Third Noble Truth & Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:48

The subject of the talk tonight is the Third Noble Truth. I thought I would start by talking about the Buddha's description of his motivation for his own practice. This is from a sutta in the Majjhima:

"Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, I too, being myself subject to birth, sought what was also subject to birth. Being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I sought what was also subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow. Then I considered thus: Why, being myself subject to birth, do I seek what is also subject to birth? Why, being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, do I seek what is also subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow? Suppose that, being myself subject to birth, having understood the danger in what is subject to birth, I seek the unborn supreme security from bondage, nibbāna. Suppose that, being myself subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, having understood the danger in what is subject to aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I seek the unaging, unailing, deathless, and sorrowless supreme security from bondage, nibbāna."

So this becomes the frame for the Buddha's journey. Understanding the limitations of what is subject to birth and death, he started his quest looking for that which is beyond birth and death, which he called nibbāna. This was the search that culminated in his understanding in that night under the Bodhi tree, where he became fully liberated.

It's said that immediately after his realization, a poem came to him:

"Through many a birth I wandered in samsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridgepole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of cravings."

The house that he's talking about is the house of this body, subject to birth, illness, aging, and death. The house builder is craving, which we talked about last week as the source of suffering in the Second Noble Truth. The rafters of the house are considered to be the passions of greed, aversion, and delusion. The ridgepole is ignorance, that which props the whole thing up. And then the very last statement: my mind has attained the unconditioned. Unconditioned is another synonym for nibbāna, that which was the subject of his whole quest, and reached the very end of craving.

This poetic utterance sets the stage for the discourse that he gave to his five old friends when he found them in Sarnath, after he had already explained to them the truth of suffering and the truth of the origin of suffering. Tonight I want to talk about the Third Noble Truth, or the cessation of suffering.

This is how he explained it in that first discourse: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

So he equates the end of suffering with the end of craving, as the Second Noble Truth equated the origin of suffering with the origin of craving, and describes it as the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving which was the origin of suffering.

The poem I mentioned earlier about the house builder also ties in the concept of the unconditioned. The statement of his quest equates that with nibbāna. So in the Third Noble Truth, we really get this conjoining of the end of suffering, the end of craving, and this factor of nibbāna.

So what is this quality referred to as nibbāna? I don't think there's anything in all the Buddha's teachings that's as confusing and perplexing. Even the teaching on not-self starts to seem sort of understandable when we put it next to the teaching on nibbāna. So as we talk about this quality tonight, I want to encourage you: please don't worry about it. It's not something that anyone can figure out rationally, so don't spend too many cycles trying to do that. The Buddha used it as kind of a pointer for the end of the path, and it's really enough to understand it in those terms, although I'll be trying to flesh it out a little bit more this evening.

As he himself said in the same sutta where he described his quest: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see, and hard to understand, subtle to be experienced by the wise." So the talk tonight may not be particularly subtle or profound, but it may be hard to understand. That's why you should take it all with a grain of skepticism.

One of the clearest definitions in the canon comes from Sāriputta, the Buddha's chief disciple who was said to be highly developed in wisdom. He defined nibbāna like this: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbāna."

Given that greed, aversion, and delusion are pretty much synonymous with taṇhā, or craving, then we have the end of craving—end of greed, aversion, delusion—equated with nibbāna. This is a good working understanding in a simple way. So you can see that when greed, aversion, and delusion are gone from the mind, there's a state of freedom. You've been reporting this in your interviews and experiencing it at many different points during the retreat. So the Third Noble Truth is pointing to a real place of freedom.

The literal meaning of this term nibbāna in the Pali—and there was a word at the Buddha's time, he didn't make it up—is extinguishing.

It refers to extinguishing like the going out of a fire.

Moreover, at the time of the Buddha, fire was considered to exist or come into being in dependence on what was called its sustenance or its nourishment. The word that was used for sustenance or nourishment

was upadana, which is the term that we use for clinging, the term the Buddha used for clinging or grasping.

So the idea was that a fire could be born of leaves or sticks or twigs or logs or grass. And then that was said—those materials, leaves or twigs or sticks or logs or grass, were said to be the material or the sustenance for the fire. They were said to be the upadana on which the fire depended.

So when the fire goes out, it was thought of at the time as being released from its nutriments, from its sustenance, from its upadana.

The Buddha took both these terms and brought them together in this sense of nibbana as something going out. And what goes out is the fire of clinging, upadana. This is what gets extinguished. So again, using the common terms and concepts that were of his day and taking them and making a new kind of spiritual truth from them.

When clinging—the nutriment, you could say, for suffering—is released, then there's a sense of extinction. The fire of craving, the fire of greed, hatred, and delusion goes out. And that's the state of nibbana, the going out of greed, hatred, and delusion.

So nibbana can be understood as a state of freedom in the mind that is released from greed, hatred, and delusion, but it's also come to be understood as an element in its own right. I hope you can get this distinction.

It could just be a psychological condition, right? When there is no greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind, then there is this state of freedom called nibbana. That's one possible interpretation.

Or this quality of nibbana could be something that is already within us, that when we touch is that place of freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.

There's one particular sutta that seems to indicate the second reading. That is from the Udana, when the Buddha says: "There is, bhikkhus, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

So the general interpretation is that in addition to nibbana describing a state of mind, it also refers to an element that is already within us—that there is this unchanging, you might say, dimension within ourselves. Somewhere within this mind-body process or underlying this mind-body process is this element which is often referred to as a transcendent element because it transcends the limitations of birth, aging, illness, and death, the discovery of which opens us to the Third Noble Truth, opens us fully to the Third Noble Truth.

Some of the implications of this understanding are this quality is ever-present within us. Because it's not

conditioned, it's not subject to arising and passing. Therefore, it doesn't get created. Therefore, it can't arise in a moment, so it must already be here.

I don't know if this interests you, but this has always really intrigued me. This element called nibbana is already here and now. This unborn, unmade, unbecome is already here and now. And it is what makes it possible for us to be released or liberated from what is born, become, or made. And of course, as we've seen many times, it's our tendency to hang on to changing elements of experience that causes our suffering.

So here's something that isn't changing. That is in a way stable. That is free from the cycle of birth and death. That's free from the cycle of samsara. And it's already here.

Now when I hear that, something in me stops and opens up. So I think this is the first practical pointer that I'd like to mention about hearing about this quality of nibbana—that it can make us stop and listen deeply within ourselves to see what could that be. Where could it be? How could it be sensed or intuited? Where is perhaps a trail, the scent that leads to that realization? And we'll talk more about that.

So if it's ever present, why is it so hard to see? It's said that it's because the movements of mind are so coarse in comparison to its nature—that its nature is very subtle. And the movements of greed, aversion, and confusion are so heavy that they overwhelm our perception of that. So the understanding is that it needs a very fine balance of mind in order for it to be perceivable.

This balance of mind is what's pointed to in lists like the seven factors of enlightenment that Sally talked about. The balance of mind is illustrated in this lovely story of the enlightenment of Ananda. We've talked quite a bit about Ananda, who was a beautiful being who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life.

After the Buddha's death, Ananda had been so busy serving he hadn't had much time for practice. So there were many, many fully enlightened beings around, but Ananda was only a stream enterer.

They were having a meeting of, it said, 499 Arahants to collect all the teachings of the Buddha since he had died in order to preserve them. People wanted Ananda there because he had heard a lot of the suttas and he had this fabulous memory. He said that he could remember everything that he'd heard, but he wasn't an Arahant, so he couldn't really be trusted. This was really a boys' club, I'll tell you.

So Ananda wanted to be at the council, but he knew he had to be an Arahant to join, to get the invitation. He said, "I'm going to practice really hard." And the night before the council, he stayed up all night practicing, sitting and walking and cultivating the factors of enlightenment. He thought that he was in the territory, and the evening was wearing on, and still nothing was happening. He sat and walked and put in more effort and tried to get his mind in just the right balance, and nothing was happening.

Finally, just before dawn, he thought, "I guess it's not going to happen. I'm not going to be able to join the

council, but at least I can take some rest. I gave it my best effort. I'll take some rest." So he went to his bed to lie down, relaxed his body, relaxed his mind, and just before his head hit the pillow came that moment of full realization.

And then Ananda had a little nap and joined the first council where he contributed all those suttas that begin, "Thus have I heard." Those are all from the mouth of Ananda.

It's very interesting. Effort can do a certain amount on this path in terms of the unfolding, the opening to the realization of nibbana, but effort can't do the whole thing. It's beautiful because it illustrates the potency of effort. We can collect and gather the factors of enlightenment through our continuous mindfulness. They do grow, and they gain a momentum that's onward leading. But we cannot control that possible moment of opening to what is beyond conditions. That is beyond effort, beyond our effort.

All we can do is lay the ground as best we can and then be patient. In fact, the very desire or striving for that particular breakthrough will in fact block it. So I think this is a nice reminder that all along the way, to open ourselves to the deepest truth, it needs an element of surrender and realizing that there's a mystery that's beyond our control and an opening beyond our ability to cause.

So, nibbana is one word for it. Some other common synonyms from some suttas in the Samyutta Nikaya: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the refuge, the beyond.

This condition or this realization, this way of being, is considered by the Buddha the highest kind of happiness. And therefore, it's the culmination of the path. Many different kinds of happiness come along the way: the happiness of sense pleasures, which we've talked about; the happiness of very refined meditative states looked at through the seven factors of enlightenment or transcendent dependent arising, as Sally discussed. But all of these are still considered in the conditioned world. And it's said that this realization, this way of being, brings a greater kind of happiness than anything else.

The reason, of course, that it is so completely happy is because it marks the end of suffering. When you think about what we as humans most deeply want, it really isn't particular experiences. It really is to be beyond the touch of pain and sorrow. And so the Buddha said that when we realize that, that is the most satisfying. That is the greatest kind of happiness.

The reason it's so fulfilling is that in that state or in that realization, there is no possibility for the mind's agitation. Because it is a place where craving cannot arise. It is a place of complete safety and complete freedom from even the potential of harm that we cause ourselves.

So just a little bit of an overview reminder again about how we approach it. When you think about the talk on transcendent dependent arising, you remember the first part—you could sort of think of that sequence in two halves. The first half starts with suffering, moves through faith and gladness and rapture and tranquility and happiness or contentment. And the second half starts from there and goes into deeper

states of calm and then insight.

So I like to think of it as that half of our journey is from suffering to contentment, and the second half of the journey is starting from contentment and going to liberation.

Now, when you came into the retreat, if I asked you, "Are you here because you'd like to realize nibbana?" I don't know that very many of you would have checked that box. When I started practicing, I was definitely practicing just with the idea of contentment. If I could have found that in practice early on, that would have satisfied me. But as time went on, my motivation started to change as I started to see greater possibilities.

So just to be aware that our aspiration is a factor of the path that also evolves as we deepen in practice.

Whether you conceive of your journey as moving toward contentment or toward full liberation, both are heading in the same direction. The Buddha said that one who walks the Eightfold Path "slants, slopes, and inclines to Nibbana." Isn't that a beautiful image? All of you are on this downhill roll, heading in that same direction. We simply need to keep rolling. Whether you know you're going there or not, whether you conceive of that as your destination, doesn't matter. The practice naturally unfolds in that direction.

Let me draw in another aspect of the nibbanic experience—our relationship with time. You'll notice that even the concept of path has time built into it. We begin from suffering, practice mindfulness, develop concentration and wisdom, and over time, at some point in the future, we arrive at the goal. This understanding often carries within it the sense that we are moving through time toward something else, implying that fulfillment is not here and now. The feeling that accompanies this is often a subtle dissatisfaction with the present moment, because the future is meant to be the real thing. Even in states that are fairly calm, harmonious, and peaceful, there's often this undercurrent of time. Take a look and see if you notice this in your practice.

But when we arrive at the goal—the realization of nibbana—that sense of time dissolves. Integral to this realization is a quality of timelessness. When that timelessness is touched, the sense of time becomes much more relaxed and expansive. Time opens up in a broad way, and we begin to reflect that there is never anything but this present moment. Instead of using the present moment as a vehicle to get somewhere else, we come fully into this present moment and discover there is nothing else. This is what gives that sense of relaxation and expansiveness.

If you observe children's relationship to time, they are much less caught in the sense of time's rapid movement. They inhabit a much more open and relaxed sense of time. The Tibetans say that generally speaking, we are caught in the three times—past, present, and future. But when we touch freedom, we enter the fourth time, which is timelessness. I think this is an interesting reflection to bring into your practice. Anytime there's a sense of being caught in time, there's movement toward a goal. But when there's the fullness of arrival, there's no sense of time.

The Third Noble Truth, like all the others, has an imperative—a prescription that the Buddha gave us of what is to be done. He described it this way: "This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized." This realization is the whole point of our path, the reason the Buddha taught, and the reason we practice.

The Buddha encouraged us all to come to the realization of nibbana—to directly know it from our own personal experience. You may not feel this is a compelling motivation at this point, and that's fine. But I also want to explore the ways we are already touching this quality in relative form. Whether in the relative sense or the direct sense of realization, this quality of freedom from clinging, freedom from craving, is met all along the path.

The direct realization and fullness of seeing nibbana is what's called enlightenment. In our tradition, enlightenment is understood as the meditator's direct apprehension of this unconditioned element. The Buddha said this direct realization can influence people on four different levels. Sometimes the word enlightenment is used only to describe those who have become completely liberated, but in our tradition, there are four levels of enlightenment or realization.

The first, which is how most people experience it, is called stream entry. This refers to the first moment of direct knowledge of the unconditioned element. This first moment of realization removes three fetters from the mind: the fetter of personality view, which Sharda discussed last night; the fetter of attachment to precepts and rituals; and the fetter of doubt—doubt that there is an end of suffering, doubt that this path leads to that end. Because one knows from direct experience the state where there is no suffering and no possibility of suffering. The middle fetter is somewhat perplexing.

How many of you feel attached to rituals and precepts? I don't think many do. I think this was a teaching that the Buddha used to address the Brahmanical practices of his day, where there was an understanding that purification through rituals alone could lead to liberation. He was saying it's not enough in itself—don't be attached to that as the way.

If a stream enterer progresses further, or for some people this first moment of contact will lead to the next level of enlightenment, called a once-returner. The idea is that such a person is born once again in the world. At this level, it's said that sense desire and aversion are weakened—not eliminated, but weakened.

As one progresses further, or for some individuals the first contact will lead to the next level, called a non-returner. A non-returner is not born again into this world, but will be born in another realm before full liberation. At non-returning, both sense desire and aversion are completely eliminated.

This third stage of enlightenment is a very high achievement. I've known a few people in my life who were considered to be at this level. I don't know if they were or not, but from my observation of them, they could well have been. This is the first stage of enlightenment where there's a strong change in affect, in emotional experience, because sense desire and aversion are no longer present in the mind. This is a very

high attainment.

Going on from there, as one continues to practice, or for some people on the first moment of realization, it's said that five more fetters are uprooted from the mind. Two are attachment to higher levels of concentration or absorption. The last three are restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. This is why we often say the comparing mind doesn't go away until full liberation, and why it's such a hard thing to be really free of. Ignorance is the ridgepole that was pointed to in the Buddha's poem—the underpinning of all our constructs of self and searching for lasting happiness.

This can seem a little remote. It certainly does in my practice. But I do want to tell you one story, because there are people alive who have reached this fourth and highest level of enlightenment, it seems. Again, I can't verify, but someone who is said to be an arahant in Thailand is a teacher named Ajahn Mahabua, who is a disciple of Ajahn Chah. He's quite old now, but still teaching in the north of Thailand.

In one of his books, he described his journey to liberation. It's a very interesting story. He said he'd been in robes for about ten years when he decided to make a strong resolution. The resolution he took up for one three-month retreat, the rains retreat, was to sit up all night every night. As you can imagine, that's a strong resolution—not an easy one to do. He said that after he did that, he lost his fear of death, because nothing could possibly be more painful than sitting up every night for three months.

After that period, he said his concentration became very, very strong. His mind became immovable—just like a rock. But he kind of liked that state. When we talk about attachment to the qualities of concentration, that's what Ajahn Mahabua was experiencing. He didn't really move, he said, for about five years from that rock-like concentration.

At some point he realized that wasn't enough, so he got motivated to investigate again. He began investigating basically the noble truths—he started looking at suffering and desire and then non-suffering and ease. Those were the qualities he investigated. But he saw that they were all coming and going. So he said, "What would it be that doesn't come and go?"

Then he turned his attention to the qualities he called mindfulness and wisdom, directing them to the quality of knowing itself. He let go of everything else. Then he said those two qualities became impartial and impassive, and the mind was not tending to move to anything at all.

This is a description from his book: "At that moment, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked."

Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared—at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

The key here is his statement that ignorance was eradicated. The eradication of ignorance is the same as saying that one has reached arahantship. So he did that by turning his attention to the qualities of

mindfulness and wisdom, which did not change at that point.

This still seems pretty remote. Most of us aren't ready to stay up all night for the rest of the retreat, let alone the whole three months. So how can we make sense of this teaching on the Third Noble Truth? How can we bring it into our actual experience and make it relevant for us?

The first question is: Does the Third Noble Truth point to a permanent end of suffering, or can it be understood as a temporary end of suffering? I would say that for us, it's helpful to understand it as a temporary end of suffering. Because if it's a permanent end, that's way in the future. But if it's a temporary end, we can start to work with it here and now.

One of the ways you can approach this is to look at times when the Second Noble Truth is your experience—when there's craving and some discomfort or unease. It means that the mind is clinging in some shape or form. Be willing to stay with that clinging until it goes. Observe it closely, feel it, feel its impact in the body where there will probably be some form of tension. Feel its effect in the mind where there will be some kind of rubbing or discomfort or unease, and be willing to observe that until that form of clinging or craving goes away.

That moment of its going away has the flavor of the Third Noble Truth. It has the flavor of this temporary end of the suffering that's coming from the clinging. It may not be the fullness of the direct realization of nibbāna, but it is a taste of the same kind of release. So become familiar with what that feels like.

As you get familiar with this sense of observing the clinging and observing the release, these two experiences can become the whole of your practice. In approaching it this way, you might relax the body, bring your attention into the heart center, have a sense that you're going to rest it there, and know moment after moment whether you're in a state of clinging or freedom. These can be your only two notes: Clinging, clinging. Freedom, freedom.

This becomes a really interesting exploration when the mind is quiet enough to see in that way. As we observe this and practice with it, we become more skilled at knowing the forms of clinging and releasing them.

There are three avenues to this non-clinging. The first is we just wait for things to pass. I'm sure you've experienced this in your practice. If you wait long enough, the clinging will exhaust itself. This is reassuring, but sometimes you have to be really patient.

The second is that you develop a greater skill at releasing voluntarily. It can't always happen. Remember that Ajahn Chah said that seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing you're clinging and not being able to let go. So don't put pressure on yourself. But sometimes we can release.

Then there's a third avenue, which is that as you get to know the feeling of this state of release, we develop more skill at just being able to put the mind there. You become familiar with what release feels like and

you find a way to encourage the mind just to go there.

There are a couple of tools that help with that movement. It helps if in our direct experience we can find something on the relative level that's a little bit like the unconditioned—a substitute or an approximation for nibbāna that's within our direct moment-to-moment experience.

So I want to ask you to investigate. What could that be? What could it be in our experience that's always here? What could it be that, like nibbāna, can accommodate everything that isn't moved by a painful or pleasant feeling? What could it be that's not caught up in birth and death? What could it be that's not caught in a sense of time?

I want to suggest two possible answers for you to think about. What about the quality of space? You can think about the space in this room. You can think about the space extending more widely out beyond. Does space come and go? Is it born and dying? Is it ever-present? Does it accommodate the beautiful and the unbeautiful?

Does it depend on time?

So space might be one kind of approximation of this unconditioned.

Here's another. What about the quality of awareness? In every waking moment, is there some awareness? Yes. Does awareness care if it's knowing pain or knowing pleasure? Is it subject to birth and death? Is it subject to time? Or is it kind of like space in that it reaches everywhere and is always there? Some kind of knowing.

So I want to suggest as a shorthand or an approximation, a way to tune into this quality of the unconditioned, that you might think about marrying space with awareness. Have a sense that your own awareness can expand to fill this room, but even beyond, outside as we listen to the sound of the wind, or as you walk out tonight and look up at the sky and the clouds or the stars. All those things are in physical space, but they're also in the space of your awareness.

I want you to investigate just for a moment: what is it like, or what would it feel like, to release any holding around the particulars of your experience in this moment? Maybe you're holding on to some sensation in the body, pleasant or unpleasant. Maybe there's some mood or thought in the mind. Maybe there's a sense of limitation, of confining the attention to your body posture. What if you let go of all those limiting particulars and let the non-clinging extend as far as your awareness extends, as far as space extends? What would that feel like? Does it have a little bit of this quality of release?

Notice also that because space and awareness, as we're talking about them now—just approximation—are not changeable, not subject to arising and passing, they're always accessible. They're accessible in any moment. So when the mind isn't stirred up or isn't clinging, could you think of this as the natural state of being? That if you simply relax your awareness from the particulars, you can know its fullness and its

expansiveness, its reach, its accommodating qualities, its non-preference. It still illuminates the beautiful and the unbeautiful, the pleasant and the painful. But is it limited by them? It doesn't need to be.

So in this way, perhaps this sense of the vastness of awareness becomes a direct avenue to—let's call it an intimation of nibbāna—the flavor of release. If you get familiar with this, you can start to feel the shift that happens. It's as though in a moment of clinging—a synonym we sometimes use is fixation—the attention gets narrowed down and constricted by some kind of holding. As we move into this wider view of things, it's like the center of gravity shifts from the particulars to a very, very big space.

So at the least, this big space gives kind of more room to breathe. It gives room for the body to relax, for the mind to expand, and for everything just to happen on its own. The second thing it can do is to shift our sense of identity. This big space includes the body, includes the thoughts, includes emotions, but it's not limited by them. So maybe we don't have to be defined by our particulars. Maybe what we're more like is this big space in which everything comes and goes. Maybe that's more our nature.

This is from Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration." In the Thai forest tradition, this quality of mind is considered more or less equal with nibbāna.

What you can feel is that as you let your attention go in this broad, expansive way, your center of gravity shifts from individual holding to an open and undying space. You can play with this.

Now, these intimations of nibbāna are not the same as the direct realization of the deathless element, of what is truly unconditioned. But they give us a way in, to feel our way in, to what that feels like.

Ajahn Buddhadāsa was a great Thai monk of the past century. Carol and I both had the chance to spend some time at his monastery in Thailand. He was quite a revolutionary in his own way. He brought the Dharma out of the monastic confines and started sharing it with lay people, applying it to lay people's experiences. He re-read the Pali Canon, the words of the Buddha, and brought fresh interpretation and meaning for people. One of the things that he said was kind of revolutionary, was a teaching in a little pamphlet called "Nibbāna for Everyone." He said that nibbāna shouldn't be understood just as the province of some arahants, but that we all have little tastes of it.

He prefaced this teaching by saying, "When you hear a phrase like 'Nibbana for everyone,' you may shake your head in disbelief and understand that someone has tried to dye a cat for sale." I love this image. If you want to sell a cat that's not very beautiful, you dye it first. You color it and then you put it on the market so that somebody will buy it.

Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any defilements. So he's basically saying that when you check your attitude and you don't see greed, you don't see aversion, you don't see delusion,

that is this flavor of nibbana—temporary though it is.

He went on to say, "Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them? Under such conditions, living things must either die or become insane and finally die away. Let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods that the fires of defilement are not burning. Periodical nibbana keeps all of us alive and well, without making any exceptions, even animals at a certain level. We survive because of the nourishment from this kind of nibbana."

So he's pointing to the fact that these moments where greed, aversion, and delusion are absent or much reduced are coming all the time. We just need to start to notice them as the cool state of mind. Moreover, this cool state of mind as we start to observe it is the natural state of mind when we aren't stirring things up with cravings.

It's not that you have to force yourself into this state. It's not some accidental thing that happens as a result of a lot of effort and construction and contrivance, but rather in any moment when the mind has let go of clinging, this is the state that results. So all we have to do to touch it, to access it, is to not do, to not fabricate, to not make up, to not construct formations, to not cling. Then the natural state of our being is this everyday nibbana.

When the mind settles in this way and we're not stirring it up, there is a great sense of peace. This is from the Buddha. The Buddha talked about the four foundations—not of mindfulness, but of growth in the Dhamma. He called them wisdom, truth, renunciation, and peace. And he explained it this way: "The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon these foundations. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over him, he is called a sage at peace. The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. He is not shaken, and he is not agitated. For there is nothing present in her by which she might be born."

This is truly our natural state of mind when we are not agitating it. So at any moment, really, we start to see the choice is ours. Do we want to be agitated or do we want peace? The Buddha said peace is the highest happiness. Sometimes he expressed it as nirvana is the highest happiness. Sometimes he expressed it as peace is the highest happiness. Do we believe that? If we do, peace is available in any moment in which we simply let go of clinging. It is always accessible.

This is from Rumi. It's a poem called "Tending Two Shops":

"Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere, and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops, and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller and smaller. Checkmate this way, checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish."

Now, the extent to which the fish can swim freely is, I think, almost inconceivable for us. This was brought home to me one time when I was in Kathmandu. I was visiting one of my Tibetan teachers who has a monastery there, and I was just about to go home. But my Tibetan teacher was hosting a very well-known and revered Tibetan Lama named Nyoshul Kempo Rinpoche.

Sharon Salzberg had asked me if I would offer some dana to this Rinpoche on her behalf because he was one of her teachers. I had never met him before. So I told my teacher that I'd like to make an offering of some dana from a friend. And my teacher said, "Would you like to present it yourself to Kempo?"—it was a name for Nyoshul Ken. "Would you like to present the dana?" And I said, "No, I don't need to."

And I was thinking, you know, you've seen one lama, you've seen them all. But then, just as I was about to leave—it was my last visit to the monastery on this trip—I thought, why not? Why not meet this Rinpoche whom I've heard so much about?

So I told my teacher that actually, I would like to present the dana. I collected the money, put it in an envelope, and was brought into the room where he was staying. There was a little chit-chat among the group of us—my teacher, the Rinpoche's wife, an attendant, a couple of other people. Then it came time for me to present the dana.

I got a bit nervous because this Rinpoche was well-known and very highly respected. I approached him, made my three bows, and offered the envelope on my open palm. As I did this, I looked into his eyes. He received the dana, and I was still feeling nervous. Then he did something in his mind that became evident through his gaze—he went into this meditative space that was a marked shift.

As I watched him, his eyes moved slightly apart, as if he were looking in a very unfocused way, and became extraordinarily still. Because I was looking directly into his eyes in that moment, I received a transmission of some flavor of the state he had entered. This experience of incredible stillness came over me.

Reflecting on it later, I realized I couldn't even say that his mind was still in that moment—it was beyond that. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. I felt I was looking right into the unconditioned, that he was manifesting it in that moment. If I could have kept looking into his eyes long enough, something profound might have happened. But I was nervous and shy, and couldn't quite get there. The moment passed and the transmission ended.

Yet I felt I had witnessed a human possibility I'd never even imagined before. It gave me a deeper sense of what looking into the eyes of the Buddha must have been like, and how so many people awakened in his presence.

I'd like to close with another quotation from the Buddha about this transcendent place of nibbana, from the Udana Sutra:

"One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's sit for a moment, please.

"There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. Just this is the end of suffering."

Thank you.

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