First and Second Noble Truths

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:11

The subject of our exploration this evening is the First and Second Noble Truths. Sometimes we hear this and think, "Oh no, not more suffering. Haven't we already had enough suffering?" But I want to share this quote from the Buddha: "The realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy." That is our preview.

I want to base this talk around the Buddha's first discourse, recorded in the Samyutta Nikaya. You may know this story: after the Buddha's awakening, he spent the first forty-nine days not departing from the Bodhi tree, but standing, sitting, and walking around it, basically just enjoying the bliss of liberation and reflecting on what he had come to understand.

During that period, he contemplated not teaching. He thought that what he had found was too subtle for anyone else to understand, and so he wasn't at all sure that he was going to teach. But then, when he surveyed the world with his vision, he saw there were some people who had but little dust in their eyes, who were capable of understanding. So he decided to teach.

The people he decided to first teach were five practitioners who had been with him through his ascetic phase of practice. Again, with his vision, he saw that they were located near the town of Benares, about 150 miles away from the place he awakened in Bodh Gaya. He didn't have a Mercedes, so he had to walk 150 miles to get to his old friends to deliver this teaching. It must have taken him about ten days to arrive.

When he found his five old friends in the spiritual life and started to approach them, they said, "Oh no, Gotama has gone soft. Look how much weight he's put on. You can't press your finger in his belly and feel his backbone anymore. He's eaten. He's fallen off the path"—because they were committed to ascetic practices. But as he walked toward them, they were struck by his composure and radiance, and finally they agreed to open themselves to hear what he had to say.

This was the occasion of his delivering the first discourse called "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma." This discourse was essentially the declaration of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth that the cause of suffering is craving, the truth that the end of suffering lies in the end of craving, and the truth that the way leading to the end of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. This is what he outlined in this first discourse—a comprehensive view of his whole teaching. You could say that the rest of his forty-five years of teaching were just footnotes to this talk.

If you look at his collected teachings in English, they occupy about twenty-five volumes. I find this remarkable. The recorded teachings of Jesus in the Bible are about fifty or sixty pages, while the Buddha's

words fill twenty-five volumes. He said many things, but they were all about this central topic. As the Buddha himself later said, "Formerly, as now, I make known just suffering and the end of suffering." His teachings were always completely pragmatic and down to earth: this is what will help you come out of suffering, this is how you recognize suffering.

Let me begin by reading from this discourse, "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma":

"Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Benares in the deer park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the group of five thus: '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 low, ignoble, unbeneficial, and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.

Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata which gives rise to vision and leads to nibbana? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata.'"

This was the first exposition of the path that we are following and the possibility of the path leading to liberation, to nibbana, to complete peace and the end of suffering. The Buddha then continues with an exposition of all Four Noble Truths.

The First Truth is the truth of suffering, or the statement that there is suffering in life. This is how he expressed it: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Illness is suffering."

Death is suffering. Sorrow, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

The word being translated as suffering is the Pali word *dukkha*, which I'm sure you've all heard before. There's not an English word that really corresponds to *dukkha*. We have to approach it with a whole constellation of different English words. Some of the translations that have been used include: suffering—probably the most common—anguish, stress, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction.

All of these point to the meaning of *dukkha* as indicating that there's some friction in life for us as human beings. This friction doesn't mean that you're making a mistake with your life, but it points to the fact that some degree of suffering is an integral part of living. So not to judge ourselves when that shows up in our life.

Notice that this noble truth never says life is suffering. Sometimes people look from outside and they say, "Oh, Buddhism is really a pessimistic religion. It says that life is suffering." It doesn't say that. The Buddha never said that. Almost always when he talked about suffering, he also talked about the end of suffering. Both are equally important.

One of the things one sees is that as we practice the Dharma, we get happier and happier. There are people in the world in the field of Dharma practitioners who are basically happy people. It doesn't mean that happy people are immune from *dukkha*, but the *dukkha* is more temporary and the happiness becomes the baseline for one's life. This is possible. The Buddha himself was known by one of his epithets as "the happy one"—*sugata*.

This term *dukkha* points to some sense that the basic circumstances of life don't quite satisfy us. I want to read this account from the *New Yorker* from a few years ago:

According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed, by positive logic, that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be given everything it must put up with. Nine out of ten of the respondents stated that they would give up completely if they knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterword, researchers stated that statistically speaking, life is, quote, "just too much." And as yet, they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all.

Sometimes you might feel like that—though your chance of getting something in the mail has gone away. So here we are.

One of the things I like about the Buddha's definition of *dukkha* in this discourse is how universal it is: birth, aging, illness, death, association with what is displeasing, separation from what is pleasing. Who doesn't experience these things? All of us are vulnerable in this way to the difficulty of living. We all have this.

Sometimes when we feel "I am suffering," it feels isolating, as though I'm the only one bearing this problem. Everybody else seems to be sitting beautifully and walking beautifully, and I'm the one who's struggling here. But of course, no, it's not really like that. We're all in this together. We're all facing the same kinds of problems. When we reflect on that—that there is *dukkha* still in everyone we meet—it provides a way of connection and not a way of isolation.

This is from Naomi Shihab Nye, who's a Palestinian-American poet. The poem is called "Kindness." This is just a small part:

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead

by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you. How he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

This universality of our vulnerability to suffering is part of what connects us as human beings.

The second kind of dukkha the Buddha talked about is called viparinama dukkha, and it is described as the unsatisfactoriness of alternation or change. This means something may be going along in a pleasant way for a while, but because of impermanence, it will shift. And if we're holding on to the pleasantness, when it changes, there will be suffering.

Ajahn Chah said that this is like grabbing hold of a poisonous snake. If you grab hold of the head, it bites you directly—that's dukkha dukkha. If you grab hold of the tail and it's pleasant, eventually the head will come around and bite you, and then you suffer. So grasping at the pleasant or the painful eventually leads to the experience of dukkha. Grasping leads to dukkha.

Joseph Goldstein had a nice way of putting this succinctly. He was surveying the changes that he was going through physically in a retreat and he said, "If it's not one thing, it's another." I've reflected on that often.

The third kind of dukkha the Buddha talked about is called sankhara dukkha—the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. Sankhara in this instance means a conditioned phenomenon, something that arises based on prior causes and conditions. And the problem with conditioned phenomena is that they're unstable.

Some years ago we were at a teaching in the Bay Area from the Dalai Lama. I think he was talking on emptiness. And he was using this third area of sankhara dukkha to explain something very fundamental to the way the universe is set up. These were outdoor teachings in Mountain View at an outdoor amphitheater called Shoreline. The stage was set up just for the teachings, going on for three days, and it was quite beautiful.

The Dalai Lama was seated on a high throne, which he said is not about puffing up the ego of the speaker, but to give respect for the teachings—which I thought was interesting. On both sides of him were monastics from all the different traditions. There were Tibetan nuns and monks in the bright red robes that you're familiar with. Theravadan nuns and monks in the ochre robes that you know. Korean Zen nuns and monks in the gray robes of that tradition. Japanese Zen monastics in the black robes. The whole stage was this rainbow of monastic life from all over the Buddhist countries.

The backdrop was a painting of the Potala, the palace where the Dalai Lama had lived until the occupation happened and he fled the country in 1959. The Potala spread across the whole stage where the speakers for the Grateful Dead would have been—this huge canvas of the Potala at sunset with the Dalai Lama sitting in front. It was very beautiful.

We were sitting on the grass behind the seats, and it felt like a Buddhist Woodstock. All the tribes had gathered, there was a big stage and huge speakers so we could hear the voice.

So the Dalai Lama got to this part in the teaching where he talked about viparinama dukkha.

And what he said was, it's not quite correct to understand impermanence as that everything is going along in a stable way and then it changes. This is the pointing of viparinama dukkha. But in sankara dukkha, there's something more subtle being pointed to, which is that things don't go along in a really stable way for even two moments. Rather, things are constantly arising and passing, being formed and disbanding, coming into existence, passing out of existence, moment after moment after moment. And this is what we need to see. This is the instability of all conditioned phenomena.

We can see it in the body. We can see it through thoughts. We can see it through the sense bases. We can see it through mental states. They're all arising and passing really quickly. When we see this, we see that there can't be any lasting security from phenomena because there's nothing solid enough there to hold onto in the first place.

The Dalai Lama said, if you want to help people come out of suffering, you have to understand all three of these ways in which people suffer: the dukkha dukkha, the viparinama dukkha, and the sankara dukkha. We have to see all of them. And each one requires more subtlety to see. Everyone in the world understands the pain of pain. But not everyone understands the pain of alternation, and fewer people understand the pain of the dissolving structure of reality. But all three of these catch us up in suffering.

This is a quote from the Samyutta Nikaya. A god figure came down and commented on the dharma teachings that he had understood. And this person said, "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." You can think of this as body sensations. Having seen the shortcoming in bodily sensations, their chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to the body. This is the insight when we look closely into our experience of the body arising, passing, forming, disbanding moment after moment after moment. Nothing solid to hang on to.

But we usually don't see this, or we usually don't take it in, or we don't quite account for it. So in our worldly life, we want to create a world for ourselves that is kind of safe and cozy and predictable, that has security built into it. It's kind of like we want to have adventures, but we still want to be safe. So it's a little bit like a fairy tale where you can go off and have adventures in the woods during the day, but you come home to your safe little bed at night and a parent tucks you in and gives you your cookies and milk and everything's taken care of. That's kind of what we're looking for in life when we don't tune in to the truth of impermanence.

And we can do this in meditation also. We can aim to end up on a very cozy plateau of mindfulness and concentration. And we think, oh, if I just get the meditation right, I'm going to land and not move from that cozy plateau. But of course, it doesn't ever work like that. There is greater and greater happiness.

There is more and more of a sense of resting, but there's always change. States like mindfulness and concentration are also conditioned. They're part of sankara, part of compounded phenomena. So they also arise and pass.

This is not altogether bad. This is another quote from the Buddha: "If there was one speck of permanent form, the holy life for liberation would not be possible." If there was permanence in the world somewhere, it would gum up the works and we wouldn't be able to transform suffering into knowledge and vision and liberation. So impermanence works for our benefit as practitioners. It really does.

The first noble truth states the truth of suffering, but the noble truths are not just philosophical statements. It's not like we're just supposed to believe in these things. Each of the noble truths in this discourse also carries with it an action. There's something to do with each of these noble truths. So further on in the discourse, the Buddha states explicitly, "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." That's the action that's asked of us. It is to be fully understood.

The meaning, of course, is we don't fully understand it now. We may think conceptually we get it, but we haven't actualized it. We keep forgetting this truth. So we have to see it over and over and over again. And this is an important part of practice.

When things are difficult, can we see that as the first noble truth? This is an interesting question to ask: How often, when things are difficult, do we recognize this is dukkha? This is a universal part of life. I would say not all the time. There are many other ways we think about our suffering.

Sometimes we deny it. "Oh no, I'm okay. I can truck through this." Sometimes we judge ourselves for having it: "It's my fault. It's my mistake. If I was doing it right, this wouldn't be happening." Sometimes we blame others—our parents, society, the teachers, the world. Or we might distract ourselves because we don't want to touch it. In daily life, we go to the television, we go to the refrigerator, whatever, to get away from the experience of dukkha. Or here we might drift off into pleasant fantasy.

We have so many ways of missing, of not truly seeing and knowing the dukkha that comes. Can we let ourselves simply feel it and acknowledge, "Oh, this is the first noble truth. This is the truth of dukkha in my direct experience"? Can we open to it and acknowledge that?

This is a delicate point in practice, this first noble truth practice. If we don't acknowledge the truth, then we're always going to aim for that cozy plateau—whether worldly or meditative—always having a gaining idea that we should be landing somewhere else where everything's all worked out. And that gets us into striving.

But sometimes if we do acknowledge the first noble truth, if we think about it too much, we can get depressed. This is where the view comes in: "Oh, everything's dukkha." But the Buddha never said that. He never said there's always suffering. He clearly pointed again and again to the pleasure and happiness that we can find in life.

There's a difference between thinking about the first noble truth and making it a view—"there's all this dukkha"—which tends to feel like a heavy weight. But when you actually see the truth of dukkha in a moment, that tends to be freeing. It's the difference between holding a fixed view as a constant ongoing take on life and seeing the truth in the reality. When you can see the truth in the reality of the moment, that dukkha is also capable of change. It forms and it's capable of being undone. That part is liberating.

Clearly, we are not meant to take the teaching of the First Noble Truth and get depressed by it. The Buddha said: "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm oneself with suffering. One does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet one is not infatuated with that pleasure."

James was talking the other night about finding these wholesome states of joy and happiness and recognizing them within your practice. That is pleasure that accords with the Dhamma. That offsets the inclination of the mind to lean toward just seeing dukkha. Yet one is not infatuated with that pleasure. One appreciates it, but one does not attach.

One way to hold the truth of dukkha is to ask: Has suffering ever been helpful in your practice? Did it ever bring you anything positive? What brought you to the Dhamma? Wasn't it suffering in some form or another? This is the almost universal role of suffering in Dhamma practice. It wakes up our yearning to know, our yearning to understand. It leads us into hearing the teachings, considering the teachings, and then taking up the practice. Without the impact of suffering in our lives, I don't know if any of us would be here. I wouldn't be here.

These are noble truths, meaning they have an ennobling quality. This is another way to understand "noble"—they are ennobling. If you look around the world, how often is suffering ennobling for people? Sometimes it seems not very often.

Sometimes suffering can indeed crush us under its weight, leaving us heartbroken and lost in despair. But if we use it well, if we remain open to learning from it, suffering can become truly ennobling—it can be transformative.

I want to share something from a book that many of you may have encountered: *The Book of Joy*. It records a remarkable dialogue that took place over several days between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Dharamsala, where His Holiness lives. The subtitle, "Lasting Happiness in a Changing World," offers an excellent approach to understanding the Four Noble Truths.

Both of these extraordinary men have endured incredible suffering in their personal lives and in relation to their countries. The Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959 and has since witnessed what amounts to cultural genocide and a devastating assault on the monastic order in his homeland—circumstances he has been powerless to change. Archbishop Tutu labored for years under the oppressive apartheid regime in South Africa, becoming a leading voice for justice, especially after Nelson Mandela's imprisonment. He has

witnessed immense suffering among his people, even since the movement toward greater equality began.

Neither man is a stranger to suffering, whether personal or societal. Yet what strikes me most about this book is the profound joy from which they speak when conveying their understanding of the teachings in their respective traditions.

Regarding suffering specifically, Archbishop Tutu shared these illuminating words about Nelson Mandela's imprisonment: "I think some suffering, maybe even intense suffering, is a necessary ingredient for life, certainly for developing compassion. When Nelson Mandela went to jail, he was young and you could almost say bloodthirsty. He was head of the armed wing of the African National Congress. He spent twenty-seven years in jail, and many would say, 'Twenty-seven years, oh, what a waste.' I think people are surprised when I say no, the twenty-seven years were necessary. They were necessary to remove the dross. The suffering in prison helped him become more magnanimous, willing to listen to the other side, to discover that the people he regarded as his enemy were also human beings with fears and expectations, molded by their society. Without those twenty-seven years, I don't think we would have seen the Nelson Mandela with the compassion, the magnanimity, and the capacity to put himself in the shoes of the other."

The Archbishop continued with these paradoxical words: "It is how we face all the things that seem difficult in our lives that determines the kind of person we become. Actually, nothing beautiful in the end comes without a measure of pain, frustration, and suffering. This is the nature of things. This is how our universe has been made up."

In retreat, we have the opportunity to experience this suffering firsthand and to truly understand what it is and where it comes from. This understanding naturally leads us to the second noble truth.

Let me read from the discourse: "Now, what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight now here and now there. That is craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence."

The word "craving" translates the Pali term *tanha*—the word we'll use as we explore the second noble truth.

When I first heard this teaching, it was revolutionary for me. At that time, I felt completely stuck in my suffering, trapped in what seemed like an incomprehensible mass of confusion. This teaching revealed that there was actually a cause for my suffering. Where there's a cause, there's a way to remove that cause. And when you take away the cause, the suffering naturally ceases—which brings us to the third noble truth.

This realization was profoundly liberating: my psychological suffering could be uprooted by examining this cause.

Now, this teaching on the second noble truth doesn't exclude other perspectives on suffering in the world,

because there are indeed other causes for extreme suffering. People need food, clothing, medicine, and shelter. When worldly forces combine to deprive people of these basic requisites, there are certainly societal and economic causes for suffering as well. But assuming one can gather these necessities, the possibility exists to transform our suffering through understanding the noble truths.

Tanha, translated as craving, originally meant simply "thirst" in the Buddha's time—a very straightforward word. The Buddha, as he often did, took this common word and brilliantly re-engineered it for his teachings.

Thirst is indeed a form of craving, a kind of wanting, but it reveals something profound about desire's nature. Thirst can be satisfied temporarily, but it always returns. When you're thirsty, you drink a glass of water—it feels wonderful, completely satisfying. But how long before you need another drink? Not very long at all.

So craving works in the same way. We may have a craving, it gets temporarily satisfied, but it's going to spring up again, just as thirst did. In our hearts and minds, what it springs up from is some underlying sense of unfulfillment. This is the human existential condition that we are trying to remedy—this underlying sense that something is not right or is not being fulfilled in the present moment. It's this hole, you might say, in our heart that is the source of craving.

Craving springs up to try to fill this empty void, this hollowness of insufficiency. And then it latches onto one object after another, seeking delight now here and now there. It picks up and takes in the object and temporarily the craving is satisfied. But because the underlying hole has not been filled and can't be filled in that way, it springs up again.

In observing this pattern, it's really helpful to start tuning into the force of craving itself more than the objects that it is associating itself with. This force of craving manifests in different ways. Even though its language represents primarily desire, it's not limited to just the desire force. Craving basically means wanting things to be different than they are. It's a relation to the present moment that is dissatisfied with the present moment and wants it somehow to be different.

There are three ways of expressing this dissatisfaction—our old friends: greed, aversion, and delusion. One way we get dissatisfied with the present moment is that we want something pleasant, maybe more pleasant, maybe greatly pleasant. We want something pleasant to come into the moment that isn't there, and that's the force of greed. But we can also look at the present moment and see discomfort here that isn't wanted, and we reject that out of the force of aversion. So that's also rejecting the present moment and wanting something different to take its place.

In truth, both greed and aversion are manifestations of craving. They're both rejecting the present, wanting to replace it with something else. So craving doesn't just refer to the force of desire or greed—it encompasses greed and aversion, which are really two sides of the same coin.

How is delusion also an aspect of craving? This is not so easy to see, but it is true. We can see it in two ways. One is that we ignore the activities of greed and aversion. Greed and aversion are always rejecting the present and trying to make something different happen. This activity is ultimately really unsatisfying—it's what keeps the mind spinning, keeps the mind restless, keeps the heart from finding peace and ease. But we don't see it. So we are basically deluded about the operation of greed and aversion as our habitual ways of trying to find happiness. We don't look at their operation, and that continues to strengthen the force of craving. We're acting out craving again and again through greed and aversion, and we don't look at it.

The second way delusion plays into craving is that when we are preoccupied with pulling in the pleasant and pushing away the unpleasant, anything that's neutral doesn't register on our interest scale. When your attention is focused on pleasure and pain, the neutral comes along and you don't care. It doesn't gratify, it doesn't feed you, but it doesn't threaten or alarm you either. So we tune it out.

This delusion regarding the neutral is another expression of the mind that's lost in craving, dominated by greed and aversion. As mindfulness comes in and sees clearly what is, independent of likes and dislikes, the neutral is just as real, just as alive, in some ways just as interesting, as the pleasant and the unpleasant. But the mind caught in craving doesn't see it, overlooks it, denies it. And that's delusion at work as well.

So truly, you could say that craving encompasses or is even the same as the movements of greed, aversion, and delusion. They're more or less synonymous.

The retreat setting is a very good place to see the ongoing activity of liking and disliking and ignoring. These are the active expressions of craving, and we see them again and again. Especially with liking and disliking, which are the stronger forces in active expression, we have to understand that the friction we feel with them is due to our own minds. If we blame it on the external situation—the food isn't right today, the weather isn't right today, somebody's making noise in the meditation hall—if we blame it on the external situation, we never get a chance to look at and transform our own habits of mind.

So when there's a struggle with the way things are, if we can bring it home and look at the movements of greed, aversion, and delusion in our own hearts, that's what gives us the ability to transform them.

There was this beautiful scene in the movie Kundun. I don't know if you've seen it or remember that movie. Martin Scorsese made a film of the life of the Dalai Lama. He did it so beautifully you would have thought he was Buddhist instead of Catholic. He so deeply resonated with and captured what was happening in Tibetan culture.

There was one scene that struck me. I went back and watched the movie again just last year, and I liked it as much this time around. The Dalai Lama is about nine or ten years old, and he's receiving teachings from his tutors, who are very esteemed older monks in his lineage. They're teaching him the Four Noble Truths.

When they come to the teaching on the second noble truth, they ask the young Dalai Lama, "What's your understanding of the second noble truth?" And the Dalai Lama says, "Well, the second noble truth is that the cause of suffering is craving."

They say, "Make it more personal. Speak from your own experience. What's the second noble truth?"

He says, "Oh, the second noble truth is that the cause of my suffering is my wanting."

They said, "Not personal enough. State it again in your own terms."

So the young boy sits there and reflects for another minute. Then he says, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

The tutors respond, "Oh, very good, very good."

This is the message of the second noble truth: most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. If we want to transform it in the context of a meditation retreat, this is where we need to look. When we're willing to look there, we find we have all these tools for transforming the suffering that's based on greed, aversion, and delusion.

I find one really interesting way to work is this: anytime there's a sense of struggle throughout your day, anytime you feel conflict, tension, difficulty, dukkha, take a look and see what is being resisted or what is being wanted. This sense of struggle always comes from some lack of acceptance. What's not being accepted? What in the moment is being pushed away, or what pleasure are we grasping for to replace it?

We can learn about this. When we look at it again and again—these activities of greed and aversion and delusion—and we see our own responsibility in them, we get better and better at letting go. Of course, it's the letting go that leads to the third noble truth, which is the end of suffering. I'm not going to talk about that tonight. We'll talk about it later in the retreat.

But to me, this is the heart of dharma practice: How do we move from the second noble truth, which is struggle, conflict, difficulty? How do we let go of that craving and open to the third noble truth, which is the absence of struggle, the absence of craving, and the presence of peace? This is the heart of what we're trying to learn in meditation. This is how we transform our suffering moment after moment.

The Buddha talked about three kinds of craving that were mentioned in the discourse. The first is craving for sense pleasures. This is called kama-tanha. You can see what a huge force this is in the world—craving in the worldly sense for pleasant experiences of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

I looked up some industry figures. For the sense of sight: movies brought in eleven billion dollars last year in the United States alone. Craving for the visual. For sound: recorded music, fifteen billion dollars in the world last year. Fifteen billion dollars. And this doesn't even include live concerts and all the other ways we enjoy sounds. For smells: this one struck me—the perfume industry, twenty-nine billion dollars a year,

and that's not even counting air fresheners and deodorants. And then food, for taste: the restaurant industry in the U.S., seven hundred eighty-three billion dollars in 2016.

Money follows sense desire. The scale of it is enormous.

So this is where in the world people are putting—where we are putting—a lot of energy. And underneath the wanting of sense pleasure is the wish to become happy through it. Sense pleasures do bring a certain amount of happiness, and sense pleasures are an integral part of lay life. If you're really not interested in sense pleasures, then I think Bhante can tell you the monastic life has many advantages. The monastic life is designed as a renunciation of the effort to find sensual pleasures.

But as lay people, we are involved in a world where sense pleasures are part of our daily activities, and we have the opportunity to find many of them. So what the Buddha cautioned about—he didn't say you can't enjoy sense pleasures. He said don't build your happiness all around finding sense pleasures. Because you can see how people do this, right? There are people who do it with food, people who do it with drugs, people who do it with sex, people who do it with television, people who do it with alcohol.

So as lay people, it's not that we are not allowed to have sensual pleasure. Don't build your life around trying to find happiness through those avenues. It doesn't work. You know that, or you wouldn't be here. Because the sense pleasures here are really limited. But other pleasures are great.

This is the first kind of craving—craving for sense pleasure. The second kind of craving is called bhava tanha, craving for existence or craving for becoming. This is a deep force in the mind, this craving for existence. And it's why we're afraid of dying. Somehow we have this deep-seated yearning for life in this body, and it's why death is scary for most people.

When you think about it, this craving for existence is not very rational. I mean, if you went to bed tonight and you never woke up, would that be a problem for you? It might be a problem for other people, but it might not be a problem for you at all. And yet that thought terrifies us. That's like the worst thing that could happen. So it's a deep-seated craving we have to be alive, to be in a body. It doesn't quite really make sense. So this is the basic meaning—craving for existence.

But bhava also means becoming. There's a desire to become something or someone. When I look back on my early years of retreat, I was younger then, and I would run through a lot of projections about where I wanted to live and what work I wanted to do and what kind of community I wanted to join and how I was going to plan my life and support myself. All of these types of becoming were running through my mind over and over and over again. And that's bhava tanha as a craving to become something or someone. I like this line from Lily Tomlin: "I always knew I wanted to be someone, but I guess I should have been more specific." So we all become someone.

And then the third kind of craving is the craving for non-existence. This is called vibhava tanha—non-existent craving. It basically means the state where we want to escape from the world of

sense contact. We don't want the constant stream of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mind objects. We want to turn it off, but we can't. So this is a deep kind of aversion to life. You just go, "Enough already. I don't want to keep experiencing this stuff."

Obviously this is the deep motivation behind suicides—one simply wants to cut off the stream, a deep aversion to living. It also means, in a less grandiose way, wanting to get rid of a particular unpleasant contact that's happening. So aversion to the unpleasant is also contained in here—not wanting that kind of becoming.

So these are the forms of tanha that we can experience and know. And there's an instruction, an action connected with the second noble truth as well. Here's the instruction: This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. That means let go of craving. That means surrender your desire in meditation to have the moment be different than it is.

This is why the role of acceptance in meditation is so important, so central. Now we're not talking about going back into the world and saying you have to accept all the conditions of the world.

You have to accept the injustice and the racism and the oppression and the homophobia. We're not saying that. But in meditation, to find your own balance of mind, there needs to be this letting go of the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion, or there will be no peace. Acceptance is opening to the present moment just the way it is, and that's what opens the door for peace and settledness.

This is the instruction around craving that allows it to move into the third noble truth, which is the end of craving is the end of suffering. So we look at this moment again and again. What are we wanting from the moment? And can we let go of any desire for it to be different than it is? Any desire for there to be less physical discomfort, any desire for there to be more calm or more concentration or more metta, any desire for there not to be any difficult state of mind—fear or sadness or anger.

The interesting thing is if we can recognize this movement of greed or aversion, of wanting and not wanting, and start to meditate with it, something interesting happens. Eventually it does let go. The particular form of craving does not last forever. If you can just stay with it, it will release. Sometimes it will release because you've really learned how to do it skillfully. Sometimes it just runs out of steam. Whichever way, whatever you're working with that is difficult to be with, continue watching the urge to push it away or bring something else in, and eventually that will release and you will go back into balance.

This gives real trust in the teaching of impermanence and lets you feel in a direct experiential way the movement from the second noble truth to the third noble truth. When desire is active, what does that feel like? What does wanting feel like? Is it peaceful and calming and settled? Or is it contracted and agitating and restless? When aversion is present, is that peaceful and calming and concentrating? Or is that friction and rubbing and fiery? And then what does that release feel like?

So get really interested in this movement from the second noble truth of some form of craving and lack of acceptance, some struggle, to being patient and observing it with mindfulness and noting that moment of release. How does that feel? This is really the heart of our practice. And we develop more and more skill moving from the grip of craving into the freedom of letting go, finding the peace and the ease that's inherent in our minds already.

I'll close with this quotation from Ajahn Sucitto: "To one who cultivates attention to the present, in whatever form the present moment takes, the mind through practice begins to reveal its treasures—sensitivity, joy, confidence, and serenity." These are all found in this movement from letting go into the third noble truth, the state of peace, acceptance, calm—temporary nibbana.

Let's just sit for a moment together.

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