The Third Noble Truth and Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:05:11

Two weeks ago I talked about the First and Second Noble Truths, and the subject of the talk this evening is the Third Noble Truth and Nibbāna. I want to say that I consider the material of this talk to be my idea of the pointer to the very heart of Dharma practice. What we are talking about tonight, in my view, is why we practice and how we are meant to practice. So I'm going to try to sum it up from a number of different angles.

When the Buddha was still a layperson, he was twenty-nine years old and living with his parents. This sounds like it could be the punchline for a modern sitcom, but it was not so unusual back in India at the time. And he described his quest in this way. He was still a layperson, and he said: "Why, myself being subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death, why do I seek what is also subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death?" You can think of this as the layperson's quest for sense pleasures—that's what the common trend is. But why do I do that? "Suppose that I seek the unaging, unailing, deathless, supreme security from bondage, nibbāna."

That reflection is what led him off on his six-year journey—six years of serious spiritual practice going through deep forms of renunciation and asceticism until he found what he was looking for. As you know, he realized this through his awakening on that night under the Bodhi tree.

Immediately after his awakening, this poem came to his mind. This is from the Dhammapada: "Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. Oh house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving."

In this statement, the house is the body that is generated again and again through the rounds of rebirth and saṃsāra. The house builder is craving. The Second Noble Truth points to craving as the source of suffering. So the Buddha is basically saying that it's this craving that generates the round of saṃsāra again and again. "My mind has attained the unconditioned"—this is one of the synonyms for nibbāna.

Something that is unconditioned does not arise from prior causes and conditions. All conditioned things arise from prior causes and conditions and because of their arising are also characterized by passing away. Nibbāna does not arise from prior causes and conditions; therefore it is the unconditioned. So these two are synonyms: nibbāna and the unconditioned.

After his breakthrough, the Buddha thought not to teach. He said: "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, subtle to be experienced by the wise." So I can't claim that

this talk will be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So just allow for that. This talk may be really hard to understand, so don't try too hard. Just kind of let it flow over you and through you, okay? You can't figure it all out, this territory.

So the Buddha's statement of the Third Noble Truth—remember the First Noble Truth was the truth of suffering, the Second Noble Truth was that the cause of suffering is craving. Here's the statement of the Third Noble Truth: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

Here the Buddha is equating the end of suffering with the end of craving. And because of the earlier poem, we know he's also equating it with nibbāna and the unconditioned. So these are all terms for the same territory of discovery. And he describes this as the remainderless cessation of craving. To me, that means it ceases and no remainder comes again. Craving ceases and it is over. That is what the full end of suffering is about.

If we only understand the Third Noble Truth in this light—the complete remainderless cessation of craving—that makes it a very remote possibility, at least for me. Maybe it's closer for you; I can't tell. But this full liberation that's pointed to by this term "remainderless cessation of craving" is something that we come to gradually, slowly, over the course of a lifetime or many lifetimes. So this formulation can make the Third Noble Truth seem kind of theoretical. Like, right, this is something that's going to happen ten lifetimes from now or whatever. Won't think about it.

But there's another way to understand the Third Noble Truth where we understand it as the temporary cessation of craving. And this we experience many times during a day.

This temporary cessation of craving leads to the temporary cessation of suffering. As we become more skilled in recognizing these moments, this becomes our pathway to freedom here and now. It's a relative kind of freedom—not the final freedom, but a good kind of freedom. The temporary end of craving is a temporary release and a temporary movement into something profound.

This understanding of the Third Noble Truth makes it genuinely accessible in our experience here and now. It's very practical and can be absolutely immediate for us.

We want to understand both dimensions—this final pointing that the Buddha is talking about, which offers a very inspiring vision. The vision that we can come to the complete end of suffering is right there in the Third Noble Truth. And even before we reach it, there are many, many moments of freedom that we can touch in our practice. I find the combination of both of these very inspiring.

We also want to bring in the connection with self. I talked last week about the fact that there's no self found in this changing mind-body process. This is also directly connected to the teaching on the Third Noble Truth. Over the course of this talk, I hope it will become clear how craving, suffering, and selfing

are all very closely related, and how non-craving, not suffering, and not-self are also very closely related. That's why I say that this configuration of elements is really at the heart of what we're doing in dharma practice.

Each of the Noble Truths is not just a philosophical statement to be believed in—it comes with an action. There's something to do about each of the Noble Truths. What is the action for the Third Noble Truth? This Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized. This is a goal in our practice: to realize the cessation of suffering.

In conceiving it as the permanent end of suffering, this is basically saying that nibbana is to be realized. As I understand the Third Noble Truth, the aim of our practice is for each of us to have the direct realization in our personal experience of the unconditioned, or nibbana—this is what we are practicing for. To realize this element directly for ourselves.

This realization—direct, immediate, personal experience—is what constitutes a moment of enlightenment in our tradition. Or you could say awakening; I'll use the terms synonymously. In our tradition, there are considered to be four stages of enlightenment. It's not an all-or-nothing thing. There is an initial stage called stream entry, which matures into a greater degree of freedom called once-returner, and then a still greater degree of freedom called non-returner, culminating in full enlightenment or arahantship. One's practice, one's realization unfolds in our tradition in these four steps.

So what is nibbana? This is the hardest thing in all of Buddhism to talk about. It's not describable, basically. It's beyond dualities. Language differentiates—it separates one thing from another. Nibbana is beyond all dualities, so there are no words that can adequately convey it.

The Buddha was deliberately quite vague in the details of nibbana, and I think that was very wise. As soon as we put out a description of a state, the mind will fabricate an attempt to simulate it. By not giving details, the Buddha kept us away from that kind of artificial effort. What he did is he laid out very clearly the steps for us to realize it ourselves, basically saying: you'll know when you get there. You don't have to have a concept about it ahead of time. You'll know when you reach it, and here are the steps to reach it.

The literal meaning of nibbana in terms of its word origin is extinguishing or blowing out. There's the image of a candle or a fire that is blown out. The fire stands for craving, essentially. In blowing out the fire of craving, where does the fire go? When you blow out a candle, where does the fire go? It's just gone, isn't it? That's what happens with craving when full enlightenment is reached. It's just gone.

Sariputta described it this way: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbana." He's pointing to the very end of greed, aversion and delusion, synonymous with the end of craving.

So again, craving is equivalent to greed, aversion and delusion. Nibbana is, in this description, a state of mind. But it's also understood as a dhamma, which means something that's present within our experience.

We'll get to this a little later.

This is from the Udana, a Pali text: "There is, bhikkhus, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

So what is born, become, made, compounded? The six sense bases. The elements of our experience are all being born, made out of prior conditions. Is there release from the six sense bases? Yes. And it is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded that gives the possibility of release from the phenomena of our six sense bases.

Because nibbana is an unconditioned element, it means it's an element within our experience that is not subject to arising and passing. Not subject to arising and passing means it's ever present. It's not that it arises and then you're enlightened. It's not subject to arising and passing. So that means it's always present. That means it's here and now for each of us. It's a dimension of our being that is always available in any moment. That means the possibility of waking up is here in any moment.

Why don't we see it? We don't see it because it's so subtle. Its nature is so subtle. That's what the Buddha was pointing to when he said, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, hard to see." It is, as far as I know, the subtlest element imaginable within our being. And our usual range of movements of mind—the defilements, craving, greed, aversion, delusion—are so coarse that they cover it over. Their coarse movements obscure the subtlety of this particular element, of this dimension.

And that is why the training of the path involves this meticulous shaping of the mind that we're engaged in through meditation. This is the role of the seven factors of enlightenment. Their role is to shape the mind so that its subtlety matches the subtlety of nibbana, of the unconditioned. When the mind is shaped in such a way with this exquisite balance of presence, energy and stillness, then the mind is prepared. It is converging on the nature of the unconditioned, so close that at some point it will touch it. It will open to it. There will be that direct realization.

And that is why the cultivation of the seven factors of awakening is so critical in our meditation practice. Our aim is to realize the unconditioned element because that's what constitutes enlightenment or awakening. The seven factors are the key players that shape the mind for that to be possible.

Here are some synonyms from the Samyutta Nikaya for this element. The Buddha called it the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge and the beyond.

The Buddha considered this the highest possible happiness available to us, way beyond sense pleasures and even beyond very refined states of meditation such as loving kindness or concentration. It is so happy

because within it there is no possibility of suffering. That's why it is a place of complete safety. In it we have stepped completely out of the reach of suffering—cannot be touched by it. It is happy because the mind is beyond the possibility of disturbance.

I find it really interesting that this movement beyond disturbance is what gives the deepest possible happiness. It's not the highest high. It's not the deepest concentration. It's not even the most open-hearted metta. It is this state that is beyond disturbance, beyond agitation, beyond suffering. There is a relief that can't be compared to anything else.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says that peace is the highest happiness. He's actually pointing at this kind of peace, but it's still a good phrase to bear in mind.

Peace is the highest happiness. I wonder how many people in the world believe that. Because if you look at the world, it's not like peace is the main thing being chased out there. And then how many of us believe it? It's interesting, because peace is basically available in any moment. If we trust in that, it will come more and more.

So how do we get to this highest happiness? Well, of course, this is the Fourth Noble Truth. The way to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha said, "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines towards the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path slants, slopes, and inclines towards nibbana."

So this practice that you all are engaged in—you are directly engaged in the Eightfold Path every day, hour after hour. Sometimes it's moment after moment. You're directly engaged in cultivating the Eightfold Path. It's only going one way. It's going toward nibbana, toward that highest happiness. That's where you're all heading. Whether you intended it that way when you came or not, that's where it's leading you.

Now it's interesting—when you head in that direction, a lot of other great things come also. But the Buddha said, "Don't take any of those as the end of the journey. Keep going." And he said this very clearly in a discourse called the Simile of the Heartwood.

The heartwood is the most beautiful part of a tree. And there are lots of other pieces to a tree. There are leaves and twigs and bark and outer wood, and then there's the heartwood. So the Buddha said, "This holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, although that may come along the way, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, although that comes along the way, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. Not even insight is the purpose. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end."

This is what the Buddha taught for—the unshakable deliverance of mind. This is the final release from craving and end of suffering.

So that lays out the map toward this final end that the Third Noble Truth is pointing to. But let's talk now

about the temporary end, because it's much more practical and accessible through our meditation practice. And yet, the one will lead toward the other, so they're not entirely separate.

I want to start by looking more closely at what blocks this opening to the temporary end of craving. And I'll put it in terms of the creation of self. We talked about how the sense of "I" is not intrinsic, stable, permanent, and ongoing, but it is created over and over and over again. How does that happen?

There's this really wonderful pithy statement from Ananda. Ananda was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. He was a cousin from the village area that Buddha grew up in. And this is a statement from Ananda: "Another monk told me when we were newly ordained, it is by clinging that the notion 'I am' occurs, not without clinging. And by clinging to what does 'I am' arise? By clinging to form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness."

So when we hold on to any of the elements of the senses—the six senses or the five aggregates—the notion "I am" is going to get created. In other words, a new self is going to arise.

You can take a look at this in your direct experience. When does the sense of "I" arise? And does it ever arise on its own? Or does it come into being in relation to some object of the senses? For example, sensation in the knee: "I have a knee pain." The "I" arises in relation to the knee pain. Or in relation to a thought: "I am thinking." Or in relation to a mood: "I feel happy" or "I feel sad."

Or in relation to consciousness. "I am aware." We don't actually need the word "I" in any of these. We could simply talk about knee pain, thought, happiness, consciousness. But when we add the "I" to it, a sense of self gets born, gets stirred up.

Does the "I" ever arise on its own? Do you ever just sit there and it goes, "me"? Just pop up out of nowhere. "Here I am." Take a look. It arises in relation to objects in our sense experience.

There's a rather poignant discussion in the Anguttara Nikaya between the Buddha and Sariputta. Picture this: the Buddha has been teaching for several years already, and he says this to his chief disciple: "Whether I teach the Dhamma in brief or in detail, those who understand it are hard to find."

That's every teacher's lament, isn't it? This is the universal plight of the teacher, whether you're teaching arithmetic in third grade or astrophysics. And Sariputta replies, "Now, Blessed One, is the time to teach the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand."

So the Buddha continues: "Well then, Sariputta, this is how one should train. In regard to this body with its consciousness and in regard to all external signs, let there be no 'I-making' and no 'mine-making' and no underlying tendency to conceit." That is, forming a sense of self by comparing, by establishing. "Let there be no 'I-making' or 'mine-making' with the body, its consciousness, and all external objects."

What I love about this statement of the Buddha—apart from the poignancy you feel in it—is how clear it is that "I" and "mine" get made over and over again in the present moment. We are generating them through

our volitional formations, through our own creations. This activity—I think we've referred to it a few times—we could also call "selfing."

The "I" is not a constant, ongoing thing. We make it up, partly by attaching with language to the simple events of our moment-to-moment experience: "I have a knee pain." "I'm feeling happy." "I'm aware."

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein made this famous comment that the self is merely a shadow cast by grammar. It's just kind of an accident. We say it over and over again in our language—"I have this," "I am that"—and we start believing it's real. It's just a shadow.

Try relating to your experience without making "I" or "mine" and see how that feels, because the "I" is always extra.

As a practice instruction, what's very interesting from this quotation from the Buddha is to notice when the sense of "I" is weak. Take a look. When is the sense of "I" weak? I'll give you a hint: When are things calm and peaceful? When is it pretty mellow?

When is the "I" strong? Well, take a look. When are hindrances up? When are strong emotions and a lot of thought energy up? Then the sense of "I" rises up really strongly.

When is the sense of "I" completely absent? Take a look. It could well be happening numerous times during the day, maybe briefly, but take a look and see. And then look and see: How do these three states feel? When the sense of "I" is strong, does that feel pleasant? Or does it feel agitated and disturbing? When the sense of "I" is weak, you can touch a sense of peace and ease. And when the sense of "I" is completely absent, how does that feel?

Investigate, explore, see what the impact is. Where is there suffering, and where is there the absence of suffering?

Another way the Buddha described the formation of I—probably the most clearly—is in the chain of dependent origination. I think this has been mentioned already. It's a chain of twelve links that begins with ignorance and goes through a series of different activities, ending in suffering. You start with ignorance, you end up in suffering as a rule. That's what this chain describes, though it presents it in considerable detail.

I'm not going to explore the whole chain—it's too much for this talk. Moreover, the first five links are somewhat philosophical, and I don't really want to delve into that. The last three links are again rather philosophical, which I'll leave aside. But the central four links are very experiential. They are designed for meditators to investigate, so these are the ones I want to examine.

The central four links in the chain are contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. Sally may have mentioned these in an earlier talk, but we'll go through them again with a specific focus on the generation of self.

Contact is the arising of an impression at one of the sense doors—one of the six sense objects. Contact really means the coming together of the sense organ, the sense object, and the sense consciousness. For instance, if your eyes are open or your ear is working—let's say your ear is working—you have the ear organ, you have the sound of my voice, and it reveals itself through hearing consciousness in your direct experience. That's contact.

Contact has the quality of giving rise to a feeling tone. This is vedanā, the second foundation of mindfulness—being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Every moment of contact gives rise to a feeling tone. It's embedded in that moment of contact.

We've talked about how feeling tone is so important because pleasant feeling tones are the stimulus for greed to arise. Unpleasant feeling tone is the stimulus for aversion to arise. Neutral feeling tone is the stimulus for delusion to arise. Here we have the fulcrum of moving into greed, aversion, and delusion, and that's why the next link in the chain is craving. Craving is more or less synonymous with greed, aversion, and delusion. The idea is that feeling tone conditions the arising of craving.

So we have contact, feeling, craving. Let's look into this activity of craving a little more deeply.

Something happens at a sense door—like a sound. The attention inclines toward that sound, specifically based on its pleasant or unpleasant nature. In this case, let's say it's pleasant. The mind inclines to it. If you really like this sound—because it means the end of a sitting, for example—the attention inclines, and at some point you take hold of it. That's the activity of clinging or grasping.

With truly pleasurable things, we take hold because we want to keep them. We want to stop that moment and preserve the pleasure of it. It's also called fixating. We want to freeze time, as it were, when something pleasant is there. Or when something unpleasant is there, the attention leans to it because we're fascinated by the threat it poses. We don't want to experience the unpleasant, so again we lean toward it and take hold of it in order to push it away.

Whether we want to bring something to us out of greed or push something away out of aversion, to act on it we first have to take hold of it. That's the activity of clinging, which is the next step.

Contact gives rise to feeling tone. Feeling tone stimulates craving. Craving stimulates clinging. Once you're in clinging, you're in trouble, because then it leads on pretty inevitably to suffering.

Let's look at a couple of examples to see why this is so. Take knee pain as an example. We're in a sitting, in the hall, and there's this little disturbance arising in our knee. Over the course of a sitting, it gets stronger and stronger. Finally, we realize, "Uh-oh, this could really be something serious." So the attention leans in, takes hold of the knee pain, and then what happens? We start to proliferate around it with thoughts: "What have I done to my knee?"

Is it going to be like this forever? Am I ever going to be able to walk again? Do I need to go see a surgeon

when I get home and get a knee replacement? How much is that going to cost? Does my insurance cover it?

Do you notice the "I" thoughts in all that? When we've taken hold of something, in this case out of aversion, "I" thoughts proliferate around it. And that's because grasping is not a neutral activity. It's fueled by greed, aversion, and delusion. So there are strong emotions circulating around that act of grasping. The "I" gets born around the strong emotions—in this case, worry, fear, restlessness, and so forth.

But if you're a reasonably lucky meditator, the bell rings, you get up to walk, and in a couple of minutes the knee pain's gone. You think, "I don't have to call my doctor today. I can walk another mile."

So here we've had a birth. As we've taken hold of the knee pain, out of that fear, a self has been born. Let's call it the injured yogi. It's taken birth, it's proliferated, it's projected a future where we're going to have to go to the hospital. The injured yogi was a being, was a self for a while. So there was a birth, and then in time, when we walk and actually find it's okay, the injured yogi passes away. There's a birth and there's also a passing away, and the mind comes back to balance. That's in relation to a painful sensation.

What about a pleasant sensation, a pleasant experience? When I was first meditating in this hall many years ago, I started to wander into places of some concentration, and I thought, "This is what I've been waiting for. This is what meditation is supposed to be about." The mind got still, the body was relaxed, everything was stable. Thoughts would come and go and I wasn't disturbed. A little discomfort in the body wasn't disturbing. Everything was stable, peaceful, workable.

And I started thinking, "Wow, now I know how to meditate. Now I've got it." I kept this through that sitting, went out to walk, and as I was walking, I just kept thinking, "This is so great. It's going to be like this from now on. I'm going to have such a steady mind. I'll be a great worker. I'll get promoted really quickly in my company. I'll be really great in relationships, and I'm going to have the best partners possible because I'm so stable and I'm so loving and I'm so balanced." I just saw my life unfolding in a really beautiful progression because this state was never going to leave me.

Then I came back in to sit. Guess what happened? Totally gone. I'd been spinning out in thoughts. I'd totally lost the concentration.

So here I had taken birth as the good meditator. It was a very happy birth. It was kind of a heaven realm birth. I thought I was floating, cruising, but the passing away—not so pleasant.

First, with the knee pain, there was an unhappy birth as the injured yogi, but a happy death when we found it wasn't that bad. With the state of concentration, there was a happy birth as the good yogi, but there was a very painful passing away. Either way we grasp, either kind of birth we take, there's going to be suffering. Happy birth, unhappy death. Unhappy birth, happy death. There's unhappiness in both.

As long as we grasp, and in the grasping, we will create a self. Take a look at it. When you take hold of

something and freeze it in time, watch the "I" thought start to proliferate around it. That's the sign that grasping has happened, and that is a new birth. Eventually, that birth will pass. All these selves that we give rise to during the day do pass away, but with the grasping, a new self comes into being.

What becomes clear through this analysis is that grasping is not something done by the self, but rather self is something done by grasping. The self is constructed each moment for the simple purpose of providing the one who likes or doesn't like, holds on to or pushes away what is unfolding in experience.

For the most part in worldly life, we activate this state of grasping so often that it becomes what's called monkey mind. Have you ever watched a monkey go through a forest by swinging? The monkey will take hold of a vine and use that vine to swing, only letting go when it has another vine to hold on to in the next part. Then it takes hold of that vine and swings, only letting go when it gets another one to grasp.

In worldly life, this is exactly what we do—we hold from one thing to another to another, over and over again. But as meditators, we have another choice. We start to realize that we can let go of one vine and not grasp the next. And we don't crash. That's where we have it over the monkeys.

So the question is: in this chain of contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and that leading to suffering—is this inevitable? Does contact always have to lead to suffering? No. If it were inevitable, we'd be stuck. There would be no way out. That means it's possible to have contact and not move into suffering, which means the chain gets broken at some point.

Where do you think it gets broken? Can you ever have a pleasant feeling and not move into greed? Can you have an unpleasant feeling and not move into aversion? Yes. This means that feeling tone can arise and it doesn't have to lead to craving. This is where the chain gets broken.

With enough mindfulness and enough steadiness, we can be with the pleasant and not move into greed. We can be with the unpleasant and not move into aversion. Then we're not taking a new birth. We're not forming a new self. We're not moving on to clinging and proliferating an I.

One Buddhist teacher put it this way: the whole of the path is resting in the gap between feeling and craving. The whole of the path.

Now don't imagine that this is a big time gap. These four—contact, feeling, craving, clinging—can go by in a second. So don't imagine that you'll be able to sit back with your good mindfulness and leisurely observe contact happening for a few seconds, then turn your mind when feeling arises to catch that, then see the mind inclining and catch that, and if it goes to grasping, see that really clearly. No—it goes contact, feeling, craving, clinging, really quickly.

You won't be able to see them all sequentially most of the time, but if you keep looking at that chain again and again, sometimes you'll pick up the contact, sometimes the feeling, sometimes the craving, sometimes the clinging. You'll go over it enough to see how they're all connected together. They go by quickly, but you

can start to discriminate the different pieces.

When you do, you'll see that it's quite possible to be with feeling and not move into craving. This is where we want to establish our practice. This is the heart of dependent origination. This is the opening to freedom. This is the abandoning of the cause of suffering.

Remember, in the second noble truth, the action for the cause of suffering is to abandon it. This is where we do that. We experience pleasant or unpleasant, but we don't move into greed or aversion with it.

And what does that feel like? You're with your experience, but the mind is not moving into craving, not moving into greed, aversion, delusion. Take a look. I think you'll find it's characterized by ease, peace, spaciousness, relaxation, rest, contentment.

This peace that you touch when you don't move into greed and aversion—did you construct it?

Did you make that peace? How did you consciously decide, "I'm not going to fall into greed and aversion. Instead, I think I'll call up some peace"? Or was that peace already there when you rested? When you abandoned craving, was that peace already there?

I think that peace is already there. It's not something that has to be constructed or brought about. It's available in any moment when we don't disturb the moment with greed, aversion, and delusion. So when we're not taking birth, we're not subject to death, and that place is always available—always available. In any moment, that peace is available.

We'd say that this has the flavor of the deathless—not subject to arising and passing, not subject to birth and death. There's something there, when we don't disturb it, that can let us rest in peace.

What I'm pointing to here is that this temporary end of craving has a connection to nibbana. It is not the final nibbana, but it is something you could call a temporary nibbana. It's a place of being unborn and uncreated, and it's like a foretaste of the final nibbana. The Buddha actually had a phrase for this in the Samyutta Nikaya. He referred to it as *tadanga nibbuto*, which means approximate nibbana.

So this is the territory we're in when we don't take birth through grasping. We're in the territory of a proximate nibbana. This proximate nibbana is satisfying on its own terms, but it's also onward leading. As you rest there, you are strengthening the habits of non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion in the mind. You're strengthening the habit of non-craving and non-clinging. And that is a very powerful way to advance the path.

It's as though you get to this point—non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—where you taste the freedom of it. And you're also getting a taste of the final deliverance. So it's as though you're walking down the street where there's a bread factory somewhere in the neighborhood and you get the scent of the bread. "Oh, there's fresh bread baking somewhere. Where is it?" You just follow that scent so that it keeps getting stronger and stronger and stronger, and it takes you to the factory. You follow this taste of temporary

nibbana, and it leads you on and on and on until you come to the actual nibbana.

"The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon these foundations. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over one, they are called a sage at peace. The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. They are not shaken and they are not agitated, for there is nothing present in them by which they might be born."

This is the Buddha talking about going beyond birth and death—momentary birth and death.

There are a number of ways we can talk about this in practice terms. Breaking the chain between feeling and craving is one. Another one is looking directly at non-clinging. And the Buddha spoke often in praise of this. It's one of the most used of his phrases in the Pali Canon to denote the process of liberation: "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging."

Through non-clinging. That means this is a practice instruction for us. Non-clinging is the way. Non-clinging is the path.

There are a few ways that non-clinging can come about. One is we wait for clinging to pass. Clinging happens a lot. Ajahn Chah said that 70 to 80 percent of the spiritual life is clinging and not being able to let go. So this happens a lot. If you find it in your practice, you're not off track. You're on the Ajahn Chah track. That was a pretty good track.

So sometimes we wait for it to pass, and it will. All the clinging will eventually pass. The mind will come back into some balance.

Or it might be possible to learn better and better how to let go in the moment. We notice we're clinging and we've learned and are learning the skill of letting go.

So this again is from Ajahn Chah: "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace."

See what this is like as a meditation instruction. What is it like in a moment of practice of full mindfulness to let go completely? All the areas that might be holding, mind and body—what if you let go of it all? What would that feel like?

I hope you're getting a sense at this point in the evening how all these teachings of the Buddha are pointing to this same area of practice. The instruction from the second noble truth is to abandon craving. The instruction in the third noble truth is to realize the end of craving. The teachings of non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion essentially mean letting go of craving. The pointing to non-clinging—a deep letting go.

In all of them, we're not creating a new self. We're resting in this deathless place, the gap between feeling

and craving. We're not taking birth and we're resting in the deathless. This is the realization of temporary nibbana.

To me, this is the heart of Dharma practice: How do you move moment after moment from the second to the third noble truth? How do you let go of craving and come into peace? It's always available. It's always there and it unfolds from just letting go.

There was this interesting dialogue between two of the great practitioners in the time of the Buddha: a bhikkhu named Anuruddha and Sariputta, who was already a chief disciple at this time. Anuruddha is in meditation and he needs a little help, so he asks Sariputta for an interview.

This is his report: "Friend Sariputta," he says first, "with a divine eye which is purified and surpasses the human, I survey a thousand-fold world system." Second report: "Energy is aroused in me. My mindfulness is established without confusion. My body is tranquil without disturbance. My mind is concentrated and one-pointed." Third report: "Yet my mind is still not liberated from the taints through non-clinging."

That's a pretty good yogi report, isn't it? I would have said, "Wow, Anuruddha, that's fantastic." But that's not what Sariputta said.

Sariputta said, "Friend Anuruddha, when you talk about the divine eye, that is your conceit. When you talk about your energy and mindfulness, that is your restlessness. When you talk about your mind not being liberated, that is your remorse. It would be good if you would abandon these three qualities and stop attending to them. Instead, direct your attention to the deathless element."

This is a direct meditation pointer: Stop attending to everything else and direct your attention to the deathless element.

This is possible for us. Once we get a sense of what constitutes the deathless element—that quality of resting in the gap between feeling and craving—we can incline the mind that way. Now, if one has been partially enlightened, one knows the deathless element from direct experience to its depth. But if that hasn't happened, there's another discourse where the Buddha gives us more step-by-step instructions. It's as if he's in an air traffic control tower and we're coming in for a landing, and he's directing us how to land in that place of release into the unconditioned.

This is from a discourse to a practitioner called Malunkyaputta: "Whatever exists of sense objects, one sees those states as impermanent, as unsatisfactory, as void, as not-self. One turns the mind away from those states and directs it toward the deathless element thus:"

Now he's going to tell us exactly how to direct the attention to the deathless element: "This is peaceful. This is sublime."

"That is the stilling of all formations. The relinquishment of all attachments, dispassion, cessation, nibbana. This is peaceful. This is sublime." This is what we've already touched through resting in the gap

between feeling and craving. We start to get to know that—the stilling of all formations.

This is a phrase you all actually know. The Pali is *sabba saṅkhāra samatha*. *Sabba* means all. *Saṅkhāra* is the fourth aggregate of formations, movements of heart and mind. *Samatha* is just the aspect of tranquility. *Sabba saṅkhāra samatha*—all formations have come to stillness. The formations have stopped. Just be still. Just be still.

The relinquishment of all attachments—this is the deep movement into letting go. Be still, let go. That's what leads to cessation of craving, cessation of suffering, and nibbāna. This is the route into enlightenment.

There's an important pointer here: "Whatever exists of sense objects, see those states as impermanent, unsatisfactory, void, and not-self. Turn the mind away from those states." Why are we so fascinated with sense objects? We have seen them come and go and come and go over and over and over. Has any of them ever really made a difference? Has any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or even mind state really lasted? And yet we keep holding on, keep looking for the right one—the one that's going to fix it, the one that's going to solve it, the one that's going to make a difference.

The Buddha is saying, turn your mind away from all of those. Turn it to peace, to stillness, to relinquishment. This is the path.

As we start to rest in this ground, we start to see that the path and the goal are coming closer and closer together. Stillness, relinquishment—this is a lot like the Third Noble Truth. The Third Noble Truth is what is to be realized. As the path and the goal come closer and closer together, the satisfaction of the goal comes into the immediate present. We don't need to look for anything else because they are so close to one another.

"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."

Now in our modern day and age, we often wonder: Is this still really possible for anyone? This complete end of suffering? Is there anywhere in the world someone who has reached this—a living person that I could meet and talk with who is an example, a living example of this? I think there is.

I want to read a little bit from a short biography of Luang Por Liem. When Ajahn Chah passed away in the nineties, his monastery—a big monastery in Thailand called Wat Pa Pong—was passed on to his Dharma heir, who is Ajahn Liem. As he gets older, he's called Luang Por, spiritual father.

"Around the middle of the rainy season of the year 1969, Luang Por Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity. So Luang Por Liem increased his efforts, and as he did so, results became

evident. Keeping this teaching in mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit meditation until about ten or eleven p.m., then stop to have a rest. But on this day I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture. A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body as if something was taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, completely light and at ease. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness."

The body felt tranquil, cool, and light. This experience continued throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued unchanging for many years, all from that one time. It feels like there are no proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before—I don't know where they all disappeared to. This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose.

There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously, all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. This same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without change.

So let's just sit for a minute and let these words settle.

As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And the experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. This same state still lasts on, continuous and without change.

Thank you for listening.

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