Impulses Come From Ignorance

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:58

The subject of tonight's talk is impulses come from ignorance.

When we come into a retreat, we're usually coming from quite a busy daily life, having been involved in a lot of planning and creating and doing and thinking and feeling. We can feel that momentum in our minds when we're outside, and then we carry it into the retreat with us.

So when we come into this environment, which is very simple, we could drop most of the mental doing. But do we? This is what's curious. That thought stream is not really needed here, but it continues with such force and intensity. And I wonder why that is. Why does it work like that? Why can't we just say, "Okay, I'm in a retreat. I can stop thinking. It's not serving any purpose. It's bothering me." Why can't we just put it down?

I'm not suggesting that we should stop all thoughts. Number one, we can't. Number two, if you try to do that, you will just suppress your own vital energy and it will not be helpful. And third, there's not a problem with a thought per se. As all of you know, there are times in practice when thoughts can arise and pass and not disturb us. It's not the thought that's the problem. The problem is when we get fascinated by the thought and chase after it. With that sort of active energy, we propel thoughts forward and then it becomes obsessive. We can no longer just let them come and go, but we get wrapped up in the content and the momentum of them.

But sometimes stopping does happen. A number of you have been reporting in interviews that there are times when it has become calm, when you can simply see thoughts coming and going, and there's something very satisfying about that kind of stability. There's something quite freeing about it.

I was reminded of a brochure that one of our friends created when I was on staff here in '78, '79. He created a parody advertising brochure for IMS. It said, "Come to the greatest resort of all. There's no talking, no reading, no regular dinner, no swimming, no golf, and no tennis. This is the vacation of your dreams," because, he said, it's better to do nothing than to waste time.

I think this is really a beautiful line: it's better to do nothing than to waste time, because that's what we're involved with here a lot of the time, aren't we? When you take away the formal aspect of the meditation hall and you realize mostly what you're doing is sitting down and doing nothing, right? And yet that's incredibly wholesome. It's like one of the best things you can do. But it's not that easy to really do nothing. It depends on a lot of wholesome factors of mind, because otherwise this habit carries over, carries over, carries over.

So the Buddha talked about this habit also. There's quite a famous discourse in the Majjhima Nikaya called the Honeyball Sutta. I want to tell a little bit of the story of that sutta.

The Buddha was living at this time in Kapilavatthu, the village in northern India close to the border with Nepal where he grew up. So it was a place he was very familiar with, and a number of his closest monks and disciples had come from this area. They were from the same extended clan as Siddhartha was himself. So it was like he was back on his home turf. He'd been there many times before.

This fellow came up to visit him, whose name was Dandapani. Dandapani—the name means "golden stick"—and you can tell by this that he was kind of a fashion plate. He carried around a golden cane, even though he was a young man, to show off his wealth and how well-dressed he was.

So he comes to visit the Buddha who's in meditation. Dandapani doesn't pay respects or sit down and address him in a respectful way, but he leans on his cane and says, "What does the recluse assert? What does he proclaim?" waiting for something that he can argue with. This is a disrespectful opening, but this is what the spiritual world was like back then. These seekers liked to come to each other and debate their positions and argue.

And it was sort of like ultimate cage fighting—one really wanted to smack the other down and come out on top. So that's the way Dandapani was addressing the Buddha.

The Buddha replied, and this is quite clever: "Friend, I proclaim such a teaching that one does not quarrel with anyone in the world." It's a beautiful statement. And then he continued, "No perceptions underlie such a one who is free of craving."

This is very cryptic—no perceptions underlie someone who is free of craving. The commentaries say what is pointed to here is that one does not build off of sense contact and the perception of things to develop craving. So the Buddha has freed himself from that. But this was still a cryptic statement even to his students, so some of them later asked a senior monk to explain what the teacher meant.

Most of the core of this discourse is delivered by a senior monk named Mahakaccana. But before that, I should mention that after the Buddha said these two lines—"I'm not going to quarrel" and "perceptions no more underlie"—Dandapani shook his head, wagged his tongue, frowned, and went away. We can see he was very disappointed by this answer. He went away leaning on his golden cane.

Later, Mahakaccana explained this line about perception: "Dependent on eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling." I think you've heard this before—this is not new. We've gone over this several times. "With contact as condition, there is feeling. What one feels, that one perceives."

Perceptions arise based on sense contact where the feeling has impinged on one. Remember that when the Buddha talks about perceiving, it means not sense data, but the recognition of what kind of thing that

is—perceiving a man or a woman, a human or a wall or a statue or a chair. It's a recognition of objects. The world really springs up from our perceptions of the shapes and forms that we see. That's what constructs our conceptual world.

Then Mahakaccana continued: "What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates."

This is an interesting turn: what one perceives, that one thinks about. You'll see this in your meditation. There's a pain in the knee—you'll start to think about it. There's an emotion of sadness—you'll start to think about it. But what one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates.

The noun here for proliferation is papañca. This is a great Pali word. I think most of you probably know papañca. You get that there's an explosive feeling to it—the mind going off in all directions.

So we perceive something, we start to think about it, and that easily leads into proliferation. A simple example: You're sitting in the hall. You think the Buddha statue up here is very attractive and you wonder where you could get one. Let's see—I would have to get my phone out. Maybe Elizabeth would release my phone if I ask her nicely. I could connect, I could Google "Buddha Rupa." I think this one is Thai, so I want to look for a Thai Rupa. Maybe I could find one on eBay, or maybe they're creating them on Etsy. Yeah, Etsy. A friend of mine has a site on Etsy, and she's trying to make her living from it, but she wasn't getting enough sales, so she was going to hook up with this guy who said that he could really promote her stuff, but I didn't trust him...

Anyway, this is how proliferation happens.

We take these conceptual leaps from a simple perception of a statue. This is papañca. And when papañca happens, one of the curious things is we don't stay in neutral territory. Buddha, rupa, from Thailand—that's all pretty neutral. But then we get into our friend and her money and her relationships and whether we trust someone or not.

Papañca usually leads us into things we really care about. That's why they draw our attention. We start to care, which means our emotions become involved. It's those emotional involvements that stir us up from this proliferation, creating a sense of disturbance.

Then Mahākaccāna continues: "With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and ideas tinged by proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye."

Let's review this because it's an interesting progression. It starts rather passively and in quite a neutral way. The meeting of the eye and the form brings contact. With contact, there's feeling. This is happening all the time—it's not a big deal. Then it becomes active.

Listen to the next part: What one feels, that one perceives. In perceiving, there's a little mental activity

coming in. We perform an act of recognition. It's not very voluntary and doesn't have much charge.

What one perceives, that one thinks about. Now we're starting to get more active. We're engaging the object we've perceived and beginning to dwell on it with our thought. But it's still not problematic because we're still connected to reality. That's a Buddha rupa. I think it came from Thailand. It's not problematic.

But now what happens? "With what one has mentally proliferated, perceptions beset one with regard to past, future, and present." We are assaulted by the proliferations that spring, almost uncontrollably, from the earlier thinking. This is the situation we find ourselves in when we come into meditation. We're not in charge anymore.

Based on past associations, our conditioning, our relationships, our emotional patterns, our areas of craving and clinging, we become victims of our own thought processes. They beset us. They assault us. Papañca launches it all, and then it gets out of hand. That's what we find when we sit quietly in meditation and try to bring our attention into the present moment—all this other stuff going on.

So what is all this other stuff about? And why is it so powerful?

In the beginning of the chain of dependent origination—this cycle of twelve links where the Buddha traced the genesis of suffering in great detail, beginning with ignorance, moving through craving and clinging, and ending in suffering—I want to talk particularly about the first two links: avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā.

Avijjā means ignorance, this fundamental not knowing of the way things are. Paccayā means it's a causal factor, but doesn't mean straight causation. It more means "conditions" or "gives rise to" if supporting conditions are there. You can think of it as "tends to give rise to," but not always.

Saṅkhārā are these volitional formations we talked about when discussing the five aggregates—thoughts and emotions primarily, the contents of mind that show up in our proliferation. Avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā means that ignorance conditions or gives rise to volitional formations.

A more visceral word for volitional formations is impulses. That's how it feels when these things come up—like there's an impulse or urge coming sometimes from deep inside us that forms the driving force for our thoughts and emotions. That's why I like to call this talk "Impulses Come from Ignorance."

This implies that many of these impulses have a blind quality about them. Not all our impulses come from wisdom. If they did, we could probably stop them once we were in meditation.

But because there's ignorance bundled up with them, they're operating on their own pilot. This quality of ignorance is a very deep conditioning factor in the mind. The literal meaning of avijja is "unwisdom." Vijja is another word for wisdom or understanding; the "a" is a negation—unwisdom. It refers to this deep blindness that we carry, this inability to see the truth of things clearly.

The fact that ignorance is the first link in the chain of dependent origination is very significant, because it means that ignorance is where all suffering stems from. The other thing to understand about this chain is that even ignorance is not fixed. That's a beautiful aspect of understanding dependent origination—we'll explore this further later. Ignorance is not permanently fixed in us; it can be uprooted. That uprooting doesn't happen until full enlightenment, but we can puncture it. We have the ability to puncture ignorance quite drastically through the practice of meditation. This is also what we want to explore.

The basic understanding is that volitional formations arise out of ignorance, and these volitional formations are coming up all the time in our meditation practice—when we're feeling distracted, drawn into past or future, figuring things out, adopting views, forming ideas about ourselves, and so on.

At one time in my practice, I became very interested in this connection between volition and thoughts. And of course, thoughts bring feelings, so they're connected on the emotional level as well. For a while in my practice, I would take thought as my primary object. Every time a thought came up, I would label it as a thought, see its content, and then ask: What volition is this expressing? What's the motivation or urge behind this thought?

This became a very interesting exploration because I found that most of my thoughts had a pretty clear volition when I looked at them closely. For example, you think of someone you care for and have a wish that they're doing well. That wish is a form of volition associated with metta—that's what loving-kindness is: a wish for another's welfare. I might be feeling grateful and think of a friend who wasn't doing so well, considering something I could do to help them. That's the motivation of generosity.

During the day, you may have many thoughts that carry these beautiful motivations: loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, renunciation. These are what Sally spoke of this morning when discussing right attitude.

But our most obsessive thinking isn't always so altruistic, is it? How often do we obsess about ending world hunger? How often do we obsess about ending poverty in this nation? That's not typically what we obsess about. The obsessive thoughts tend to be a little closer to home.

We might think of somebody we've had a conflict with and some resentment arises—that's an expression of ill-will, the opposite of good will. There's a quality in anger where we wouldn't be sorry if they got hurt a little bit. That's an ill-will attitude.

Or we think about our work situation, whether our job is secure, whether our income is reliable, and anxiety comes up. Fear expresses an intention—a wish for safety.

We have a thought about some place we'd like to spend time, or reuniting with our partner after missing them for these five weeks, and desire arises—desire to be home or to see someone we're close to. That's an intention toward pleasant experience.

We might think about ourselves with judgment: "Oh, I'm not good enough in this way. I'm not lovable enough. Nobody's ever going to really care for me." This expresses a view of condemning ourselves, finding ourselves insufficient—the comparing mind.

This was an interesting exploration, and I encourage you—you don't have to obsess about this—but take a look now and then. When a random thought goes by, see if you can feel into the volition or motivation behind it. Most thoughts have some motivation.

This raises another interesting question: Are there any thoughts that don't come out of volition? I'm just going to leave that with you as an open question to hold.

Look at your thoughts over the next several days or weeks and see what you find about that.

During meditation, other urges arise—ones that don't involve us so much with the long-term past and future of outside life, but instead entangle us deeply in the meditation world and experience. These urges try to make the moment a little bit better. We want to make the body more comfortable. We want to get rid of that tension and pain that's popped up in the shoulder blade. We want to return to that concentrated, peaceful sitting we had first thing in the morning. Or we want to recapture that open experience of loving-kindness we felt for our benefactor when we felt truly connected and appreciative.

We might try to push away some fear, anxiety, or resentment that's starting to emerge connected with a memory. These impulses arise within the realm of meditation itself.

In these areas where we tend to get obsessive and driven by urges, don't they mostly revolve around me? Aren't these obsessive ones that really push us mostly about self, I, me, and mine? Many of our impulses, especially the really powerful and difficult ones, come from a sense of self-concern in some degree or another.

There's a funny story about ignorance and formations. A robber went into a bank and handed a teller a note demanding all the money in her till. The teller didn't want to get shot, so she emptied her till and handed the money over to the robber, who went out, hopped into a getaway car, drove back to his house—and when he got there, the police were waiting. How did that happen? He'd written his robbery note on the back of his own deposit slip, which of course had his address on it.

We do a similar thing when we hurt someone or when we hurt ourselves. We've written our address on a karmic deposit slip. The impact of that action, of that harm, of that unskillful volition is going to come back to this address, to this body and mind. On the other hand, if we're seeing clearly, then our actions align with that wisdom and clarity. One of our colleagues and friends, Sylvia Boorstein, says when we see clearly, we act impeccably. But when we don't, our actions are not always so great.

We can see this effect of the movement of craving in the world, expressing itself through greed and hatred and confusion. I just read in the New York Times today that the top one-tenth of one percent of Americans

own twenty percent of the wealth—one in a thousand people own twenty percent of the wealth. This is compared to what it was in the 1970s, when it was seven percent. So when we talk about income inequality, certainly there is a vast change over the last thirty to forty years in wealth distribution in this country, mostly because of tax cuts in recent years.

What's also curious, and the Times reported this, is that in order to balance the budget, the wealthy are much more likely to favor cutting spending as opposed to raising taxes compared to ordinary Americans. So could that be greed at work? Could be.

Another version from today's paper: The war in Afghanistan is still continuing—this is like fourteen years later—and the Taliban are still fighting. One intelligence report says that they now control or greatly influence about fifty percent of the country. So that's still going on.

Ajahn Sumedho put these first two links succinctly in summarizing the whole chain. He said, when you start at ignorance, you end up at suffering. This is the mechanism, these formations, these impulses—this is the dynamic that keeps us going round.

So what is ignorance? It's not about not knowing facts. It's not about whether you know the longest river in Asia. It's defined in the discourses as not understanding the Four Noble Truths. We don't see the full extent of dukkha, of unsatisfactoriness, number one. We haven't completely given up its cause, which is craving. We still think that there's some lasting happiness to be found there. We haven't fully realized the end of craving, which is nibbāna, and we haven't fully practiced the path to the end of craving, which is the Eightfold Path. In all these ways, we're still bound. We're still bound up with suffering, not having understood the four truths fully.

As long as we're tied to craving, we're also—in a way, that establishes the three characteristics. It also means that we haven't fully seen the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. We don't see the inherent nature of change, so we keep holding on, keep craving and clinging. We don't see how craving leads to suffering, so we haven't fully seen the extent of unsatisfactoriness. Because we haven't seen through the belief in self, we continue to put a lot of energy into the self—extra energy that's not helpful out of the belief in a self, which we could summarize as hope and fear. We continue on that route.

Maybe just as a shorthand, we can think of ignorance as not seeing the truth of not-self—summarizing all these different truths, the craving and the clinging, the unsatisfactoriness, the impermanence, into the truth of not-self.

The Buddha made an interesting comment about one who is in a state of suffering.

He said that when one is in a state of suffering, it results in either bewilderment or search. That's really interesting. So first, maybe there's confusion from the suffering, and second, we look for a way out. And that search might be guided by wisdom or it might be guided by ignorance, by unwisdom.

It's obviously the search through unwisdom that leads us from the confusion of suffering into the activities of greed, aversion, and delusion. We put all our hope in craving, although we don't really see it clearly, and it turns out to bring us more suffering.

So we could say that in this veil of ignorance, it casts a cloud of not seeing. We could say there are three levels to the way that it obscures. And I want to talk about it sort of from the foundation up.

Through not seeing the third noble truth, which is nibbana, we are not seeing the possibility of a complete and satisfying peace. We don't understand that that absolute peace is right within our own nature. Nibbana is spoken of as an unconditioned element, not subject to arising and passing. Not subject to arising and passing means it's present in every moment, but we don't see it. And that is the sad part of our condition.

You could say the Dharma treasure that will set our hearts free is right here. But because its vibration is more subtle than the vibration of the passions, it's clouded over. So we're not able to see that which could give us the greatest possible happiness and freedom and security.

Not understanding that, we look for substitutes. And the substitute that our psyche comes up with is the self. The self seems to offer the promise of some ongoing security. Through the construction of self-image related to past and future, we believe that there's an ongoing nature that is a substitute for the true lasting peace.

But once we construct a self and we identify it with this body and mind, we have to do a lot of activity around it. We have to make the self try to be safe. We have to keep it nourished. So that's what a lot of our thoughts are about—this self-protecting. We don't see that this construction of self wraps us up with holding on. We construct the self out of holding on to past and future and views. And therefore, because it's holding on to what's impermanent, it can't really last. The self-view can't really last. So that's the first level. We've lost touch with the deep inner peace that is part of us.

The second is that we move into these strategies based on craving. We think if we feed the self, that will be the road to happiness. So we put our chips on greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed is to keep the pleasant coming. Aversion is to force the unpleasant away. Delusion is to step back and not feel exactly what's happening in all of those.

Greed, aversion, delusion are the basis for all the unhelpful emotions. We could talk about anger or guilt or judgment or grief or loneliness or pity, desire. They are all based on different combinations of greed, aversion and delusion. In one school of Buddhism it said there are 84,000 of these afflictive emotions combining greed, aversion, delusion in different ways. And that was written about 2,000 years ago. So today I think that number must be at least doubled. Modern life is so much more complicated.

So our normal life is a flood of these emotions, these unhelpful emotions—you call them the hindrances or the taints, kilesas—because we've put our chips on the self and keeping it fed through craving. And these

are all oriented around the self, all these unskillful emotions. The Buddha referred to this as a flood. This is the flood that he talks about crossing, talks about crossing to the further shore, crossing to the island, crossing over the flood.

So you could call this the second layer of obscuration. And this is a veil of the afflictive emotions. One of the things we see when we're governed by the hindrances: we don't see clearly. That's one of the main descriptions of the hindrances in the language of the Buddha—they blind wisdom. So when any of the afflictive emotions are strong, they prevent us from seeing clearly. They draw our attention elsewhere and they reinforce these passions, which are not helpful.

When we are tormented by the afflictive emotions of greed, aversion, and confusion, we act in unskillful ways, and this creates the third level of obscuration. We harm ourselves and we harm others.

That's what's so interesting about understanding sila, which Kamala is going to talk more about in a day or two—that when we transgress the precepts and harm someone else, it ends up harming us also. It's so interesting. And the reason is that we are not totally separate. We are so deeply interconnected that hurting someone else also harms us because on some level we know that it's wrong. And we carry that knowledge with us even if we are in denial about it. But we know that it's wrong and that we've hurt ourselves through doing it.

So harming—basically violating the basic lay precepts—causes harm to us not only emotionally but also in terms of wisdom because it builds up in the mind either a layer of denial, which will block clear seeing, or the burden of regret and remorse, which we really carry as a weight that prevents us from fully loving ourselves and from fully accepting ourselves, which means the moment just as we are, just as it is.

And so we could call this third one the obscuration that comes from harmful actions.

So the ignorance, the basic not seeing, gets layered with these afflictive emotions of greed, aversion and confusion. And out of that come the third level of obscuration, which are the actions that we commit out of these three together.

When we come into meditation, this often becomes a weight that we start to open to. When I did my first long retreat here, all the things I had done in my life that hurt other people or other beings started to come up really strongly in my memory. And every one I would look at, and because I now had a new understanding of the precepts, I would just cringe in seeing it. I can't believe that I did that. I can't believe that I was so ignorant and unaware that I would have done that.

And some of these things went back to second grade. And some of them were a lot more recent at that time. I was about 29 years old at that time. They just invaded my mind. They stayed there. I felt terrible about them. And I had to write them down to get them a little bit out of my thoughts. So I made a list, the 10 biggest mistakes I've made in my life. And by writing them down, I didn't dwell on them quite as much. And then over time, just letting myself feel the remorse and regret about those acts and a real recognition

that they were harmful, that I wouldn't do them today, and it was really a different person who had done them, I started to get lighter around them. I still feel regret when I think of them, but I don't feel that heavy weight that I did then.

This is a quotation that's been attributed to the Buddha. I don't think it comes from the Buddha, but it could well have: "Thoughts give rise to intentions, and intentions lead to actions. Actions are repeated as habits, and habits harden into character. Therefore, watch closely the thought and let it spring from love for all beings."

So we have these three layers of obscuration to seeing: the basic ignorance, the afflictive emotions, and the actions of harmful conduct layered on top of one another. Most people don't have the opportunity to penetrate these layers and see what the truth of things is. And so most beings are bound in this cycle of ignorance leading to suffering. This is the fact for most human beings in the world. And so we just continue to perpetuate. Out of the suffering comes more ignorance and we continue to perpetuate this. That's why the Buddha said, "This samsara is without discernible beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, obstructed by ignorance and driven by craving." And in the Buddha's vision, this is over many, many lifetimes and many, many years of birth and death.

So now what's interesting is to see how the path works. Because the path is constructed deliberately to pierce through these three layers of obscuration. And if you know the Eightfold Path, it can be summed up as sila, samadhi, and panna.

So we start with sila. The point of sila is to undo the layer of obscuration that comes from harmful conduct. As we take up the five precepts, we cease, as far as we can, harming others and harming ourselves. That then leads to the undoing of this layer of obscuration. We have to meet the past harm, but as we meet it and let that go, that level gets purified by the acts of sila.

So conduct alone brings a certain level of peace of mind. This is from the Buddha: "Virtue is for the sake of restraint. Restraint is for the sake of freedom from remorse. Freedom from remorse is for the sake of gladness." So as we take more care with our conduct, it leads directly to a sense of gladness and ease in the heart.

So this stage is described in the text as the purification of conduct, piercing the first level of obscuration—the area of sila.

The second area is the area of samadhi. Samadhi is a word that is translated as concentration, and as we've talked about in the discussion on the seven factors, it refers to a state of mind that has become collected, steady, composed—one that's not so assaulted by the hindrances. One of the delights of the concentrated mind is that the hindrances have ceased assaulting us. The rolling on of papancha has stopped assailing us, and there is this new sense of calm, peace, and rest that comes in.

Just by being steadily attentive to the moment, moment after moment, the floods have been halted. The

floods of greed, aversion, and delusion—the hindrances—have been halted temporarily. In one of the discourses, the Buddha made the comment that mindfulness can dam any flood. That's what we're practicing. When we practice being in the present moment, again and again, we're blocking those floods from coming in and taking over our mindstream.

The mind becomes collected in the present moment. The nature of the present moment is essentially peaceful. If we don't disturb it, the present moment is peaceful, here at least. So this mood of samadhi is about relaxation, about acceptance, and about trust in the moment. The very fact that the hindrances are absent gives a deeper level of happiness. This degree of happiness is found directly in our present experience, so we don't have to go out to look for stuff anymore.

The Buddha expressed this as: tranquility is for the abandoning of desire. This word tranquility is a translation of the Pali word samatha, which is paired with vipassana. Practice develops both tranquility and insight—this is the tranquility piece. Tranquility is for the abandonment of desire.

So this stage of samadhi leads to the purification of mind. The hindrances are in abeyance—they are temporarily halted—and we start to taste some of the possibilities of that peace and freedom.

Then, because the mind is more still, it can see more clearly. It's not blinded by the hindrances. Wisdom can function at a deeper level, and so wisdom now has the possibility of seeing more clearly the deeper truth of things. Wisdom starts to undo the third level of obscuration, which is the misunderstanding about the nature of the self and the nature of our own being.

We start to see that everything is merely coming and going and that there's no fixed center. The more we rest in equanimity with that seeing, the more we are coming closer to that natural peace of non-disturbance. That peace, basically of equanimity, is right next door to a deeper seeing. This is the stage called the purification of view, where we are starting to get closer to piercing the fundamental ignorance about our own nature—the essential peace that's deep within our own nature.

Seeing not-self is a part of that, but it's not the end of the path. The wisdom needs to go one more level at this point, and that is to nibbana.

This dependent origination chain shows how suffering is created based on ignorance. But it's also given, as the Buddha said, in the reverse order, so that when ignorance ceases, the other links of the chain collapse also, and suffering is no longer generated. When ignorance ceases, that is the moment of the realization of the unconditioned, of the element of nibbana.

The Buddha said: with the cessation of ignorance comes the cessation of sankhara or impulses, these volitional formations. What is it like when the mind is filled with wisdom? The basic sense is peace, calm, spaciousness, loving-kindness. There's understanding, there's strength, there's joy, there's interest. All these factors are there. These are aspects of the awakened mind.

The actual sense of awakening depends on this third noble truth—the penetration to nirvana—which involves, as is often said, the destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is one of the descriptions the Buddha gave: "This is peaceful. This is excellent. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

This is really, for serious practitioners, the goal of our practice—the realization of the third noble truth. In our tradition, this is called a moment of enlightenment. In this first moment of realization, one is said to enter the stream. One becomes a stream enterer.

If I were to describe this as carefully as I can, I'd say it is a moment of the direct realization of the unconditioned element of nibbana. The Dalai Lama has described it as a direct realization of the ultimate nature of reality.

I think that is also accurate. There's one phrase that often appears in the discourses that expresses this seeing. After someone has had this stream entry experience, the Buddha will say something like, "The spotless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose: All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation."

This sounds like simply a seeing of impermanence, but I think more is being pointed to here. This quality of cessation is most often referred to as the cessation of craving. And the cessation of craving, as you know, is the cessation of dukkha and is connected with the third noble truth or nibbana.

So when craving ceases, the unwise impulses also cease. There's a sense of stillness and peace. Now this peace of nibbana is an unshakeable kind of peace. But we start to approximate this. We start to feel close to it in our practice when the mind is temporarily free of craving, temporarily free of greed, hatred, and delusion.

And you can start to recognize these moments for yourself. There's a feeling of calm and steadiness. You check on attitude. Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion? No. That is a moment. It's described in the suttas at one point as "insofar as possible, nirvana" or "just this much nirvana." And one of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, called it "temporary nibbana."

This happens not uncommonly for meditators in retreats like this. It's not exactly enlightenment, it's not exactly stream entry, but it gives one a taste, a pre-taste of that quality, and you can start to appreciate it.

Once you start to appreciate the sense of temporary nibbana, you can use it as a meditation instruction for yourself by asking something like, "Do I remember what that felt like? Can I sort of put myself back there?" This is not just to recreate an experience, which would be based on greed. It is because it is such a wholesome place to be in. It not only provides a strong foundation for wisdom, for seeing clearly, but it also continues the work of purifying the heart and mind—continues that work of the three levels of purification.

So it's a very helpful practice in and of itself. If it's not accessible, drop it. You can't strain after it. But sometimes by remembering the feel of it, you can find it again. And then this becomes something of a practice.

When this is a practice, you're feeling the freedom in it already. You're feeling the peace of it already, which is the goal. So it's very interesting—at this point in practice, the path and the goal come very close together. And at one point the Buddha said something like, "The Eightfold Path has the deathless as its ground." It's founded in nibbana, in other words.

Some teachers have a way of transmitting this quality of awakened awareness and intelligence. I have a teacher who lives in Kathmandu named Soni Rinpoche, a Tibetan lama. One winter I went over to visit him in his monastery. I stayed in town and was doing a retreat in my room, and I would go out to see him every couple of days in his monastery.

Just at the end of the time I was there, he had a very senior Tibetan lama staying with him, whose name was Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche. A lot of my friends had studied and practiced with Nyoshul Kempo and spoke very highly of him. Toward the end of my stay, my teacher asked me if I would like to meet him, and I said yes, I would.

I actually had a good excuse because a friend had emailed me and said, "Would you be willing to give Nyoshul Kempo some dana from me?" So I had an excuse to pay a visit and pay my respects to him. I had some cash that she would repay me.

So I was taken in to see Nyoshul Kempo. Everything was arranged. The translator was there. He was sitting up, quite dignified, wearing a gold robe.

His wife was beside him. My teacher was there and there was a translator. So I paid my respects with three bows and went forward on my knees to offer him the dana from my friend, who was a student of his.

As I did that, he drew me closer and looked directly into my eyes. I'd been sitting for a couple of weeks at that point, so I was fairly sensitive and fairly quiet. And he was a very well-known and respected master, so I was a little bit nervous. But I went up—it was quite an open place—and I looked directly into his eyes. Our heads were not very far apart.

At that moment he went into a meditative space. I could tell that he made a shift. He wasn't so much looking at me anymore. His look was more inward, and what it felt like is his eyes sort of went apart and were looking off into infinity. And what I felt in his mind then—it almost wouldn't be right to say that his mind was complete peace. It was more like there wasn't a mind there anymore.

Looking into his eyes, I felt like I was looking into the unconditioned. I just held that gaze for a few seconds and he stayed in that state for a few seconds. Then I started feeling that nervousness came up. I

felt so exposed, but I felt he could see right through me. I just got a little nervous and it's like I kind of blinked, and then it ended—that moment of transmission. But I felt like if I had just been able to go on looking for a few more seconds, who knows what might have happened.

It was just a wonderful moment of transmission where he revealed to me that inner state of utter peace—of utter non-disturbance, of the utter absence of impulses, of any kind of movement based on self or anything else. He was just there, I felt, in the unconditioned element.

So I'll just close with another quotation from the Buddha about Nibbana:

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.

So let's just sit for a minute together.

There being no wavering, there is calm.
There being calm, there is no desire.
There being no desire, there is no coming or going.
This, just this, is the end of suffering.

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