Three Noble Truths

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:49:34

Tonight I want to speak about the core, the central teaching that the Buddha gave, the basis for all our practice here together, which many of you have heard before, called the Four Noble Truths. Actually, I'm going to talk about the Three Noble Truths, and tomorrow night Sylvia is going to talk about the fourth one—kind of keep you coming back. The fourth one's the nicest one.

In some ways, if you just hear these three truths, especially the first two, and not look deeply into them, but just hear them and take them at face value, it's a very difficult teaching. Because the first truth is that the nature of much of our life, of our mind and body, is essentially unsatisfactory. The word is dukkha, sometimes translated as suffering—essentially there's an unsatisfactory quality to our life, which I'll go into more. The second truth is that the cause of our suffering is this quality of craving, of thirsting, which I'm sure many of you experience just sitting here. The third truth is that there is a cessation, an ending to this craving, to this confusion, to this living in such a confused and suffering way. And the fourth is what is called the Eightfold Noble Path, a path of living both in and out of formal meditation that helps us continue to see, to stay in touch with the truth of what we are, to live in a non-harming way and in a way that helps us continue to stay awake with what is true.

But as you can see, the first two are a little heavy.

I have a lot of respect for people who are on their first long retreat, because as a couple of people said to me just today, "I had no idea what I was getting into. If I had known beforehand, I probably wouldn't have come." We have this idea that meditation leads us to greater peace and bliss—which is true—but the path it leads us through is not one of greater peace and bliss. For the odd moment, we might have that. But when we really sit down and walk and go through the day, it's really hard. Not always, but frequently. And the question arises as to why. Why does it have to be so hard? That's what I want to talk about in speaking of these truths.

It's said that when the Buddha first came to his great awakening and with his omniscient eye could look all around the world and see everybody, what he saw was that everybody in the world only wants to be happy. But in our ignorance—ignorance really meaning blindness, not seeing what is true—in our ignorance, in trying to be happy, we keep on doing just the thing that makes us more miserable. And not getting it, we do it more, and we do it more, and then we don't understand why our lives feel like such a mess. This is what motivated him, it is said, to teach, out of his great compassion for our poor, ignorant, confused condition.

When we speak about ignorance, ignorance being like the root of our confusion and our actions, one of

my teachers described ignorance as having two manifestations. I like this a lot as a way to help me understand it. Ignorance, as I said, is really blindness. In one aspect of this blindness, we don't see what's here. We just don't see the truth of what's right in front of our face. Actually, it's closer than the front of our face. It's inside of us. It's what we are, and we just don't see it. And then, in not seeing what's true, we take what we do see, construct all kinds of confused things about it, and proceed to see what isn't here and act as if that's true. That's what we live from.

I feel that the Buddha, especially in his first two truths of unsatisfactoriness and craving, is speaking to this blindness. It's sometimes hard to hear because we don't want it to be that way. We want it to be different. Yeah, that's the whole problem—we want it to be different. If we can just allow ourselves to open and see things how they are, then a whole other possibility of how to be, how to exist, of knowing what we are, opens up to us. This is really what our practice is about. This is what we experience here many times in small ways, if you allow yourself to notice it.

Actually, coming to understand, to open to this unsatisfactory quality and the power of craving, is not depressing at all. It has been and continues to be an incredibly freeing way of being in the world.

So we'll talk a bit about each of these three truths that the Buddha spoke of. There's a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a great Indian wise man: "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain."

And so that's what the Buddha is talking about. What this does is obscure our true being. It doesn't deny it. It can't change it. All it does is serve as a mist between what we know and what our true being is.

Speaking to these forms of blindness, this truth of unsatisfactoriness, the Buddha enunciated it in a couple of different ways, in his usual clear list-making fashion. One form of dukkha—I like to use that word because "unsatisfactoriness" is sort of okay, but it doesn't quite give the real meat of it. Dukkha is a great word. Anyway, one is just plain dukkha dukkha, the pain of pain.

Now this one seems clear enough, you'd think. All we have to do is sit here—most of us. There's the odd person here who's not having any experience of physical pain, but most of us just have to sit for a few hours and hello old friend, we're introduced to physical pain. Or read the newspapers. It doesn't seem like it's a big secret. So why does he proclaim it?

But when we really look, when I really look at my own experience—are we really open to the fact that there is physical, emotional, mental pain in the world? The Buddha described it as birth, aging, sickness, old age, death, pain, grief and despair, separation from the loved, not getting what we want, coming together with what we dislike. This is dukkha dukkha.

What's our real attitude to it when one of these things arises? Do we really say, "Oh yeah, that's how life is. There's separation, there's pain"? When you're sitting here and something difficult comes up in your physical or mental experience, isn't the usual, perhaps subconscious attitude, "This is a mistake. It

shouldn't be happening. If I was doing this right, it wouldn't be happening. Something's wrong with me, with the practice, with whatever."

And in life as well, when someone's really ill, when someone we love dies—these things are really sad. We're not talking about how it shouldn't be sad. But somehow, deep inside, it's hard to accept that this is really an aspect of life. It's not going to go away. Even if we're totally and completely enlightened, we're going to get sick. People we love are going to die. We're going to have to be with things we don't like. There's going to be difficulty.

And the real suffering of it is that we continually try to fight this. It's the struggle against something that we absolutely cannot change that blinds us to the clear perception of our true being.

This doesn't mean that if there's something difficult in life, or our job is horrendous, and we can with great care and attention make a switch, we shouldn't do it. This isn't saying go out and look for pain or don't act in an intelligent manner. But it's just saying: acknowledge what's really happening when it's really happening.

It has been to me a very deep and ongoing teaching to see how much I struggle and how much I try to change, to pretend things aren't the way they are. And that's the real suffering, really, much more than the pain or the unpleasantness itself.

And this to me is not depressing. I know it sounds really cheery. It is not depressing because it opens the possibility to relate to life in such a different way.

The denial runs really deeply. Here are a couple of examples. Sometimes we deny because it's really hard to feel in ourselves. All our life, our training, our deep conditioning is: as soon as it's difficult, go in the other direction. And as long as this works, it's fine. What happens when we sit down here is it doesn't work anymore. So we develop all kinds of denial, outer and inner.

I've told this before, but once I was in the hospital and a doctor was doing a relatively painful procedure—not terrible, but painful. I was kind of stretched thin and I started to cry. And he looked at me and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

And just, you know, if he let in that it was hurting me, that would be really painful for him.

Another way I look at denial in myself is when I go to India. India is a very painful place to be because all the suffering that we hide away is just right out there on the street. Life, birth, death, sickness, filth—it's all just right out there. So one thing I watch in myself—I've gotten better at just observing and not judging too harshly—is how long do I stay open to all the beggars? Because anywhere you go, there's just a stream of beggars, really sad and painful to encounter. People that are really emaciated, small children, people who are maimed with withered limbs, people with leprosy. It's really quite painful for me to see.

And everyone does their own dance with how much to give and when to stop. Because you could give

everything you have in five minutes and it's over and it does nothing. It doesn't end it; just more people come until you're besieged. But anyway, I just watch in myself: how long can I stay open, and when do I shut down? And I shut down simply by pulling down a wall, averting eye contact, no longer making a connection. Because I could stay open and still not give. It's not the giving as much as the being willing to be there and present and participate in this aspect of humanity. And it's hard.

I think for most of us, we do hit a place where the suffering, inner or outer, is just overwhelming and we need to shut down. Well, we do. It's kind of out of our control. It's like there's some mechanism that says, "Okay, that's enough," and we shut down and take a break. On retreats and in life, I respect that. But that's different from a total mass denial where we're not willing to investigate this aspect at all.

One thing I find helpful is to investigate when I do shut down—what's the nature of shutting down, what goes on in that process. Because that helps me to see, well, what's the point of opening to all this anyway? I could just, as a friend of mine did, go to India and find the pain is really just too much. So he would stay in a nice hotel, just go eat at the American Embassy. And I can respect that's the level of pain one can let in at that time. But investigating why, and what happens when we open—why is it worth it?

I can see that for me, the shutting down usually comes out of fear. And the fear comes again out of this blindness, of not seeing clearly what's really true. So the fear is that, "Oh no, it's going to be this way forever. I'm going to die from this. I'm going to be destroyed." Even if the mind doesn't actually say that, that's the feeling: this is going to destroy me.

Now what's interesting is that this "that's going to destroy me" could be a cramp in my toe during a sitting, or it could be some really overwhelming painful experience in life. It's that same quality of, "Oh no, I can't be with this. It's going to destroy me." There's not seeing the impermanence, that everything changes. And also for me, a sense of misidentification. Somehow that pain, physical or emotional, inner or outer—I think that's me. The pain that I feel has become so big it fills the whole world, and that's me. The burning in the knee, if I just be with it as burning—it hurts, it comes, it goes, it's more or less intense—but it doesn't have that gripping quality of "this is who I am and it's never going to change and I got to get out of here."

So when I start to see this, you see that the fear of the pain again comes from our not seeing clearly what is. And this is where our mindfulness practice is so helpful.

The other thing I see is that when I'm shut down in fear, in pain of whatever sort, we can't shut down selectively. So for example, again with the beggars in India—because it's a really clear example to me—as soon as I shut down because I can't take in the pain anymore, also what shuts down is any sense of our human connectedness, any sense of joy, of compassion, of love, appreciation of the moment. It's all shut down. I can't say, "I'm shutting down, I don't want to feel the pain, but I'm also going to really appreciate the beauty of the moment." It's not possible.

When our energy is sucked into fear and denial of what is, that's the struggle that keeps us from seeing

and appreciating the truth of who we are. And so I notice when I open up that again, there's a sense of eye contact. The people, whether I give or not, I feel the pain.

I feel the pain of not being able to give. The pain of not being able to do anything. But there's also a human connectedness, a sense of our own interrelatedness, and also the possibility of appreciating just what is in this moment, however it is. The possibility of knowing ourselves as we truly are. Pain still stays pain. It doesn't all transform into clouds of bliss. But the attitude shift allows something else to emerge.

I've found in my life that the more I'm able to acknowledge and be with difficulty, the more I've been discovering a commensurate increase in equanimity, yes, but also in real appreciation and joy in life. I really feel a lot happier than I did twenty years ago, and I honestly feel that it's from the willingness to be with things as they are, not needing outer things to support it.

The second aspect of dukkha that the Buddha talked about is that of change—that things change. Again, this is one that intellectually is incredibly obvious. We would all agree on that. But it's also a truth that while we intellectually agree on it, we actually viscerally live as if it's not true. And so this again can bring in a real sense of confusion and conflict. Because if we look to anything—any sense experience, any emotional state, any person, any situation, any condition—as that thing which is somehow going to bring us lasting happiness, it can't do it. It's impossible because nothing is lasting in the long term. And because we forget this, we keep running into confusion. This is that blindness.

It's not to say that because things change that means they're bad or that we can't enjoy. Actually, the appreciation of experience can be much richer and deeper. I was thinking about this as I walked up here tonight, looking at the sunset. It's incredibly beautiful and people are out there looking at it. If the sunset stayed all day and night, it somehow would lose some of the poignancy, some of the sense of beauty. We can really appreciate it. And we don't really think, "Oh no, the sun went down again. It's so sad." There's a way that some things we can really accept.

Well, all of life can be that way. We can really appreciate, really value, really live quite richly with whatever it is that we're meeting in our experience at this moment. The fact that it's impermanent doesn't mean we shun it—"Oh, I hate it. It's never going to give me lasting pleasure, so let's not have it at all." It doesn't lead to aversion in that way, but just to seeing things as they really are.

And again, we often tend to see change as a mistake. A year ago, I moved into a little cottage that had just been built brand new. After about a month, I walked into the main living room and there's this big crack on the wall where the plaster was settling. And I thought, "Oh my God, they did it wrong. The house is falling apart." And then I realized, oh no, this is what happens. Things change. Nothing stays the same and perfect. I really noticed there was like one second of that house when everything was clean and new and perfect. And that was it. Since then it's been just ongoing decay. It's sort of like our bodies—some of them decay faster than others.

And we still are amazed by it. I must say I've been noticing this retreat, for some reason the conversations, especially in the staff dining room or among the teachers, keep coming around to old age and middle age and how we're all creeping up there, and decay of the body. Somehow we put on this nice veneer—of course we know that. But why are we talking about it like it's a shock if we really, really lived as if we know this is what's going to happen? Somewhere deep down, it's amazing. How did I get to be forty-one years old? I'm still a kid. And I imagine I see my father. He's seventy-five and he's sitting there going, how?

75? I still feel 20. And it's really so interesting to see how we can keep on doing this.

So really getting it, really opening to the fact that everything comes and goes, can open us to a life of much more appreciation and a whole lot less suffering. Because what the Buddha saw is that we keep doing just the opposite of what would make us happy. The main thing we're doing is looking, craving for insubstantial, impermanent things to bring us happiness. And when one doesn't do it, we go on to the next, and we don't see this. When we really deeply know in our guts that nothing's going to last, a huge space opens up.

Why it's so hard to really, really know this, I don't know. I would think I really know it, but on retreat, you're sitting here—how many mind states have you had today? And how likely is it that the next strong one that comes, like, "Oh no, this is it. I'm going to be like this the rest of the retreat, I can't stand it, I'm going home"—even though we know it's all just flashing through.

Sometimes people say, "Who needs to look this closely?" It just seems a little too overwhelming and depressing, especially since I haven't added the third form that the Buddha spoke of. And I'm just going to touch on it lightly. But it's a very subtle underlying sense of the oppressiveness of things that we're not usually even aware of. See, I knew you'd really want to hear this one.

I'll just give one really simple example, which I actually read about in one of Jack's books. There's a type of vipassana meditation where you just really focus on when you move—why are you moving? And if we really pay attention, when we're lying in bed, if you didn't have to get up for the bell and you could just lie there as long as you wanted, you'd think that would be the most comfortable position. But sooner or later, what happens? You have to pee, your back starts to hurt, you get hungry, or you get bored, or you get restless, or something gets uncomfortable. And so we get up and move. And then we take a shower and that feels good, but how long can you stay under the shower? You start to wither up and turn into a prune and it doesn't feel good, and—oh—get out of the shower. And you can just follow this through the day.

Now admittedly, if this is all you focused on, it could get really demoralizing. There are times in practice when quite naturally, not of our choice, the mind does sort of focus on these things. We call those dukkha times. And they really are. Because what you're seeing is true, but it's imbalanced. It's out of balance. You're only seeing that, and none of the joy, none of the peace, none of the equanimity—just overwhelming dukkha. So it's true, but it's not in balance if that's all you see.

But even so, this truth of unsatisfactoriness has been to me one of the most freeing things, over and over, in my experience. And so that's one of the reasons I really feel it's important to talk about. Like for an example, I'll be in some situation in my life where I have to figure out, should I move here or should I move there? Some kind of big decision, and I'm all knotted up trying to figure out the right thing. And I could be like this for days, and suddenly it hits me: there is no right thing that's going to make me always happy. What I'm caught up in is thinking that if I figure out the exact right thing, then I'm always going to be happy. There's no such thing. That immediately, when that thought comes up, I get tremendously happy, because I'm not looking in the wrong place anymore. And I can still go ahead and make the decision, but there's such a freedom and spaciousness about it. That happens to me quite a bit.

So anyway, that's the first noble truth. And in a way, it's one of the ways of blindness—not seeing what's here, not able to accept things as they are.

The second noble truth, the cause of suffering, the cause of a lot of our distress, is this energy, this movement of craving, this thirsting for something. Whatever it is, the object actually doesn't make any difference. It's this movement of craving that we think is going to make us happy. Craving—and it is always—craving for that which changes, that which is insubstantial. There's no solidity, no solid self-existence. This craving has never given peace to anyone. This is really the crux. This is what the Buddha saw us doing endlessly. And we keep focusing on the object.

We think, well, this one didn't do it, so I'll try another one. It goes from money to cars to family to relationship to spiritual practice to states of mind to states of absorption. It's just endless. The objects can get more and more refined, but the suffering and the delusion are still running our lives.

So much of our life is spent in this tandem: it's unpleasant, let me out of here; it's pleasant, let me go have it. And then grieving when it's gone and wondering why we're so confused. Craving is born of not seeing what's true, born of the denial of the unsatisfactory nature of experience and the fact that everything is going to change.

In the instructions this morning, Sylvia spoke about noticing the pleasant or unpleasant or neutral aspect of an experience. This feeling quality arises with every sense experience we have—mental sense experience, sight, sound, taste, touch, smell. What's fascinating about mindfulness practice is that we can begin to see how, on a moment-to-moment level, this energy of thirsting, of craving, arises. And how it doesn't have to get so out of hand.

Every time there's a pleasant feeling, when we're not paying attention, our natural conditioning all our life is that the mind moves forward to it, the heart moves forward to it. When it's unpleasant, we push it away, back off. When it's neutral, we usually don't even notice it. So that's again the ignorance, the blindness. It becomes a good time to just zone out or feel bored and try to make something happen.

It's important to really begin to look at this because, in a funny way, when we don't examine the nature of

craving and our actual experience of it, it feels like there's something really sweet about it. The Buddha even said once that craving is accompanied with delight.

When you're sitting here and you go off in a long daydream—maybe a food fantasy, or you've gotten involved in what we call a VR, a Vipassana romance, where you've really latched onto someone you've never met, never talked to, know nothing about, and the mind is just off into craving and wanting and fantasy building—in that moment, it can feel really kind of sweet. That moment usually goes on for twenty-five moments when it feels really sweet like that. We're not really examining it.

When we come out of it, what's the result? You suddenly wake up and you're sitting here. Has that really made things a lot sweeter? It's usually, "Oh, here I am sitting here again with the breath. Right, right. And that person doesn't even know me and nothing's going to happen." We usually end up more discontented with the way things are, less in touch with the way things are. If it was a food fantasy and you go to lunch and that thing wasn't served, it makes us much more disgruntled with what actually is served, much harder to appreciate.

So though we think it's sweet, when we examine it, what we find about craving is that it distorts our perception. We don't see things the way they are—things become kind of distorted so we see what we want. When you're having this strong Vipassana romance, the things that you make up about that person... could anybody be so perfect and loving? No way! The mind is completely distorted, and usually you only need to have two sentences with that person after the retreat and you think, "Oh my God." Once in a while I do know some where the people got together and got married, but it's rare, believe me. And then they also found out that nobody's that perfect. Nobody.

There's the saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. That's how we distort things through the energy of craving. So it's not about hating it. Our mindfulness practice is to understand it. It's through understanding that we're freed from the confusion, from the distortion.

Krishnamurti said, "By themselves neither pleasure nor pain enlighten. Only understanding does." That's what our practice is about. We're not looking for pain. We're not looking for pleasure. They're both fine when they come. It's the understanding of what's happening that allows us to open to the truth.

To understand craving, again, we use our practice of simply coming back and being here when it arises. How does it feel in the moment?

You're sitting here, there's a thought, a sound, a sensation, another thought, you're noticing it, or perhaps you're a little spaced out, and suddenly—*glom*—something in your experience has been clutched onto, and craving has started.

If in that moment it's noticed, *ah, craving*, then in that moment the craving is not increasing. It's not being fed. Simply seeing, in that moment of mindfulness, we're seeing craving, but actually it's not being created. It's not arising in that moment. It doesn't necessarily have to go on.

When we don't see it, it builds. It leads to more fantasies, more solidity. And besides the fact of the craving getting so strong that you might find yourself jumping out of the hall and running to satisfy it, what's really happening is this: it's not that the thing you're wanting so much is so important. The craving itself is so uncomfortable that we do anything not to have to feel it. And mostly in our culture, we can get away with that to a huge extent. We can satisfy a lot of our cravings. So again, we have the feeling that if I'm craving and I can't have the thing, something is wrong.

With our practice, we can just sit and be with the craving, watch it come, feel its discomfort, explore it. And you know, it just fades away at some point, no matter how strong. This is really an amazing process that we're putting ourselves in, that we're opening ourselves up to explore. Not to have to spend our lives running back and forth between avoiding the unpleasant and trying to get what we crave. It opens up a huge space of intelligent choice, a huge space of freedom.

So play with it, sitting here. Play with it with little cravings. Wanting an apple. Wanting to go get water. I play with it—sometimes I'll walk into a store and look at clothes and see myself really want something and just walk out. It's kind of fun to play with. We're not going to die from craving. We might die from trying to satisfy it.

When we're lost in craving, really lost in it—not observing it mindfully, but lost in it—both kinds of ignorance are present. Craving arises in the first place because we're not seeing what's true. Because we're not seeing the insubstantial, impermanent nature of things, we're somehow thinking that satisfying the craving is going to bring us lasting fulfillment. And when it's present, as I said, craving not only distorts so that we don't see what's here, it also distorts so that we see what's not here.

I told this story last year, but it's so perfect I can't help using it again. It actually happened here last year with an anonymous, unnamed person. It was late in the retreat, really hot in the afternoon, and I was sitting talking to some people who had come by to visit for a little while. In the course of it, one of them mentioned some new place down the road where they made these great milkshakes.

Now, in that moment, craving arose in my mind. It was not noted, it was not noticed, and it got really solid. Immediately the distortion began. I wanted those people to leave—like immediately—so I could go and get a milkshake. Two minutes before, I hadn't thought of a milkshake for two weeks. It wasn't something I needed, but the mind gloms on.

So I was no longer appreciating these people. I kind of stopped talking, shut down, and said to my friend, "Let's go get a milkshake, let's go get a milkshake." And they left, finally.

When we're in the grip of craving, it also distorts our perception of appropriate behavior. I think we had maybe twenty minutes before the next sitting. We leapt in the car, went flying out looking for this milkshake, and got to the place. It was maybe five past three and it had closed at three.

So instead of stopping there, we said, "Well, there must be somewhere in this whole strip that we could get

a milkshake." You can see, at this point, the craving itself has taken over. There's no sense—I mean, who even cared about a milkshake at this point? It was just the craving energy.

So I'm driving. We're going down the road, trying to look at all these different places. And my friend yells, "There it is! There it is! Yogurt cafe."

That's it. And I said, oh, great. And I looked over, and it said, "Urgent Care." I swear.

This is a little example of what happens to us all the time. This is craving. You just don't know what the heck is going on, and you'll do anything to satisfy it.

So that's why I say, when you're sitting here, no matter what the craving is for, just some little thing, and you can really be mindful of it—notice it's coming, its movements, and how it just fades out—this might not seem like much, but it's really an important and powerful experience. Because it's a movement out of the distortion of ignorance to clarity, to really being able to see things as they are and to not be driven by habit and by discomfort. It really allows for us to open into freedom.

And that brings us to the third truth that the Buddha spoke of: that there is an ending in our experience to confusion, to getting lost in the movement of craving.

So if craving is the mist between us and freedom, the good news is, yes, it's only a mist. There are a lot of ways to talk about this ending of suffering, this ending of the movements, the pain of craving and aversion. On the deepest level, it's really living in a way that craving does not arise. And that comes about through really deep seeing, experiencing the true nature of existence, of who we are beyond the temporary manifestations of our mental functioning, of our body.

And it really is impossible to describe, you know. I was with one teacher, and he was pointing to different people and saying, "Well, everyone describes and manifests this differently. For you it's love, for you it's peace, for you it's silence, for you it's emptiness, for you it's fullness, for you it's joy." But what the truth is, is that it's here and now and always accessible when we're not lost, when we're not seeing things in a distorted way.

I wanted to read one poetical description. This is a Tibetan poetical description of our true nature. Again, it's poetical. Anything you say isn't exactly it:

When left to itself, ordinary mind is fresh and naked.
If observed, it is a vivid clarity without anything to see.
A direct awareness, sharp and awake.
It is not permanent, since it does not exist at all.
It is not nothingness, since it is vividly clear and awake.
It is not oneness, since many things are cognized and known.
It is not plurality, since the many things known are inseparable in one taste.

It is not somewhere else.
It is your own awareness itself.
The face of this primordial protector dwelling in your heart can be directly perceived in this very instant.

In this very instant. And when we touch that and acknowledge, allow ourselves to know that, clinging just doesn't make any sense. So of course it doesn't arise. Why should clinging arise when, in Thich Nhat Hanh's words, the idea is that you do not put something in front of you and run after it, because everything is already here in yourself. Everything is already here in yourself. It makes absolutely no sense to run after anything. And this is true for all of us with no exceptions.

Mindfulness is really a tool that facilitates our cutting through our confused and distorted ways of perceiving, of thinking about things, to just touch things as they are in any moment of our experience. It makes no difference what it is that's happening. No difference at all.

And that's another level that is sometimes spoken of as freedom. Sometimes a moment of mindfulness is spoken of as a moment of freedom. It's a way of tasting. Because in a kind of microscopic sense, mindfulness is this quality of direct, bare attention, being fully with something just as it is. Say craving—knowing it just as it is, sensations, without a lot of story, without any interpretation, just clearly knowing it, without wanting and without pulling away. In that moment of direct being with, knowing without any movement of mind, in that moment greed, delusion, anger are not arising. Even though the next moment they might, in that moment they're not. And we all have many moments of this. Sometimes they're so

They're not lights going off. We sometimes don't notice them. But I really would like to suggest starting to pay attention. There's a real peace in these moments when the mind isn't caught in craving and aversion and confusion. Some are more noticeable than others. I can't imagine you could be here this whole ten days and not have lots of moments like that—moments when things feel so exquisite. It might be the sunset, or a little lizard that you see, or a particular cup of tea that you have, or a particular footstep that you take. It could be anything. But just that sense of the exquisiteness of a particular moment.

A lot of times—and I can remember lots of particular moments like that—they're more vivid usually in retreats because there's more stillness in the mind. And for years I would attribute the exquisiteness of that moment to the thing that was happening. That was a particularly beautiful rose, or a particularly cute lizard. I remember one lizard from fifteen years ago, sitting in a chair and this little blue lizard went by. Why do I remember that moment as being so exquisite? It's not that that lizard was any different from any other lizard, not more special. But the exquisiteness comes from a mind and heart, a being that's at peace. It's not wanting, it's not pulling away. It just is, touching that primordial protector—whatever you want to call it—that space of emptiness, of fullness, of love.

We all touch that. See if you can just be with and appreciate that, and not look for an object as the cause of it. You'll find that if you try to recreate that cup of tea again, it doesn't happen, because it's not the cup of

tea. So just noticing these moments of mindfulness—a little taste of a moment of freedom, momentary freedom from suffering and confusion. It's really amazing what just this gentle paying attention can do, how it can work such wonders.

So that's the three noble truths. Sylvia will talk tomorrow night about the path, the Eightfold Path of living, of developing both in and out of formal meditation, of living in a way that continues to open us to the truth of what is.

I want to end with a couple of things. One is that in a way, yes, we put in a huge effort to be mindful, to be with what is. But in another way, we don't have to try so hard. Sometimes we try so hard that we don't see what's right here, closer than our nose. So can we just, with our mindfulness, settle back into what is, just as it is, and allow that to unfold under the sunlight of mindfulness?

This 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." And that comes about simply through understanding.

Let's sit together for a few minutes.

It is not permanent since it does not exist at all. It is not nothingness since it is vividly clear and awake. It is not oneness since many things are cognized and known. It is not plurality since the many things known are inseparable in one taste. It is not somewhere else. It is your own awareness itself. The face of this primordial protector dwelling in your heart can be directly perceived in this very instant.

around the world are involved in the same process or quest or opening that we're involved in here.

One of the great preoccupations of human beings over the millennia has been to find that which brings transcendence, or brings us to touch that which is sacred or timeless—that which takes us beyond the small and limited sense of ourselves and the world. In all cultures, this is the journey of the yogi, the healer, the wise man, the medicine person, the wise woman, the shaman. And although it may take many forms, in some ways it's a universal journey. A journey from being unconscious or lost, from living in an ordinary kind of reality, to opening beyond that and discovering that which is sacred or holy. The root of the word "holy" is "whole"—not cut off, not separate from anything in life, wise in all the realms.

So here we are together in the desert, participating in this great universal journey. There are six stages or aspects to this journey.

The first is that of renunciation. Our life may be fine in an ordinary way, but often there comes to us a sense of some other possibility. There must be more, even if we're successful. One very famous and rich author wrote, "There must be more than having everything. There must be more to life than having everything." There's some sense that we come to that there's some other possibility within us and in life.

For some, life isn't okay. We look out at the world and see one war or one revolution supplanting another,

whether in the Middle East or Central America or Asia. The democracy in the Soviet Union, which is so wonderful and exciting, and then all of a sudden the ethnic fighting and rivalries in Eastern Europe and parts of the old Soviet Union. We see that something is amiss in the world. Or we see in our own culture a kind of loss and sadness, a longing for connection that we used to share. So many people busy and isolated, lost in consumerism or desireism. As Joseph Campbell said, you climb the ladder only to discover it was against the wrong wall.

There was a cartoon in The New Yorker which showed the three monkeys sitting—one with hands over the eyes, one with hands over the ears, one with hands over the mouth—and then a fourth monkey in the same room saying, "I think there's some denial going on here."

The addicted society. Anne Wilson Schaef writes that the substance and process addictions so common in our culture—gambling, alcohol, drugs, sexuality, workaholism, so many kinds—usually have a meaning beyond our personal dilemma. The modern society in which we live needs addictions, and its very essence fosters them. It fosters addictions because the best-adjusted person in this society is the person who is not dead and not alive, just numb—a zombie. When you're dead, you're not able to do the work of society, and if you are fully alive, you are constantly saying no to many of the processes of the society: the racism, the polluted environment, the nuclear threat, the arms race, drinking unsafe water, eating carcinogenic foods. Thus, it is in the interests of modern society to promote those things that take the edge off, that keep us busy with our fixes and keep us slightly numbed out, zombie-like. Consequently, the society itself not only encourages addictions—it functions as an addict. A very powerful indictment of the way we can sleep in our culture.

For some, the renunciation comes very personally—because of our own isolation or loneliness or pain that we've suffered, or past abuse, or because we face the fact of death in someone we love. We want some understanding of this, or we live along and all of a sudden we're surprised.

One day, when the Sultan was in his palace at Damascus, a beautiful youth who was his favorite rushed into his presence, crying out in great agitation that he must fly at once to Baghdad, imploring leave to borrow His Majesty's swiftest horse. The Sultan asked why he was in such a hurry. "The cause," the young man answered, "is that as I passed through the gardens of the palace just now, Death was standing there. And when he saw me, he stretched out his arms as if to threaten me. I must lose no time in escaping from him." The young man was given leave to take the Sultan's horse and fly. When he was gone, the Sultan went down indignantly to the garden and found Death still there. "How dare you make threatening gestures at my favorite," he cried, "in my own garden!" But Death, astonished, answered, "I assure Your Majesty, I did not threaten him. I only threw up my arms in surprise at seeing him here, because I have a tryst with him tonight in Baghdad."

So that happens. We think it won't happen, or it doesn't happen to people close to us, or to ourselves. But we start to look and see that life changes. Karma changes, said the Buddha, like the flick of a horse's tail.

Praise and blame and gain and loss and pleasure and pain. And if we don't want to live at the mercy of these elements, we must sense that there's some other way to be in the world—not just following what we like and what we don't like.

Somewhere in us we sense another way, and we let go for a moment of our habit, our usual way, and begin—not by doing something, but by stopping. To listen to the stars, to our breath, to the wind around us, to our hearts.

Often it's a lonely journey, at least in part. We have community and sangha. In many traditions there's a company of those who practice. But in the end, one does it alone. The wonderful old Huichol Indian shaman from Mexico, Don José Ríos, with whom I studied at some point early in my practice, wrote: "I've practiced my apprenticeship for eighty-four years. Many times have I gone to the mountains alone. Yes, I've endured much suffering in my life."

But to do this, to hear the voices of the gods, you too must go to the mountains. For it is not I who can teach you the ways of the gods. The gods are heard only alone and only in solitude.

That being alone is really the solitude of the heart. It's what the silence here allows you—that listening in yourself. There's a turning from the ordinary of our life to listen in a deeper way, sensing that there's some mystery, some possibility.

Then the second stage of this journey is a sacred question. Each of us will have our own version. Each of us has to listen for our own sacred question.

During the Kuwait war this last winter, a friend of mine, a poet and peace activist, was very upset by it. She went to Europe to try to come to terms with the war. She visited the concentration camps and spent a couple of weeks there after the war broke out, sitting in the crematoriums, sifting the sand and the ashes of the bones of people. She meditated on what makes enemies and how we learn to hate one another, writing letters from there to everyone she could as the understanding grew in her. That was her question: What makes us do that to one another?

Another friend sought the answers to his sacred question through working with the dying, through hospice work. He's done years of hospice work now. Recently when I was with him, he told me about a man dying in his hospice—fifty, a hundred, two hundred people die a year there. He said this was an older man and his two children were attending to him. They came in alarmed one day and said they had just received an emergency phone call. Their father was on the verge of death, but the phone call told them that his youngest brother had been killed that day in a car accident. Should they tell him? Would it disturb his process of dying?

They went back and forth. Maybe they shouldn't say anything. Finally, they decided just to leave him be in peace. They went into the room where he was indeed near death and sat by his bed with my friend, the hospice director, together there with them. After they sat down for a minute, he looked at them and said,

"Don't you have something to tell me?" They said, "What do you mean?" He said, "About my brother dying." They said, "How could you know? How do you know?" He said, "Oh, I've been talking to him." Then in a few minutes he said the last things he had to say to his son and his daughter, closed his eyes, and died.

Now, how do you understand that? How does anyone understand this mystery that we're born into this life? Where does it come from? And where does it go?

During the three-month retreat one year at Barre, at the end of the retreat, this great Korean Zen master, Kusan, came to visit. People had been sitting and walking like this for weeks and weeks. He came and gave a little Zen lecture and asked a few questions about vipassana. Then he said, "Oh, you're doing it all wrong"—which was pretty alarming to these people. He said, "Don't waste your time with vipassana." He said, "Only one question: What is this? What is this? Forget all the rest of that meditation." Of course, what you're doing actually is sitting and seeing what is this. Or maybe your question is, how can I love well? Or how can I live fully in this life? Or what does it mean to be free? But somewhere in us there comes this wanting to awaken, to know, to see.

Now, based on this renunciation, this question that comes in our being, we must then undertake some discipline.

It requires a vehicle, some discipline, some practice, some way to break open the shell of our habit, of our conditioning, of this small sense of self that we have been caught in.

Sometimes, of course, it happens by accident. Travel or birth or death or some special event in life will awaken us for a moment or a day. But to really awaken and integrate it, the path of the yogi or the wise person or the shaman generally requires some repetitive discipline—chanting over and over, praying over and over, going into solitude, seeking visions.

In the Native American tradition, one group of Indians in their shamanic practices would have a large ground stone and a small one, the small one representing the sun as it went around the earth, as it seemed to go around the earth. And the person seeking a vision would go and sit day and night, simply rolling this small sphere around the larger one, concentrating on it and looking at the mystery of the circularity of those two until something opened up in them.

Here we're doing it with the breath and our steps. We meditate. We take a seat. And it's really very simple. As James talked about last night, it's manual labor. It's repetitive. It's just like being a parent. You have a young child and the child wakes up at night and you have to go in there. In the morning again, you get the child dressed and you feed the child. And then the child needs its diaper changed. As soon as you've gotten all the clothes on, you take them all off, change the diaper, put them all on again. And you do that over and over, a thousand times.

Boredom is a part of meditation. In fact, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche said that when you get really bored, it should be considered good news—that you're finally letting yourself be here and not somewhere else. A

kind of appreciation for the monotony of life itself. The rhythms of the sunrise and sunset and the moon rising, the rhythms of the seasons, the rhythms of your breath.

There's a story of a somewhat crabby dowager who lived in an apartment building in New York. She went out of her apartment and pressed the button for the elevator, and it didn't come for a while. She pressed it again a number of times and waited more and more impatiently. Finally the elevator arrived and she looked at the elevator boy and said, "Where have you been?" And he looked at her and said, "Lady, where can you go in an elevator?"

It's like that. You're sitting here, you go up, you go down, you go up, you go down. Your breath comes in, it goes out. You're happy, you're sad. And part of what really brings the learning in meditation is that willingness to stay with these things that make up our life and pay attention to them.

The Buddha begins the four foundations of mindfulness, speaking to the Kurus in the marketplace, saying, "My friends, there's a most wonderful way to realize purification and overcome grief and sorrow and pain and anxiety and realize freedom, or nirvana." And he says, "Sit yourself down under a tree or in a quiet place. Be aware when you breathe in and when you breathe out. Be aware of the feelings that arise. Be aware of the thoughts as they arise. Be aware of contraction, grasping, fear, desire. Be aware of releasing, letting go. Openness. Freedom."

We do it over and over and over again.

Now traditionally, there are outer circumstances—forest monks sitting in the woods with tigers in the distance roaring, sitting out in sun and rain, in caves during storms. We don't need that. All you have to do is sit here with your boredom, your doubt, your fear, your longing, your pain, the storms that come. There's plenty of difficult weather. There's plenty of circumstances. Just sitting here and being with yourself.

Gandhi said, "I have only three enemies. My favorite enemy, the one most easily influenced for the better, is the entire British Empire. My second enemy, the Indian people, is far more difficult." And if any of you have traveled in India, you understand just what he means. "But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him, I seem to have very little influence."

So what it is, is this discipline to sit and walk and breathe and pay attention and acknowledge what's here, and do it over and over and over. And distractions come and the elevator goes up and the elevator goes down. And we discover in the midst of this a capacity of our heart and our mind to stay present.

I have had a number of friends and members of the sangha who have died over these past years in the AIDS epidemic. One close friend I used to go and sit with at times got to the point where he couldn't speak much, and we would just sit and hold hands and breathe together. Or when I couldn't visit him, I would call him on the phone and I would chant to him on the telephone, and then I'd say, "All right, let's breathe together." And we would just breathe together.

There's something really significant in being there, that present, with death, with pain, with whatever it is—bringing yourself again and again into the moment, facing the difficulties. It's only by doing it over and over, facing the difficulties, letting things come and letting the difficulties teach us, that that which is indestructible in us can be born.

Now it's not done by force or fighting against yourself, but rather it's done by awakening within you this greatness of heart, by your sincerity.

Martin Luther King—I read this passage from him very often—speaking at the most difficult moment of the civil rights marches, when his church had been bombed, when people had been killed, when the kind of freedom and justice that was so obviously necessary for African Americans was so tangibly there, and yet in seeking it, the very seeking brought this immense amount of difficulty and suffering. He said, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws. But we will soon wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And in winning our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win your freedom as well."

So that's the spirit of doing something over and over again with your sincerity, with your whole being.

Now whenever a person undertakes a genuine practice or discipline of truth—as a yogi or a meditator in prayer or meditation, or as an artist, or as someone in marriage, or as a parent, something that you give yourself to really fully—what inevitably arises is the next stage, which is hardship. It's called Mara in the Buddhist tradition. Mara is the name of the god of darkness, the shadow, that which is difficult, the forces of greed, fear, delusion, prejudice. And Mara has the capacity to arise in a thousand different forms.

I don't know if you've noticed Mara during this retreat, but I'll read you a poem from Kabir. He says, "Friend, please tell me about what I can do about this world I hold on to and keep spinning out. I gave up sewn clothes and wore a robe, but one day I noticed how well woven was the cloth. So I bought some burlap, but I still throw it elegantly over my left shoulder. I pulled back my sexual longings and now I discover that I'm angry a lot. I gave up rage and now I notice that I'm greedy all day. I worked hard at dissolving the greed, and now I'm proud of myself. When the mind wants to break its links with the world, it still holds on to something." Kabir says, "Listen, my friend, there are very few that find the path, yet it is right here in front of us."

So there are these thousand forms of Mara. Mara comes in the form of temptation, distraction. "Let's get a little more comfort. Let's go for tea instead of taking a walk. Let's follow this fantasy. Let's have a nap. Let's do this or that." It kind of comes and taps you on the shoulder and says, "Come on, if you do this, you'll be happy." And then you say, "Yes, that sounds really good to me." And off you go in fantasy or action. All those things, and yet you've done it a thousand times, but the voice still is very believable. "Come on, this time it'll really work."

You know, Socrates lived quite frugally, but yet he was often seen going into the marketplace. And so his students said, "What are you doing? You live without even sandals, barefoot and very frugally." And Socrates said, "I love to go to the market and discover how many things I am perfectly happy without."

So Mara comes with all these other things you could be doing or having or feeling. And you see those temptations, the temptations of desire. Or Mara comes in other forms—as fear, "This is too hard, too painful." As aggression. As restlessness. And what you're asked to do is sit and acknowledge, as Carol talked about, these different energies, to name them. Fear, fear. Restless, restless. Desire, desire, desire. Whatever they happen to be. Simply to stay present again and again. And to say, "Oh Mara, here you are in a new form. Nice to see you again. What do you have to say today?"

To really let yourself see it.

I remember being with my teacher Ajahn Chah at one point. We took a trip to a monastery on the border of Cambodia, about eighty miles over dirt roads in this back province. The driver was one of those crazed—I would say third world drivers. You would find them in this country as well, except that there are more policemen here. It was a one-and-a-half-lane dirt road going around over hills and mountains, with water buffalo and ox carts and bicycles and buses, and he was just passing everybody, leaning on the horn half the time, completely unable to see what was ahead. I was sure I was going to die. I mean, it was clear that this was the end of my life.

So I'm sitting there, not even wanting to see as he's passing this bus on the curve, holding on really tight and breathing in meditation, thinking, "Well, maybe I'll use my meditation to die well as a monk anyway." And I look over at Ajahn Chah who's sitting next to me, and his knuckles were white. That felt very good somehow. That was reassuring.

Obviously we made it there—as you can see, I'm still here. After all that time, the car came to a stop at the monastery. He turned over to me and looked at me and said, "Scary, wasn't it?" It was such a lovely moment, because I don't think he was afraid to die. He seemed pretty much at peace with birth and death and whatever it was. That was simply the fact of it. It was the way it was.

So this is what you do with Mara. "Oh, fear arising. Hi, interesting to see you again." Fear, fear. What does it feel like in the body? You name it. Fear, fear. As long as it stays. "Let's see how big you get." Fear, fear, fear. Terror. "Oh, interesting." Terror, terror, terror. If you really acknowledge the feelings that come, they last ten notes or twenty or thirty labels, and then they turn into something else. Maybe it turns into sadness or calm or interest or anger. Who knows what will happen? But it's just to see that which arises, these hardships.

Then Mara has more subtle temptations. Once you get good at it, as Kabir says, then you feel, "I'm really doing well." Pride arises. Or clarity—"I'm doing so well, I just want to keep this clarity." Or you feel joy or rapture arising. These too are simply to be acknowledged. Joy, joy. "I really like this." Liking, liking, liking.

"I hope this doesn't go away." Hoping, hoping. Simply seeing what arises. All of the temptations, pleasant and unpleasant, and sitting in the midst of them.

This is really what the Buddha did. He sat under the Bodhi tree and took a vow to open his eyes and his heart to the entire mystery of life without withdrawing from a single thing. To really let himself see it and know it all. To sit as if in the eye of a storm. To face what Zorba the Greek called "the whole catastrophe."

This, in the shamanic tradition, is called the equilibrium of a shaman—this capacity to enter all the realms of existence and stay balanced.

One of the great inspirations for me in practice was a Tibetan lama and master named Karmapa. His Holiness Karmapa, when he visited this country, was for the most part this most joyful, beautiful being—like a big fifty-five-year-old baby who loved everybody and loved everything. I remember when I first went to see him, he arrived at the airport in Boston. Some friends of mine said, "This great Tibetan lama has come to visit and we're going to the airport. Do you want to come along?"

And I said, okay, sure. Why not? I hear he's a fine teacher.

So there were about twenty of us to meet him at the airport. People brought flowers and bowed and so forth. It was kind of a line. And then it was my turn. And I looked at him. I'd been in monasteries for so long, I thought, well, another fat monk. He seemed like a nice man. He was a little bit round. Nothing good or bad.

And I went up and I kind of bowed a little bit. And he took my head and pushed it all the way down to the floor. Which I think I needed.

Then I got up and I looked at him and I smiled and I walked away. I got about ten feet away from him and all of a sudden I felt cold. It was this complete shock because I wasn't expecting anything. I felt this coldness and all I wanted to do was walk back up and sit at his feet and hug his robes. There was this tremendous field of warmth that was completely unexpected to me.

He would perform the black crown ceremony with this wonderful black hat, a crown that was given to him a thousand years before in a past incarnation by the emperor of China, in which he would become the bodhisattva of infinite compassion—surrounded by monks chanting and Tibetan horns and ancient ceremony. He performed it a number of times in this country, in halls filled with thousands of people. He would place it on his head and take out this crystal rosary and become transformed into the bodhisattva, the god or goddess of infinite compassion.

And I would look at his face and it was the saddest face I'd ever seen. His eyes were as sad as anything I'd ever seen, looking out into the world and seeing the sorrows of every single being. And he would do 108 beads on his rosary and say 108 prayers of compassion for beings everywhere. And then he would put the crystal beads away and put the crown away and complete the ceremony and turn into this big baby again.

It was remarkable. He could be in any realm. He could be anywhere.

In bringing awareness to our practice, in facing hardship, there is a profound healing that takes place if we are willing to not put anything out of our heart. When we sit, we will see our own fear that we've run from, our grief and loss. In fact, one meditation teacher and psychologist at Harvard, a good friend, sees the whole process of meditation as really one of grieving, of letting go of deeper and deeper things.

We'll feel the wounds that we carry in our bodies and in our hearts, the loneliness, the suffering of the world around us that we know—homelessness and warfare and children who don't have enough to eat. We'll feel the pains in our own body that we've carried for such a long time. And what we're asked to do is sit and discover a new way to touch all of this within us.

Here are words from Chögyam Trungpa. He says: "This is the practice of the sacred warrior. What is the awakened heart of a warrior? It is the heart of tenderness and sadness. When you awaken your heart in the face of all the difficulties of the world, you find to your surprise that your heart is empty. You find that you are looking into outer space. What are you? Who are you? Where is your heart?

"If you really look, you won't find anything tangible and solid. Of course, you might find something very solid if you have a grudge against someone or you've fallen possessively in love. But that's not the awakened heart. If you search for the awakened heart, if you put your hand through your ribcage to feel for it, there's nothing there except for tenderness. You feel sore and soft, and if you open your eyes to the rest of the world, you feel tremendous sadness.

"This kind of sadness doesn't come from being mistreated. You don't feel sad because someone has insulted you or because you feel impoverished. Rather, this experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely open. It is like pure raw meat."

Even if a mosquito lands on it, you feel so touched. It is this tender heart of a warrior that has the power to heal the world.

So there's a way, as hardships arise in our practice, that we are asked to learn to transform them—an alchemical transformation from lead or difficulty or pain into the gold of compassion and patience and steadiness and kindness. Thomas Merton says, "True prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone." Just when it is the most difficult is actually when your practice becomes the most interesting and the most compelling. To sit and awaken in the center of those difficulties is to recreate what the Buddha did under the Bodhi tree, for yourself, in this very life, in this body.

One of the most remarkable paintings of the night of his enlightenment is a Tibetan thangka. The Buddha sits there under the Bodhi tree, attacked by the forces of Mara—temptations and aggressions and fear, all the sorrow of the world thrown in his face. Arrows and bows and weapons launched toward him. And he sits under the Bodhi tree facing all of that with his hands raised in this gesture. There's a kind of line

painted from his heart to his fingertips, indicating compassion. And he touches each arrow and each spear as it's thrown to him with compassion, and it turns to flower petals and falls at his feet. He's surrounded by mounds of flower petals.

"This is the last lesson," says Don Juan. The transforming power of our own presence, of our love and attention—it is always left for the very last moment, for the moment of ultimate solitude when a person faces their death and aloneness. Only then does it make sense.

So we come through hardship, we face difficulties, and we still stay seated—present, open, wakeful—transforming them with our awareness and our compassion. And from that there comes the next stage, which is transformation itself, or awakening itself. We let go. We surrender. We open. We die a little bit at a time. You do. You die in here every day. You expand yourself. You let the whole capacity of your being open over and over. And then the old sense of yourself starts to shift.

Remember the story of Mullah Nasruddin going into the bank to cash a check? The Sufi fool and wise man. They say, "Could you please identify yourself?" So he pulls a little mirror out of his pocket, looks at it, and says, "Yep, that's me, all right."

We have these notions of our identity. And as we sit and pay attention over and over and over again in deeper ways, and the different parts of ourselves and life and the world show themselves, and we let each arise and acknowledge it with attention and compassion and allow it to pass, then our whole sense of identity opens in a new way. Not through fighting, not through struggle, but by being willing just to be, to open, to let go—we discover something new that is timeless.

Kalu Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama, wonderful master, says, "You live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you understand this, you will discover that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all."

So you discover that none of these things can you possess or hold or say, "This is me." They all come and go—different forces of the heart and body and mind. And there's this space in the middle that knows what is true. Discovering that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. There's this opening, this awakening.

Whitman puts it another way. This is his vision: "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars, and the egg of the wren is equally perfect, and the grain of sand, and the tree toad is the chief work of the highest, and the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven. And the cow crunching grass with lowered head surpasses any statue. And a mouse is a miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

A mouse is a miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels. There's this amazing thing which is our life in front of us. And no one knows how we got here.

How did we get in this body with a funny hole at one end into which we stuff dead plants and animals? That's what we do, right? And move the tube around by kind of falling in different directions against gravity. And come out of the vagina of another person, out of their belly, out of their womb. How does that happen? And here we are, born into this thing, or we are this thing, or something. And then you look out at night and there are all those stars hanging out there, billions of galaxies spinning around.

So there comes somehow this awakening, this realization that's not about solving your problems, but seeing the mystery of birth and death itself—and discovering that what we've longed for, what we've sought for so long, is here, just now, where we are.

Zen Master Suzuki Roshi could say, "If when I die, that's all right, you know. If I suffer, that's all right, you know. Just suffering Buddha, no confusion in it." Sun Buddha, Moon Buddha, Happy Buddha, Sad Buddha—to rest in that which is timeless, that holds birth and death and joy and sorrow. The heart of the Buddha.

When Thomas Merton visited the statues at the great monastery of Polonnaruwa—two-thousand-year-old Buddhas carved out of the cliff of marble—he walked across the grass in bare feet in the early morning. He said they were the most beautiful pieces of art he'd seen in the world. These huge Buddhas smiling, this half-smile knowing of tremendous peace. The peace not of emotional resignation, but of openness that has seen everything without refutation, without argument, without trying to discredit anything. The peace and compassion just of openness.

The Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, and when he awakened, seeing all of life, birth and death, he sang a song. He said, "O house builder, thou art seen at last. The rafters are shattered. The ridge pole is broken. No longer shall you build this house of sorrow." The Buddha had broken out of the house of desire and grasping. "No longer shall you build this house of sorrow. Freed am I from birth and death. Awakened the unshakable deliverance of heart."

So there comes to each of us in our own way—in days or moments, in ordinary ways or extraordinary ways—some sense of opening beyond the busyness of our life, some transcendence. And then we realize that it is we who know, and not someone else who will tell us, that we found it in ourselves. Tremendous joy in that opening and discovery.

And then of course one has to go back. You go out into the wilderness or up into the mountains only to return again. But because we have let ourselves touch our fear and our sorrow, our aloneness, our death, our rapture, our ambition, our hopes—for some people, their life is more difficult than their death—because we've let ourselves feel and face and sit in the midst of all of this, there comes a kind of fearlessness. The fearlessness of one who has traversed the territory of humanity, of birth and death. And so we become a wise man or a wise woman, a seer, a healer, a bodhisattva—someone who's journeyed through the center of the earth to touch all of these things.

I see retreats as having two great functions: one teaching us how to live, and the other teaching us how to die. Teaching us how to die because if you sit even for ten days or twenty days and really just be with everything that comes, there grows this great capacity. So that when someone you love is dying, you can sit there and hold their hand and breathe with them. And when they feel pain, you can say, "Yes, I know what it's like to sit in pain." Or fear arises and you say, "Yes, I know what it's like to be afraid, to not know." Restlessness arises, boredom arises, all the difficult states. And you can sit there and hold their hand—or when it's time for your own death—and say, "Yes, this I know, this I've learned." It's an enormous gift.

But it's also the gift to be alive. Because as we sit and walk and sit and walk, breathing and feeling our steps and eating and paying attention and reclaiming with our attention the whole of our life, we become more alive. We see more, hear more, and feel more fully. And in being alive, we live from ourselves and not from someone else. It's a wonderful way to live. And out of that, we become happy. That's what the Buddha was called—the happy one.

In the Zen ox herding pictures, the monk goes off in the forest seeking the ox, and then finding it, and taming the ox, and then losing oneself and the ox in both, just in the emptiness of things. Going through this whole journey. And finally in the last stage, returning back to the world. Emptiness let go of, ox let go of. Coming back, there's this wonderful old man with his bag and his bowl and his stick. And he says, "I go to the marketplace with my wine bottle and return home with my staff. I visit the wine shop and the market, and all whom I look upon become enlightened." He speaks of the wine bottle and wine shop because he says, "I go anywhere."

It doesn't matter where it is now. I can enter this world without fear because I don't carry that fear in the way that I used to in my own heart.

And this is really what's offered here—that we too go through this journey. Out of this, we learn the gifts of our heart that we can bring and return back to all of those we touch in our lives. Sometimes it's little by little in monotonous, regular ways: one breath, one step, one sitting. Sometimes it's great moments, mystery of reawakening. It doesn't matter. The elevator goes up, the elevator comes down. And where can you go except here?

So let's sit together.

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars. The egg of the wren is equally perfect, and the grain of sand, and the tree toad a chief work for the highest, and the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven, and the cow crunching grass with lowered head surpasses any statue, and a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

Breathing in and breathing out. Being awake and present. The feelings of the body and heart and mind. Thoughts and images arising and passing. Staying present. Wakeful. In the center of them all.

As we come into the middle portion of this first ten-day retreat, really let yourself settle into the practice. The one thing that you can do—not to strive or force anything—but one of the things that really helps the whole process open is your continuity. Take care as you stand up and walk out. Take care as you eat. Take care as you change clothes. Just bring that spirit of presence, that spirit of being awake and mindful, and make it a thread throughout the day.

As you take a walk, you can walk far into the desert. That's fine. It's not about denying yourself enjoyment. Some days will be pleasurable. Some may be terrible. That's fine too. But it's to be present and to keep coming back again and again to simply be where you are. And all of the process will open from that.

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