First Noble Truth: Dukkha

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 55:57

The talk tonight is on suffering and the cause of suffering. You may recognize this is an abridgment of the Four Noble Truths, focusing only on the unhappy parts. So prepare yourselves. But even once when I was about to give a Four Noble Truths talk here, someone in the staff room said to me, "Do you really want to talk about that? We've really heard quite a lot about dukkha already in this retreat." But hey, that's what being in a Theravadan center is all about. So I hope you'll feel right at home.

The Buddha said at one point that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So I hope that will be your experience tonight.

I'm sure you all have heard the story of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gaya. How he thought of not teaching, but was urged to do so by a Brahma who descended and said there are beings who will understand. How he then traveled across a couple of hundred miles of northern India to find five friends he had practiced with before in his ascetic period—called the group of five bhikkhus in the discourses—and located them in the deer park in Sarnath near Benares, then approached them and delivered his first Dharma discourse to them. And in that discourse he laid out the basic teaching on the Four Noble Truths.

So the talk tonight is primarily based on his first discourse called the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, which translates as "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma." This wheel that he established almost 2,600 years ago is still transforming beings' lives even today. The rest of his 45 years of teachings until he was 80 were really just an amplification of this first talk, sort of like footnotes to this talk.

You may also remember that famous sutta of the handful of leaves, where the Buddha said, "Which is greater, O monks, the handful of leaves that I've collected in my hand or the leaves in the trees in the forest around us?" And the monks, being no simpletons, said, "Well, of course, the handful of leaves is not nearly as big as the leaves in all the forest." But what you may not know is that he went on to say in that discourse, "Just so is what I have shared with you. It is very small compared to all the things I know by direct knowledge, but what I have shared with you is enough for you to gain complete liberation, and what I have shared with you—what you are to understand—are the Four Noble Truths." So he again reiterated that as the essence of the handful of leaves that his teaching had disclosed.

I'll just mention the Four Noble Truths briefly as a way of review. The first is the truth of suffering. The second is the truth that the origin of suffering is craving. The third is the truth that the end of suffering is in the end of craving. And the fourth is that the way to the end of suffering is through the Noble Eightfold Path.

So I want to talk tonight about these first two noble truths.

What distinguishes the Buddha from simply a philosopher is that in addition to the insights of the Four Noble Truths as just outlined, he added to each one an injunction, a direction, a command, so that it was not sufficient just to hear the teachings. With each of the Four Noble Truths, there was a suggestion or a prescription that those listening needed to carry out. So from the very first days of his sasana, of his teaching, the Buddha was not simply philosophizing. He was directing people how to walk the path to liberation. So I'll talk about the injunctions or prescriptions as well as we go through these Four Noble Truths.

The way he expressed the first truth is like this: "This is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, lamenting, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering."

This truth is sometimes represented, especially in the non-Buddhist world, as "Oh, the Buddha taught that life is suffering" or that "everything is suffering." And it casts a kind of gloomy pall around the notion of Buddhism. But this is not what the Buddha is saying and it's not implicit in this statement. It's not what he meant either, I don't believe.

The word, of course, that he was using throughout the Four Noble Truths, which we translate usually by "suffering," is the Pali word dukkha. But no English word is adequate to translate the range of meanings that are implicit within the Pali word dukkha. I'm going to use "suffering" as the primary translation as we go through the talk, but please be aware that it's not a very good translation, but it's such a common translation that it is the one I'll use.

Dukkha has a whole range of meanings from the most intense kind of pain imaginable, which usually carries a strong experience of suffering, down to very subtle levels of unsatisfactoriness or unreliability. And the basic sense is that this world, as available through our six senses, is not capable of providing a lasting satisfaction. So you could say that maybe the best general translation for dukkha is "incapable of satisfying." But that's kind of cumbersome. So we shorten it down to this term, "suffering." But it ranges from intense experiences of unhappiness to very subtle experiences of lack of fulfillment.

Some of the other translations that have been used that you'll read in different texts translated into English are unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, unreliability, stress, anguish. All of these convey facets of the meaning of dukkha. But when you come to any specific passage, it's helpful to try to understand which aspect or which nuance of the meaning the passage is particularly pointing to. Because some passages will point to direct experiences of pain, others will point to the more subtle manifestations of unreliability.

Overall, you can take this teaching on the First Noble Truth...

as pointing to a kind of lack, or you could say a lack of fulfillment, that is universal in the way that as

humans we live our life until we undergo the training that leads to freedom.

There is a universal sense of insufficiency, of feeling that something is missing. There is not a general and constant pervasive sense of contentment throughout the human world, as you may have noticed. Even if we have everything externally—which so often these days we have in this Western paradise that technology has helped to give us—it seems that the basic level of unhappiness is perhaps even increasing in our world.

But it also doesn't mean that everything is miserable. There are people whose lives are basically happy, who have, I would say, a great deal of happiness and even contentment in their lives, ordinary people, untrained. But even for such people, where there's a baseline of happiness and contentment, there are good days and bad days. There are pleasurable experiences and unpleasurable experiences. There are times of frustration as well as times of contentment. But this pointing to an essential lack of fulfillment, I think, is a good way to remember the essence of this truth.

One of the things I appreciate a lot in the way the Buddha phrased his teaching on the First Noble Truth is how universal it is. You know, if he had come along and said, "basically, life really sucks," a lot of people would have just turned off and gone to hear somebody else, probably in California, who was painting a much rosier view of the human condition. But everything that he says, it's hard to disagree with. Birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, and pain are all suffering. We can all relate to that. The association with what we don't like and the separation from what we like and not getting what we want—these are things that everyone can relate to as happening regularly in our lives.

The other thing that I appreciate is that in its universality, it's also very impersonal. It doesn't say, "I am suffering" or "you are suffering" or "you should realize how much you're suffering, guys." It doesn't say it that way. And when you think about it, if we take it that way, that has a really different feeling.

How often in our minds do we kind of take it that way? "Oh, I really have a lot of suffering in my life. I have a problem in this part of my life. I've had this very painful pattern of emotion in my psychology for years and years. I don't know what I'm going to do about it. I don't know when I will get rid of it." These are the kind of thoughts that tend to spin out when we phrase this as "I am suffering."

It's a very different feeling when we step back and we take a look at the universality of suffering as a noble truth. When we go on in the vein of "I am suffering," does it feel very noble to you? It generally doesn't to me. When my mind runs in those directions, it feels lowering. I feel weighted down by the burden of those kinds of thoughts. It's not uplifting. It doesn't elevate me and it doesn't give me dignity.

But when we see it as this universal psychological condition that all human beings are subject to, that to me is more what our friend Stephen Batchelor calls ennobling. That becomes an ennobling truth.

Why? For a few reasons. Number one, if we don't take our own difficulties so personally, then we might be able to accept them more easily. When we realize that what we're struggling with is part of the universal

human condition, well, maybe it's not so much our fault. Maybe it doesn't invalidate us as a person.

Secondly, it can help connect us to everyone else that we meet. In this culture, we tend to put kind of a premium on being upbeat and happy and putting on a smiling face in public. And sometimes we are taken in or forget to look under the surface of the cultural appearance to recognize that everybody is dealing with these same issues of birth and aging and illness and death and being separated from what is pleasing.

When we start to go a little deeper for this universal human condition of unsatisfactoriness, then we can start to connect also with everyone we meet, knowing that somehow we're in the same boat with them. And then this kind of connectedness is the doorway to awakening compassion.

I think this is one of the great benefits of the brahmavihara practices. As we go through the phrases in either metta or compassion, we realize we all share the same deep wishes and we all have the same deep struggles in achieving them. And the brahmaviharas serve then as a way of uniting us in the human family, of allowing our compassion, our goodwill to flow out.

Sometimes the sense that "I am suffering" and the claiming it is ours has just the opposite effect. It can feel quite isolating, as though we have to be ashamed of the pain that we feel. We can't expose it and we can't share it with anyone else.

There's a lovely poem by Naomi Shihab Nye that expresses this connection. It's called "Kindness." "Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things."

Feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved—all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you—how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans, and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows, and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, "It is I you have been looking for," and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The line I most appreciate in this poem is where she says, "You must speak to sorrow till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is vast—universal.

It includes all sentient beings, all subject to the first noble truth of dukkha.

As we start to explore the kinds of suffering we encounter—and meditation practice is the only way I know of to plumb the depths of this kind of seeing—we come upon three types that the Buddha described. The first is dukkha-dukkha. Can you guess what that is? It's like a double hit—the immediate pain of existence.

The second is viparinama-dukkha, the pain of alternation. We may have pleasurable circumstances for a while, but when they change, we feel the loss and separation, the pain of change.

The third is called sankhara-dukkha—the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena.

Dukkha-dukkha is helpful to reflect upon from time to time, recognizing it as an integral part of our world. The experiences of illness and death are clearly, for most of us, going to feel like dukkha-dukkha. When we look around the world and think of the wars and conflicts going on—the genocide and torture in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Tibet—we see big eruptions of this kind of intense suffering.

Even in our own society, where there is not a time of war, if you really start to listen to the stories of the people you meet, you'll find instances not so far from our own lives—murder, rape, racism, and abuse of children happening in our own communities, all around us.

Living in our fairly privileged lives, as I think most of us do, we are still subject to various kinds of dukkha-dukkha. Sally and I were leading a class a few years ago of senior students who had been practicing for some time and were materially reasonably comfortable. We had been working together for months, if not years. One evening, I asked the group to talk about the pain in their own individual lives.

They spoke of a sense of isolation and lack of connection with others. They talked about still dealing with their afflictive emotions—depression, sadness, anger, anxiety. They shared about feeling pressures in their work life, the struggle to make ends meet, and fears of inadequacy or not performing well enough. Because this was a group partly of our generation, they were already feeling the effects of aging. Everyone knew the impact of illness.

Again, probably because of our age, there was much discussion of aging parents losing their capacities and declining physically and mentally—which, as you know, is a very sad thing to witness in people you're close to. These were common experiences for people even in this fairly select circle of practitioners.

Viparinama-dukkha, the pain of alternation or change, is something we're all subject to. We enjoy pleasurable conditions or experiences, and when they change, we tend to feel their loss. If there's been even the slightest inclination of grasping—even the slightest—then there will be at least some pain or friction when change happens.

Ajahn Chah compared this alternation of pain and pleasure to a poisonous snake. He said, "If you grab the head of a poisonous snake, it will bite you right away—that's dukkha-dukkha. But if you grab hold of the

tail, which is the non-painful end, and you hold on, eventually the head will swing around and bite you too—that's viparinama-dukkha." So the lesson is: don't grab. It's not easy to do.

The third type of dukkha the Buddha discussed is sankhara-dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory because they are unstable—all unstable. Every state that is put together from prior causes and conditions is falling apart.

It's not like viparinama dukkha where we see that something will fall apart at some time in the future. With the insight of sankara dukkha, we bring concentrated attention to our moment-to-moment experience and see that every mind state and every physical sensation and every external sense impression is arising and passing over and over again, moment after moment after moment. When we come into that level of seeing, we truly see the unreliability of conditioned phenomena.

We had the opportunity a few years ago in California to hear the Dalai Lama. Sally and I were there. I think Sharda was there too. He was outdoors in the Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View—a place that Led Zeppelin might have played twenty years ago. It's a huge stage. If Led Zeppelin had been there, it would have been full of their speakers. But on this day, the backdrop to the stage was a huge painting. It was like the whole stage was a painting of the Potala Palace, where the Dalai Lama used to live in Lhasa, painted in the colors of sunset. Purple and orange colors streaked the sky and reflected off the windows of the painted Potala Palace.

The Dalai Lama sat on a big throne, projected over large screen televisions so that everybody—there were several thousand people in the seats and on the grass amphitheater—could see him. It was a very wonderful feeling. It was kind of like being at a Dharma Woodstock. That's what it felt like—a festival atmosphere. Being with the Dalai Lama for three days, he was teaching on the subject of emptiness from the Heart Sutra.

What he said about these three kinds of dukkha is that each takes an increasing subtlety of attention to see and understand. Everyone can be aware of dukkha dukkha, the suffering of pain. With a little bit of thought and reflection and examination of experience, one comes to understand that even pleasurable experiences come to an end, but that takes some investigation and reflection. And then it's only with the very subtle attention of a concentrated mind that can see the moment-to-moment arising and passing that we really deeply understand the unreliability of all conditioned things. This is how the Dalai Lama explained it also. He said that if you really want to help people in this world completely become free of their suffering, you need to understand these three levels completely yourself. Only then will you be able to help others release their bondage from these forms of dukkha.

This is a quote from the Pali Canon. It's put in the mouth of a Brahma who is one of the higher gods, but it expresses a dharmic teaching: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." Sankara dukkha is a pointer to this trembling within form—that moment by moment things are not stable, even for one moment, but they're constantly being created and dissolving, being created and

dissolving. Thus the wise do not cling to form.

Our problem, of course, is that we don't really see dukkha in this way. We're blinded by very deep conditioned tendencies. We have very strongly built-in biases that seek the possibility of happiness in the world, the possibility of permanence, and a self, when in fact, as you all know, the things of the world aren't capable of satisfying. They are impermanent, and they do not constitute a self. But our conditioned nature is such that we keep looking for lasting happiness, permanence, and self. It's a form of ignorance that is clouding our understanding.

So we approach spiritual practice with the same attitude that we've approached our worldly life by and large. We are all intelligent enough to have understood that lasting happiness doesn't come from external things. But when we come into the spiritual world, we tend to think that true happiness may be found in lasting spiritual things. This is certainly true for me, and I see it still in my tendency when I'm not looking closely.

I keep thinking that if I just get my attention right and my posture right and my concentration right and my intention right, I'm going to be able to sort everything out. I'm going to find this nice plateau of peace and concentration and openness and metta, and then I'm just going to be able to hang there—for six weeks at least, hopefully the rest of my life, but six weeks would be a good start. Then every time it doesn't happen that way, I feel like I've blown it. I've got to go back and set those conditions better.

So I find in myself this tendency to look to land somewhere in some meditative state that's going to be ongoing. And meditative states are also part of compounded phenomena. Until you realize the unconditioned, meditative states before that are all put together by prior conditions. Just as they were put together, they will also fall apart.

We not only keep wanting things out in the world, but we bring this same attitude into our meditation practice, continually wanting things to unfold in a certain way.

Now, it is definitely true that there are skillful attitudes to cultivate, skillful states of mind to develop in dharma practice. And it does happen that these skillful attitudes and states of mind tend to feel better than the unskillful ones. So do you see the dilemma here?

We do want to cultivate the factors of the Eightfold Path, the seven factors of enlightenment. The factors of the Eightfold Path and the seven factors of enlightenment do feel better than their opposites. So the question becomes: are you cultivating them out of desire for pleasant experience, or are you cultivating them out of wisdom, knowing that they lead toward liberation?

This is an interesting exploration I'll return to later. But it's worth keeping an eye on this tendency.

Life throughout—both worldly and spiritual—doesn't offer cozy plateaus. It is changeable, raw, vivid, and often intense. This tends to be our experience here in practice as well as outside.

But this changeable quality, while initially disappointing, works to our benefit in the long run. I came upon a passage in the Samyutta Nikaya that caused me to ponder for some time. The Buddha says, essentially—I'm paraphrasing—if there were one speck of permanent form as big as my fingernail, then the holy life lived for the purpose of liberation would not be possible.

In other words, if there were even this small amount of permanence in the universe, it would gum up the works. We would not be able to transform our minds from their current state, clouded by ignorance, into a state of full enlightenment. It is only due to the impermanent and essentially empty nature of our own being that we are able to make this transformation.

Suffering is not stuck either.

What was the injunction that goes with the first noble truth? The Buddha said: "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." This is the prescription for the first noble truth—it is to be fully understood.

Part of the implication is that we don't understand it now. Even after listening to this discourse, you probably do not fully understand the first noble truth. And I have to admit, I don't either.

What does it mean that we don't fully understand it now? As a practice direction, this is a wonderful instruction. To fully understand this truth, we need to keep applying it over and over in our experience until we understand its depth. We can use it as a frame to bring in again and again, looking at the way our experience unfolds.

Ajahn Sumedho said that in his own practice, he used the Four Noble Truths as his primary practice orientation throughout all the years of his development. He would bring them in and apply them, checking them out in each situation he found himself in. He calls this "a lifetime's practice"—the understanding and application of the first noble truth.

Let's talk about some of the ways we don't see it. When we're experiencing difficulty, how often do we recognize it as the first noble truth revealing itself? Is this the first thought that comes to mind? How often do we think instead, "Oh, I've screwed up again. It's my suffering coming to the fore"?

So often we see it as: there's something wrong with me, there's something wrong with somebody else, or there's something wrong with the world. The world includes this retreat center, the facility, the food, the weather, and so forth.

Notice that because we don't like to see the truth of dukkha, we have many ways of missing the point. We might deny to ourselves that it's happening: "Oh no, this isn't pain. This isn't as bad as yesterday anyway." Or we could judge ourselves: "Oh, you just did something wrong. It's your fault that there's pain now."

Because the noble truths encourage us to take responsibility for suffering and the end of suffering, one can get the impression from the Buddha's teachings that we are at fault if we're suffering. This is quite

interesting. There's also a sutta where a questioner asks the Buddha, "Am I the cause of my own suffering?" I was very surprised to read that the Buddha said no. I found this very liberating.

Then the questioner continued: "Was another the cause of my suffering?"

And the Buddha said no.

And he said, well, how is it then? And the Buddha went through the chain of dependent origination: When ignorance is present as a condition, karmic formations arise. With karmic formations as a condition, consciousness arises, and so on—a sequence of twelve steps that ends in suffering. We'll probably talk about it more later.

The interesting thing to me that has made me reflect a lot is that the first step in that chain leading to suffering is ignorance. So I want to ask each of you: Did you put your ignorance there? Did you ever remember knowingly creating it? Was there an enlightened mind to start with, but you slid ignorance into the picture to cover it? No.

In fact, the Buddha said that a beginning for ignorance cannot be discerned—that we have been traveling this round since beginningless time. So if we're not responsible for ignorance, and ignorance is the primary source of our suffering, how can we ultimately say it's our fault?

This may sound abstract, but the more I came to see ignorance as the fundamental problem in my relationship to life, the less I had to say, "Oh, I made that happen." I saw that all the mistakes and blunders I'd made in life, all the suffering I'd caused, was based on that ignorance—stemmed from that ignorance. So the judgment of ourselves is off the mark of the noble truths. Many, many causes and conditions have led to the situation we find ourselves in.

Similarly, if we try to escape from the experience of pain by blaming others, we're also missing the point of the First Noble Truth. You can blame other people all day long for your suffering—does it ever alleviate it? It hasn't for me. It can keep us stuck in a resentful or blaming attitude, but it doesn't seem to lift the suffering.

So can we, when we're in difficulty, if we see a tendency to blame ourselves or blame others or blame the world, just stop for a moment and say, "Oh, this is a form of dukkha. This is the First Noble Truth." And then we might inquire a little more into it: "What is the real source of this dukkha?" But being able to name it as dukkha in its universal quality, being able to see it as one more instance of the First Noble Truth, is the beginning of this kind of insight where the noble truth of dukkha comes to be fully understood moment by moment.

Now, there's another point I want to make in relation to dukkha that is kind of delicate about opening to the First Noble Truth. As I've said, it's not an easy truth to be with. We have a built-in bias not to see it. It's part of the Buddha's teaching that goes against the stream.

If we don't stay in touch with this noble truth, then what are called vipalasa—our illusory way of perceiving the world—will lead us to believe that there is permanence, lasting happiness, and a self. We will project into the future this safe and cozy plateau, whether it be through external things or through internal meditative states, and we will aim our lives into the future to land there. So we put our happiness into the future based on an illusory wish. Clearly, this is misleading and involves us in more delusion.

But the other thing is that if we start to dwell on the concept of dukkha a lot, we can start to see the whole world in terms of dukkha. Then we really start to feel that gloom that's sometimes attributed to Buddhism, and we think, "Oh my God, everything is dukkha. Life is dukkha. My life is dukkha. My friend's life is dukkha. Everybody's life is dukkha."

But the problem with this is we have taken an insight and converted it into a belief. We are not seeing the true nature of things moment by moment. We've taken one experience, held onto that as a generalized view of the world, and then stapled it everywhere: "It's like that, it's like that, it's like that, it's like that." Basically what we're doing is clinging to a view. But when an insight is turned into a view, it's no longer true. An insight needs to be of how things are here and now.

If we form a view about the world as being dukkha, then that covers over the living reality. Because there are many, many moments in the day when there is not—I'll say it—when there is not dukkha. Generally, these moments slip by us, and we don't notice those either. But I'll talk about this when we get to the Third Noble Truth at another time.

So the intention of the First Noble Truth is not so that you'll get gloomy and develop an aversion about life.

That's not the point, and it's a misapplication—it's converting a truth into a view.

The Buddha expressed this beautifully: "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure." Many of the suttas that speak of developing the factors of enlightenment and cultivating the higher qualities of the path describe aspects of happiness, joy, and rapture as integral to the path's evolution.

To understand suffering, it doesn't work to be overwhelmed by it. We have to be able to—Ajahn Sumedho likes this phrase—stand under it. That means we must support it on our own shoulders while standing upright. We have to hold it, or as he says, embrace it, accept it. In order to understand suffering, we must allow it to be in our lives just as it is while remaining upright, dignified, and ennobled.

So how can we do that? Let me ask you: has suffering ever been useful in your practice? Have you ever learned anything? Has it ever opened qualities of heart or mind? What have you found through connecting with suffering?

"Compassion," someone responds. Yes, suffering is said to be the proximate cause of compassion. What

else?

"Empathy—being able to feel another's suffering from feeling and opening to our own." Indeed. "Impermanence—investigation of suffering leads to seeing impermanence, so wisdom is cultivated."

"Appreciation." How so? "Experiencing the suffering can really make us experience the times that are free from that suffering." Exactly—appreciation, patience, strength, confidence. I can bear this. I can understand it. I can work with it.

In many ways, suffering becomes a training ground for the paramis. We grow, develop, and open through a wise relationship to suffering. But it depends on us not being overwhelmed by it. We must find that inner strength that lets us maintain our balance while relating to it, understanding it, feeling it, coming into contact with it. This is truly the power of equanimity—when present, it gives us the strength to learn from suffering.

I always enjoy seeing Morgan Freeman in movies. I recently read about his life story. He was born in 1937, so he turned seventy this year, and he grew up in Mississippi. Being an African-American young man in Mississippi through the thirties, forties, and fifties would not have been a primarily happy experience. And yet when you look at his character today, I feel an incredible amount of dignity and self-respect in his bearing. He was chosen in two different movies to play the character of God—quite a testament to his character.

Sally and I were in New York last fall and went to a Broadway show—Spamalot, which was not particularly dignified but a lot of fun. When we came out of the theater around eleven o'clock, there was Morgan Freeman walking down the sidewalk toward us with a woman, dressed in a black wool overcoat. He looked just like a character from his movies—tall and dignified—and you could see the crowd of people parting in advance of his wake. He has a wonderful bearing and character, and I believe much of that was learned through dealing with the adverse circumstances of growing up as a black man in a racist culture.

There are many things we can learn from suffering when we can bear it, when we are not overwhelmed by it—but we need to see it clearly, moment after moment.

One of the ways we know we haven't fully understood dukkha is that we keep chasing things. If we really understood dukkha and the true meaning of impermanence—the thoroughgoing nature of impermanence—we wouldn't chase material things, we wouldn't chase people, and we wouldn't chase meditation experiences.

So to the extent that we still chase these things, those are signs that we have a way to go in the full understanding of dukkha.

Along these lines of the ennobling quality of dukkha, Ajahn Chah offered this reflection, which you've

probably heard before: "There is suffering that leads to more suffering, and there is suffering that leads to the end of suffering."

What makes the difference between these two? We see so much suffering in the world that seems to lead only to more suffering—this spiral of violence and unhappiness and endless pursuit of materialism. So what kind of suffering leads to the end of suffering? Or better, what quality of mind can transform suffering toward its end?

One aspect is this base of equanimity—we must be strong enough to bear it. The other is interest. If we cultivate an interest to learn from suffering, this brings in a profoundly wholesome factor of mind. This investigative quality is the second of the enlightenment factors. The first is mindfulness, which gets us there and puts us in touch with what's happening. The second is that we want to investigate how that suffering is arising, how it's being sustained, and how it can be ended.

If we get interested in suffering, this becomes the turning point that starts to lead us toward using it for the end of suffering. We have abundant opportunities during this retreat to see this, as I'm sure you've noticed.

That simple practice of turning attention to the attitude of mind—seeing if there's wanting, seeing if there's not wanting, seeing if there's delusion—these are pointers to conflict, to struggle, to having an agenda. They point to some way we may be in conflict with our situation and therefore experiencing some degree of suffering, either gross or subtle.

If we can take that opportunity to learn what leads to suffering—how it gets created, how it can be released, and how it can be ended—that's the investigation we're here for.

I heard a teacher giving a dharma talk recently who said, "Changing the conditions that lead to suffering is what our practice is about. There is no other practice than this."

It's only through our own wisdom that we can change those conditions—not through force of will. Wisdom alone can change those conditions. We have to look, investigate, attend, be interested, be curious, until the wisdom itself reveals to us suffering, its cause, and its end. If we are patient and stay with that experience, knowing it as the First Noble Truth, the wisdom will reveal this to us. The wisdom will unfold the way out.

I didn't get to the cause of suffering tonight—we're halfway there. We'll explore that another evening. But I want to end with the Buddha's formulation of the Third Noble Truth from this same discourse, just to point toward the direction of the teaching.

This is what the Buddha said about the Third Noble Truth: "This is the noble truth of the end of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it. That is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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