When we can just sit, become mindful of the experience of craving, experience that it's unpleasant or unbalanced—and it's okay. We don't have to be driven to act every time a movement of craving arises in our experience. We don't have to keep running just to avoid the experience of craving. We sit here, we feel it, and then we see it comes up and it just kind of plops down. It's no big deal. It's not so fearful. This is really what can allow us to become free of this cycle of craving and fear. It can allow us to open to the truth of the moment.

So really, all craving, all grasping is bondage. It's bondage because it distorts our perception and because it blinds us to what is true. Craving distracts us from the true nature of who we are. We get lost in trying to fulfill the objects of craving, and we get taken away from the ability to open to the truth of who we are, which is always here and now. When we're craving, we're always looking somewhere else.

But through our mindfulness, through this power of simply bringing our full non-judging, non-violent attention to what's happening here and now, the possibility of understanding this process arises—and so understanding who we are becomes possible. Through understanding, it is possible for this seemingly endless search for gratification to come to an end. Right now, in this moment. Not ten years down the road, but right in this moment of clear seeing.

I want to end with two quotations. The first is from Nisargadatta Maharaj:

Nothing physical or mental can give you freedom. You are free once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you.

So that's what our practice is about—seeing and understanding.

The second is from Thich Nhat Hanh:

Meditation is not evasion. It is a serene encounter with reality.

That's what we're doing: serenely encountering reality with our mindfulness in order to understand who we are.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.