The Sources of Happiness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:01

The subject of tonight's talk is the sources of happiness. The whole point of the teachings of the Buddha was for us to find happiness. Although he often talked about it in terms of the end of suffering, the outcome is the same. However you want to language it, the outcome is the same. The Buddha often used this kind of negative language in his teaching, so the end of suffering is consistent with his terminology. But he also used many very positive expressions for different kinds of happiness.

In the Pali, I'll mention a few words and their sense in English. One word he often used was *sukha*. I really like this word because it sounds a lot like "sugar" and has that kind of sweetness, which means alternately happiness or pleasure. I think of it as a quiet kind of contentment.

The word *pīti*, which many of you are familiar with, refers to a happiness specifically associated with meditation. There's a kind of delight when you really connect well with your meditation focus—whether it's the breath, the body, a mood—and you're really present with it and meeting it with fullness of attention. There's a delight, a meditative delight in that.

The word *ānanda* means bliss, and it's used in many names. The Buddha's attendant was named Ānanda. You see it frequently in monks' and nuns' names in Asia. My preceptor was the Venerable Paññānanda, the bliss of wisdom.

The word *pāmojja* means joy. It's one of the factors in what's called transcendent dependent arising, the increase in joy. *Somanassa* means gladness of mind. I believe it's mentioned in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* in a few places.

One contemporary scholar and commentator named Venerable Anālayo wrote a wonderful book called *Satipaṭṭhāna*, a book-length exposition of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. He put it this way: "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." So really, that's what we're here to do. We're here to refine the sense of joy and happiness that we experience both in our retreat life and in our daily life. That's what the path is about.

This summer I was sitting with a Buddhist teacher who is a monk. I decided not to name him because I want to be able to speak freely about him based on my own suppositions. I may or may not be right, so I don't want to taint his name with my projections. I also don't want to create expectations in you. There's nothing worse than being told somebody's a fantastic teacher, then meeting them and thinking, "Oh, what a disappointment." So I'm not going to share his name, which will enable me to speak more freely about him.

But in spending time with him, listening to his teachings, being around him personally outside the formal teaching role, I was really struck by his happiness, his degree of contentment and joy. That's not a purely subjective impression, because he'd been through those machines at Madison. The University of Wisconsin does MRI tests and brain scans of people, and his happiness quotient in the brain scan was off the chart. So he had been coined by some there as the happiest person in the world. But they haven't tested everybody yet, even at Madison, so we won't call him that for sure.

But as I observed him through many different situations, I watched how this happiness had different facets. If he was not called on to do anything, it wasn't like he was always bubbling over with some kind of cheerful, smiling delight. Often if he wasn't interactive, he'd be very quiet, peaceful, very low-key. You could sort of just overlook his presence if he was in a room with people and wasn't called on to do anything—very simple and modest and humble. But when he taught, and often when he interacted, he was really playful. He'd break into smiles and laughter very easily, and it was very contagious. So being around him for a while, one tended to soak up that happiness through his manifestation of it. But he was quite charismatic also.

As I spent time around him, I started to wonder: where did his happiness come from? Because I wanted some also. And I thought if he developed it, that means any of us could develop it to that extent. That's one of the promises of the path.

As I reflected on it, it seemed to me that in the teaching of the Buddha, there are basically five avenues or five means to developing happiness. I reflected on each of them in relation to him as I observed him and listened to him teach. So that's what I want to talk about tonight—these five sources of happiness in the teachings of the Buddha.

But first I want to say why this is of interest to us. Because happiness is the destination of the path, it's something I think we're all interested in. Once we learn what the causes of it are, then we know how to create it for ourselves. Happiness is a mental factor like any other. It's a conditioned state that arises based on prior causes and conditions and comes into being when those conditions are right. It's very scientific.

So if we go through the steps to prepare the mind for happiness, happiness is the inevitable result. This is not a whimsical thing. It's not a random thing. It's not an elusive thing. As it often feels in Western literature, it's really hard to figure out in Western life why some people are happy and some are not. But in the Buddhist teachings, it's very predictable.

Now, of course, we're all starting from a different point. And so it's not easy to predict. It's not possible to predict the timing of the development of happiness in anyone's practice. But the eventual outcome, if we persist, is inevitable. And that's one of the things that I love about the Buddha's teachings. There are very predictable ways for us to get where we want to go. Happiness in its various gradations are points along this route. And if we know the causes, we know how to reach that destination.

So in my understanding of the Buddha's teachings, there are five avenues to happiness, each one is kind of a set of practices. Again, it's not random. It's something that we can practice and develop. Four of them can be taken to a lot of depth. You could almost say unlimited depth of development in four. And one of them is always going to be shallow and superficial. So we don't worry as much about that one, but it's available also.

The other thing I want to say is this is just in our tradition of Theravadan Buddhism and the Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the ways to happiness. I looked up the word happiness on Amazon just this evening, and the response came back of 18,000 books dealing with happiness. So there are a lot of other ideas out there. The Buddha's list is not exhaustive, but it is reliable.

Just to name some of the others that are common in our culture: psychotherapy, exercise—there's a new formulation of exercise that some of our friends are into called the happy body. I don't know if you've heard of that one. There's a whole system to make the body happy that makes the mind happy too. Developing creativity, spending time in nature, and I'm sure you all have your own lists as well.

The five that I'm going to talk about tonight from our tradition are sense pleasures, merit, concentration, insight, and awakening. I'll talk about each one a little bit as we go in the order that I gave them. Each one is a progressively more refined, more reliable, and more satisfying form of happiness.

The other thing to say about all five of these avenues is that they rest on a common understanding in the Buddhist tradition of what constitutes genuine happiness. And that is that the forces in the mind of greed, aversion, and delusion are reduced and eventually absent. So this is the sense of when we say in our practice that the mind becomes more pure, we mean something pretty precise by this, which is that greed, aversion, and delusion decline over the course of our Dharma practice. So I'll talk about how each one of these contributes to that sense of decline.

So the first one is sense pleasures. This is from the Buddha talking to his attendant. "Ananda, there are these five chords of sense pleasure. What five? Forms—which is a synonym for sights, often when the Buddha says form also means sights—cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing."

Isn't that nice to think of all the sights in the world that have that combination of qualities? "Sounds cognizable by the ear that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing. Odors cognizable by the nose, tastes cognizable by the tongue, sensations cognizable by the body. Similarly, the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on these, that is called sensual pleasure."

And what came to my mind when I read this was a trip that Sally and I took to a museum in San Francisco, the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park. It was showing this quite wonderful exhibition of Impressionist paintings.

The Musée d'Orsay in Paris was undergoing a renovation, and so they were lending out quite a large body of their works in two stages. The first stage, called "The Birth of Impressionism," traced the early development of this revolutionary art form into its more mature expressions.

As we walked through the exhibit, we witnessed Impressionism's evolution through time—from the early, more realistic paintings by Manet and Degas to the later works by Renoir and Monet that became pure plays of light and color. The further we progressed, the more impressionistic the paintings became, and I noticed my smile growing wider and wider. I wasn't even conscious of it at first, but as I gazed upon the beauty of these Monets, Renoirs, and Pissarros, joy simply arose, and my smile expanded until I became aware of it and felt slightly self-conscious.

It truly is a delight to encounter beautiful things—to see magnificent art, to hear beautiful music like a symphony in concert. I've often thought that if an alien visited this planet and wanted to experience the greatest achievement of Western culture, I would take them to a symphony hall to hear Beethoven's Fifth. The interplay of instruments and the resulting harmony is simply magical.

We can indeed experience very high degrees of pleasure, bliss, and joy through exposure to the delights of the five senses. This is a natural part of life for lay people. When you think longingly about your life outside these walls, I suspect it's often the sense pleasures that come to mind—sharing a good meal with friends, savoring your favorite latte, making love, listening to beloved music at home or while driving. These experiences create the small moments of delight in our lay lives, moments of uplift through pleasurable encounters with the physical world.

When we enter this contemplative environment, as I mentioned in my previous talk, one of the sorrows we face is the loss of those familiar pleasures. We feel this absence for a while until we adjust, and then the joys of the renunciate life tend to compensate, making us less concerned with what we've temporarily set aside.

I'm sure you've noticed that in the Buddha's teachings, there are numerous warnings about the dangers of sense pleasures. Generally in Buddhism, sense pleasures receive rather harsh treatment—they certainly get a bad reputation. Here's a classical statement from the Buddha:

"Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is the way of worldlings—ignoble and unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial. Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision and knowledge, which leads to peace, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

But notice the crucial preface: "for one who has gone forth into homelessness." The Buddha's warnings about sense pleasures are primarily directed toward monastics—people whose entire lifestyle involves renouncing access to sense pleasures. This renunciation forms the very foundation of the monastic path,

just as it provides a foundation for our life here during retreat.

We don't make the pursuit of sense pleasures a central part of your experience here, nor is it highly recommended. Such pursuits tend to distract the mind from our essential concern: observing the mind and its movements.

In other suttas, the Buddha offers vivid comparisons for sense pleasures—likening them to a dry bone because ultimately there's no real sustenance there, or to a dream because they're so fleeting they can seem almost illusory and not worth pursuing.

However, it would be incorrect to believe that the Buddha condemned sense pleasures for lay practitioners. He didn't. In one sutta, he explicitly stated that one who enjoys sense pleasures may be praised, provided the wealth they depend upon has been acquired lawfully and is shared to create happiness for oneself and others.

There's a logical connection between sense pleasures and wealth that the Buddha recognized—many sense pleasures require money. As lay people, we use our resources to enjoy these pleasures, and this is a natural part of householder life.

But of course, we all understand that sense pleasures are not the final word. They represent a limited kind of happiness—temporary, transient, coming and going with fleeting satisfaction. The pleasure is genuine while it lasts, but it ends very quickly.

I remember one summer day when Sally and I were eating lunch at our kitchen table. We had fresh, homemade chocolate chip cookies, and as I bit into one straight from the oven, I remarked to her, "It's really hard to be unhappy while eating a fresh chocolate chip cookie." But then came the inevitable problem—it ends so quickly. The cookie is gone, and with it, that particular moment of pleasure.

The Buddha continued his teaching to Ananda about sense pleasures and the joy that arises based on them...

Though some may say that sense pleasures represent the supreme pleasure and joy that beings experience, I would not concede this to them. Why is that? Because there is another kind of happiness more excellent and sublime than that happiness.

So we move on to examine this next kind of happiness, which exists at a higher level. When I reflected on the enjoyment of sense pleasures in relationship to this teacher I mentioned, I realized that as a monk, sense pleasures didn't make up a huge part of his life. All I really saw was that he enjoyed some meals, but he seemed to enjoy every meal equally. Whatever he was served, he ate it with an equal degree of happiness or equanimity. I didn't see any particular preference or craving, and it wasn't a big deal for him. So for him, sense pleasures were not a significant component. For us, they form a bigger component in our daily life.

The second avenue, the second source of happiness, is a word that carries some ambivalence among Westerners: merit. It's a translation of the Pali word *punya*, and it basically means wholesome action or skillful action. But this term "merit" feels somewhat tied up with merit badges, or perhaps with the idea of bringing an apple to place on your high school teacher's desk to be seen as a good student. There's something a little too goody-goody about the word, and many of us don't feel comfortable with it. Unfortunately, there isn't another word in common use to translate this term, so I'll continue using "merit." You'll encounter it frequently in Buddhist teachings. If you simply think of it as skillful action, hopefully that will remove some of the uncomfortable associations.

The understanding is that when we engage in skillful action, it brings positive results back into our life. Some of these results may be experienced on the physical level, some on the mental or emotional level. But in any case, the results tend to lead to happiness. This is the basic law of karma.

One quotation that has been mentioned several times is this opening of the Dhammapada: "All states come from mind, are preceded by mind, are ruled by mind. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable." This captures the essence of merit—that when we act from a purity of mind, happiness and good results return to our life.

I find it fascinating to contemplate this understanding. If you understand karma in this way and have some degree of faith in it, you begin to realize that this provides the lever, or the engine, for building happiness into our lives. We can control, to some degree, the future outcome of our life by examining the intention from which we act in the present moment. If we make an effort—if we develop a regular practice of acting from beautiful or wholesome intentions—that lays the groundwork for happiness to return to our life on both physical and material levels, as well as emotional and mental levels. This understanding of karma begins to give us a certain degree of agency in our lives and reduces some of its apparent randomness.

This concept of merit is what most lay Buddhists in Asia practice for. Most lay people in countries like Thailand and Burma don't engage in the kind of intensive meditation we're doing here. Some do, but the majority of Buddhists don't enter intensive retreat the way you're experiencing. Rather, they feel that their happiness will be generated by an ongoing series of wholesome actions. They structure their relationship to Buddhism around offering food at the temple to monks or nuns, making prayers, developing loving-kindness, observing the five precepts or eight precepts. This is considered in Asia—and the roots lie in the Buddha's teachings—a good lay path. Someone following this course is considered to be carrying out authentic lay practice.

Because we have a foot in both worlds, I think it's valuable for us to undertake both the monastic practices based on insight and concentration, which I'll discuss later, and also the lay practices based on carrying out wholesome action. This is a teaching we haven't always emphasized during the years the Dharma has been in the West, but I believe it's tremendously important for us who live most of our lives in the lay

world.

The Buddha said there are "streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishments of happiness, which are heavenly, ripening in happiness, and which lead to whatever is wished for, loved and agreeable—to one's welfare and happiness." Part of the understanding of merit is that developing merit through abundant wholesome action leads to realizing your aspiration. It leads to whatever is wished for.

Because different people hold different aspirations, the outcome of wholesome action varies depending on the person's heartfelt aspiration. If your heartfelt aspiration is liberation, this practice of merit will conduce to liberation. If your aspiration is simply to live more comfortably in the world with greater prosperity, health, or ease, then developing wholesome action can lead in that direction as well.

The Buddha spoke of three particular practices that form the basis of this wholesome action, the foundation of happiness for lay practitioners: generosity, virtue or integrity, and *bhavana* or mental development. The Pali terms for these three are *dana*, *sila*, *bhavana*—generosity, virtue, mental development.

Let me speak briefly about each of them. Generosity is a tremendous part of the Buddha's teachings for lay people. It's the first of the ten *paramis*.

So in some ways it's considered the foundation for developing the qualities that bring one to awakening.

Generosity is a very powerful practice because it cuts across the assumed separation between ourselves and others. Generosity is about tuning into someone else as a being like ourselves, who experiences happiness and unhappiness, who has wants and needs, and wanting to care for that person's needs the same way we care for our own needs.

The act of generosity is based on seeing through this assumed duality, through the force of empathy—feeling what another feels, and then acting in a way to share, which breaks down the assumed division or separation. When we have an understanding of non-separateness with one another and then act based on that understanding, the action plants that truth of non-separation in a deeper place in our heart, our mind, and also in our karmic stream.

It's a wonderful thing to carry out acts that bridge the divide between ourselves and other beings—human beings, animal beings, any other beings that you may encounter. We notice something of this in the joy we feel in giving. When you think about a time that you've given freely—not because you had to, not because it was your uncle's birthday coming up—but when it was a freely given gift, there's a lot of joy in thinking about making that gift, feeling into what would make the other person happy. When you find the right gift, there's joy in offering it. It just feels beautiful. And when you reflect on it afterwards, there's joy in thinking about the gift, the person receiving it, and the happiness that it hopefully brought to them.

You can feel how this happiness builds from the act of giving. And you also understand that it leaves a

karmic imprint that will bear good fruit in the future.

One of the great things about being around the Dharma for long is you meet people doing extraordinarily generous things. Of course, many of you are devoting your lives to serving others. It's always inspiring to meet people on retreat who serve in this way—who serve at Dharma centers, serve as nurses or therapists, serve as teachers in schools, as caregivers to aging parents, as parents to young children. So many people I meet in the Dharma have based their lives around giving of their time and their energy and their skill. It's beautiful to be in the presence of that.

I was teaching a retreat in New Mexico one time and driving home with this woman who had recently returned from Thailand. She had gone to Thailand as a relatively wealthy person. She had worked as a management consultant for many years and built up savings, invested in real estate and different properties. She went to Thailand with the intention to give it all away and to retire to live in a monastery or nunnery.

She got to Thailand and made connections with different places, both monasteries and nunneries. While there, she sold her properties in the States and channeled her money to give to these different places that she'd visited and wanted to support. She sold all her properties except one and gave the money away—hundreds of thousands of dollars. She moved into one of the monasteries and got sick. She could no longer really practice and needed to return to the States to look after her health. She only had one property left.

She came back, sold that property, got enough money to live on for a while to look after her health, then went back into her job as a management consultant. The beautiful thing was she had no regrets. She'd given away almost everything she owned to support the Dharma, and she had no regrets about it. I just knew that the fruit of that giving was going to enrich her for years to come. It was very inspiring.

The second foundation is sila, or integrity or virtue. Skye talked about this extensively in her talk earlier this week, so I won't go into great detail. I'll just mention one thing that Skye said and repeat it. When we observe our sila closely, keeping the spirit of non-harming and being really conscientious with that, we're also giving a gift in that observance. The Buddha said what we give to countless beings is freedom from fear. That's a wonderful thing.

When you know somebody who has really good sila, there's a real feeling of trust in that person. It makes it very safe to be around them. You can feel that atmosphere influencing the other people who come into their orbit, so that those people create a zone of safety. The people who move in that zone are all receiving this gift of fearlessness. It makes a safe place for countless beings.

In terms of the benefit of observing this kind of integrity closely, the Buddha said that it brings a certain kind of happiness which he called the bliss of blamelessness. When we know that for a long time we really haven't harmed another being intentionally, there's a wonderful feeling of relief that's there—a lack of

guilt or inner pressure or regret or uneasy conscience, a real feeling of purity and ease. The Buddha called this the bliss of blamelessness. That's a fruit of integrity.

The third practice, bhavana, is very interesting. Bhava means being or existence or becoming. So bhavana means bringing into being. It's sometimes used as a synonym for meditation.

A common translation is mental development. And I love this sense that we are bringing into being our own hearts and minds. That's really the essence of bhavana—we learn how to shape our heart and mind in a beautiful direction.

The French poet Paul Valéry kept a series of notebooks that became his spiritual practice at a certain point. I think he didn't publish them during his lifetime—they were published posthumously—but he wrote for one or two hours every morning in these personal notebooks, which were kind of a diary of his inner exploration. He'd write on many different themes. It wasn't poetry. It was just reflecting on the things that he read and his own understanding of them. It was his spiritual practice. He said of it: "Other people write books. I am making my mind."

That's what we're doing here. We're making our minds step by step, moment by moment. We're fashioning what's in here.

When the Buddha talked about bhavana as a form of merit or wholesome action, he tended to talk about it specifically in terms of developing the practice of loving-kindness. In terms of merit, the sense is something that lay people—people in daily life—can easily access and build: the sense of loving-kindness, compassion, connection. You could put gratitude in that. The other quality he talked about often was the development of faith.

So in this dana, sila, bhavana combination, I think of it as developing loving-kindness and faith. When faith is strong, life goes more easily, practice goes more easily.

This is not an exclusively Buddhist law, as you must know. Think about people you know in your life who you feel are truly happy, and just run over your acquaintances. See who comes to mind among the people you know who you feel are happy, and take a look at their lives. See if they aren't characterized by generosity, integrity, and some degree of loving-kindness.

You could say that these are the requisites for normal human happiness—not happiness that even conceives of a spiritual path, but just what it is to be a good person in the world, in human society, across cultures, across religions, across any part of the globe. You'll find these people: generosity, integrity, loving-kindness. That's what makes for a normal, happy human life.

As we develop these three in our lay life, we also will be generating the conditions for a normal, happy life.

I think it's interesting—just one final note—what all three of these have in common is they're all based on

empathy and caring for others. And that's so interesting to me: the basis of a happy human life is caring for others and then expressing that.

When I thought about this in relation to the teacher I was with, the connection was very apparent. His conduct was very, very blameless. I'd never seen him do anything that would in any way give offense to someone. Very gentle person, spoke kindly when he spoke. Of course, he was practicing a lot of precepts, but you could just feel there was a genuine intention of kindness and compassion behind them.

The next of the avenues to happiness is concentration—the third, after sense pleasures and merit. Now we're getting into the realm of what you're doing on this retreat. So this is something special. This is not something that a lot of people in normal daily lives have access to or are able to develop strongly, but it's one of the key things we're doing here.

Concentration is the common translation of the Pali word samadhi. It really refers to a mind that has gathered itself into the present moment—that has become, as Carol said the other night, one-pointed in its awareness of the present moment. This gathering into the present moment brings a lot of strength to the mind.

Normally in our daily life, we're distracted by past thoughts, by future thoughts, by what we have to do next, by running here and there. In this situation, because our activities become so simple, we're enabled more and more to gather our full attention and put it into just this moment.

When that happens, you'll feel it. You'll feel the mind really collect upon the breath or body or sound in a very wholehearted way. Then we find the mind has a lot of strength.

When the mind collects in this way, it becomes still, and you can feel that in that place, it's hard to shake it. When the mind's distracted, any little sound might throw us off or start us down a path of thought and papañca. When the mind really comes together in this way, it acquires a strength that lets it stay connected to the present moment.

That brings a sense of stillness and peace and well-being. So this unification of mind, the strengthening of mind, brings with it automatically a sense of well-being.

If you look back over some of your fondest memories in meditation or what you might say are some of the happiest moments you've had, I bet they'll exhibit this factor of concentration. This is one of the things that put the dharma hook in me and made me keep coming back—because I tasted some peace through meditation I'd never felt before. I kept coming back because I wondered: wow, if a little bit feels like that, what would a little more feel like?

This cultivation of peace brought me back again and again. One of the things that's so satisfying about this state of concentration is that when it's strong, the hindrances don't arise. This is one of the hallmarks of strong concentration. The hindrances are temporarily at bay. They haven't gone away for good, but these

movements of liking and disliking and sleepiness and restlessness and doubt have temporarily quieted. The mind then feels a certain kind of freedom. It's a beautiful experience not to be assaulted by these chaotic movements of our own mind.

So it's said that this state is one of seclusion. We're not only secluded from outer distraction, but we're secluded from the impact of our own kilesas to a large extent. And that's part of the beauty and delight.

The concentration can develop further into these states called jhana, which are described as absorption states of concentration. This is the Buddha's description of the first of the jhanas. There are seven states beyond this, but this is the first one: "The meditator enters and abides in the first jhana with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. She makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, fill, steep, and pervade her body so that there is no part of her whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure."

The development of this kind of joy and pleasure in meditation naturally reinforces our ability to stay present, because now the present moment experience is satisfying in itself. So this concentration enables the mind to relax into its own experience of the moment. And it can become self-supporting because the mind's not being drawn out through likes and dislikes, through wants.

One of the other things that happens as the mind settles into itself more and more is that the body also starts to settle. I think for most of us in the West, we've grown up in a very busy culture and our body reflects that. When we come to meditation, often we've picked up the energy of the fast-paced society that surrounds us. In the early years of practice, I often felt that energy was vibrating my body and rising up, coming into the head a lot. It was hard for me to settle in a relaxed way lower into my body because I felt I was still reeling from all the busyness that my life had picked up. And especially if there's any injury, trauma, or deep hurt, that kind of buzzy energy gets even stronger.

So a lot of what happens as we calm the mind in meditation is that the body also calms and lets go of that unnecessary frantic energy that's so prevalent outside. Sometimes it can take a long time for that calming to happen, but it's part of the natural process. And when the body does start to calm, it's much simpler for the mind to rest because it's not meeting the jangly energy in the body.

The practices that you're doing, the practices that we've been instructing in the mornings, all develop this quality of concentration and samadhi. You don't need to do anything differently. Sometimes people want to develop concentration very strongly and go in a particular direction, and a few people on the retreat may end up doing that. But for most of you, the practices that you are doing through the vipassana instructions will lead you to deeper and deeper concentration as you go through the retreat, and that will be sufficient.

The next of the avenues is insight. This is basically the growth of wisdom or understanding. This is what all our instructions are pointing to. This is what most of the evening talks will be pointing to. This is really what the retreat is structured around. I don't have to talk about this a lot tonight—I know you're very

familiar with this ground. I'll just recap.

Insight is really around understanding what it is that we do with our minds that leads to suffering, and what we can do through our minds that leads to the end of suffering or to happiness. This is what we're here to understand.

The Buddhist formulation of this question came in two or three different main paradigms. The first, probably most important, is the Four Noble Truths: to understand suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to its end. In this, we spend most of our time on the second and third noble truths. How do we understand the arising of craving, which is the source of suffering, and how do we release that craving to come to the at least temporary end of craving and to that place of freedom? So this is really the crux of our meditation practice. If we're caught in something, there's some kind of craving at work—how do we release that and return the mind to a place of freedom, relative freedom, ease, relaxation, well-being? There's a central investigation that goes on through the Four Noble Truths.

Another insight that's commonly talked about is the insight into the three characteristics: the understanding of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. But these insights are very closely related to the Four Noble Truths. As we understand that everything is in the process of change, we don't tend to hang on or to grasp as much.

So we move through life more easily, letting things come as they come and letting things go as they go. As we learn to let things come and go naturally, there's less clinging and therefore less suffering. We learn not to hold on, and then the craving and clinging doesn't arise so much in the first place.

The Buddha talks about this in a third way as well—through the direct observation of clinging or grasping. We learn to notice when there's clinging in the mind through some form of contraction, either through liking or disliking, and how to release that. All these insights revolve around the same core issue: How do we get caught? How do we release? How does the mind get stuck? How does the mind free itself?

The understanding of not-self is particularly helpful here because we begin to understand that all the different phenomena that arise are not really commentaries on me, myself, or I. Everything arises according to its own causes and conditions. Everything passes away according to its own causes and conditions. This kind of understanding seeps in gradually through our practice, but it has a deep and lasting impact.

I have a friend who's an old meditation student, interested in coming to a longer retreat next year, who recently emailed several of us with reports of a difficult health condition. He's about my age, and his body is starting to break down in different ways. He said, "I don't know—this may be the last long retreat that I may be able to come on." He's someone who's participated in long retreats with us for many, many years. But then he added, "You don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body."

Even in the midst of that health crisis, even while seeing the end of his life on the horizon, he could say

with genuine conviction: "You don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body." There's tremendous freedom and lightness when we let those truths of not me, not mine, not I really settle in and grow slowly, slowly.

When I reflect on the teacher I was with this summer, one of the most enjoyable things about watching him was observing the kind of lightness with which he approached everything. I simply didn't see stickiness or grabbiness in his mind. He was someone who really seemed to have understood the fleeting nature of everything in this world, and he wasn't getting too caught up in any of it that I could see.

The fifth and final avenue to happiness is awakening. You could say this is another form of insight, but because it's insight on such a deeper level, I place it in a different category—awakening or enlightenment. This points to the realization that it's our human potential, through meditation practice, to discover a peace that's beyond time, beyond conditions, beyond change. There's a dimension within us that has this absolute purity—it cannot be corrupted or made imperfect by anything, no matter what happens to us.

The discovery of this dimension, whenever it happens in practice, represents at least one stage of the awakening process. This discovery gives us truly unshakable faith in the end of suffering as a possibility for ourselves. We know it because we've experienced it directly. Nothing can take away that knowledge. Nothing can take away that faith.

In addition, this realization gives a certain confidence in life—certainly confidence in the path and the teachings. When it happens, it removes some of what are called the fetters in the heart and mind—some of the very structural elements that lead the mind into suffering. These can be removed once and for all.

This happens in different stages, so different fetters are removed at different points in the journey. But ultimately, the Buddha said, all the tendencies of mind that can possibly lead us into suffering—meaning all forms of greed, aversion, and delusion—can be taken out of the mind so that there's no longer any potential for suffering to arise in the mind stream. This, the Buddha said, was the highest happiness.

The Buddha taught that the happiness of sense pleasures was not one-sixteenth of the happiness of this kind of awakening. It's hard to imagine what that would be like because we're buffeted every day—as we live, as we sit, as we practice—by these forces in our own hearts and minds. The forces of wanting, of not wanting, of not seeing clearly—this is our normal human life. To come to a place where we knew that those forces could not come again to harm us, to injure us—what a relief, what a blessing, what happiness that would be.

In closing, I want to mention that this monk who seemed to know what he was talking about said that the main cause for this kind of freedom is happiness—the development of sense pleasures in moderation, of merit through generosity and virtue, of cultivating the heart, of concentration and discovering inner peace even if conditional, and of the growth in wisdom through understanding clinging and its release. The happiness from all these sources becomes the main cause for liberation.

So as we practice all the different avenues to happiness, if we practice them all, then they all channel toward this possibility—a real human possibility of awakening and the final end of suffering.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Thank you for listening.

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