The First Noble Truth

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:53

The subject of tonight's talk is the First Noble Truth. You probably remember from hearing Greg and Andrea discuss this that the First Noble Truth is the first of four: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to the end of suffering. Tonight I'll be exploring the first noble truth, which is the truth of suffering.

Sometimes people hear this and feel discouraged, thinking, "Oh my God, we just had the hindrances last night. Do we have more on dukkha tonight?" I want to share this statement from the Buddha, where he said that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So may you experience great happiness and joy in tonight's talk.

To set the stage for this exploration, I want to base our discussion on the first discourse that the Buddha gave. You probably know the story. The Buddha had been practicing for six years very intensively—probably more intensively than we can imagine. He wouldn't have skipped the late night sitting with chanting, for example. In that, he's a very good role model for us.

After six years of very intense seeking, you know of that night when he sat under the Bodhi tree and toward dawn had the realization that brought him to full enlightenment—the release from all kinds of suffering. It's said that he didn't teach right away, but spent the next forty-nine days in the area of the Bodhi tree, sitting and walking, enjoying what he called the bliss of deliverance.

Can you imagine? After six years of striving to have arrived at his goal and then just to be able to rest in that peace and liberation, the feeling of that liberation. He was enjoying the bliss of deliverance and reflecting on his understanding. He must have been thinking about how he would possibly convey this to someone else.

It's said that he was inclined not to teach because he thought that what he had discovered was so subtle that no one would understand. Then the legend goes that a heavenly being came down and said, "Awakened one, please consider—there are beings in the world with little dust in their eyes. If you teach, they will understand. Please share what you have gathered out of compassion for the world."

The Buddha took that advice, looked around and remembered that there were beings who perhaps could understand. He thought of the first two teachers he'd had in his journey. As he used his psychic powers, he realized they had died. Both of them had died recently. He wasn't able to share it with them.

Then he reflected on his five most recent friends in the course of his meditation practice—a group of five ascetics who had been doing these very austere practices of self-mortification along with the bodhisattva.

But when he decided to take food as he was near the town of Bodhgaya, they gave up on him and said, "Gautama is resorting to luxury. He's falling away from the path. We won't have anything more to do with him." They left him, and of course he came to enlightenment.

Again with his psychic powers, he realized that they were now living near the city of Varanasi, and he resolved to travel there. He walked from Bodh Gaya to Varanasi, which is a couple of hundred miles. It would have taken him probably a couple of weeks or longer to get there.

When he found his group of five ascetic friends and they saw him coming, they thought, "Oh, this is the luxurious indulger Gotama. We won't have anything to do with him." But as he approached them, something in his being intrigued them—maybe his dignity, maybe his radiance, maybe his confidence. They decided that they would lend an ear.

Having persuaded them to listen, the Buddha delivered this discourse. After six years of practice, after enlightenment, after forty-nine days of enjoyment and reflection, these were the first words of teaching that came from him. These words are recorded in a discourse in the Samyutta Nikaya called the Dhammacakapavatana Sutta, which in English means "the discourse on setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma." This took place in the deer park at Varanasi.

The Blessed One addressed the practitioners of 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, the way of worldlings, ignoble and not beneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and 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? 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."

The Buddha sets aside two courses of action which he had seen in the world. One is the pursuit of sense pleasures. I want to frame this carefully because as lay people, we are all involved in sense pleasures in different ways. As I understand this teaching, the Buddha is really saying: don't follow a path that seeks its happiness through the incessant pursuit of sense pleasures. This is not the path that all of you are on.

Someone who has embarked on that path wouldn't come to a twenty-eight-day or a two-month retreat. So I regard this as like the people that are shown in the film *The Wolf of Wall Street*. Do you know that one where Leonardo DiCaprio plays this Wall Street scam artist and spends his accumulated millions on drugs and all the other sense pleasures?

But neither is it beneficial to try to torture the flesh in an effort to liberate the soul, which was the view of the ascetic practitioners of the time. So finding a middle way that isn't seeking to find our total happiness

through sense pleasures, but also isn't seeking to mortify the body in order to release some kind of spirit.

So this middle way goes between two extremes. There are many other extremes that it goes between. You could say between greed and aversion. You could say between nihilism and substantial creationism.

So having introduced this, the Buddha is basically proclaiming his own awakening and his own enlightenment. Then he announced that the middle way was this Eightfold Path, which we are cultivating here, which we're developing on this retreat. So having introduced the Eightfold Path, then the Buddha started to enunciate the Four Noble Truths.

And you could say that after that enunciation of the Four Noble Truths, the whole rest of his teaching career, all forty-five years, was really just a commentary on this discourse. It was just filling in the details of what he had already transmitted to people. At the end of this discourse, one of the group of five, his old friends, became enlightened to the first stage of awakening called stream entry. So the discourse itself had a powerful effect.

So in introducing the first noble truth, he said, "This is the noble truth of suffering." And then he enunciated what makes up suffering. And he said it like this: Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Illness is suffering. Death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

This is the definition of the first noble truth. Sometimes it's stated as "all of life is suffering." But that's a misstatement. Did you hear that within this enunciation? It doesn't say it like that.

And in order to really get the meaning of what the Buddha is pointing to, we want to draw out the Pali word that is being pointed to by suffering, which you probably know as *dukkha*. It's not possible to translate the term *dukkha* with one word in English because it really has a range of meanings. So you'll see translators using different words for it.

Bhikkhu Bodhi uses the word suffering. Most translators do. It's the word I'll use most of the time. Thanissaro Bhikkhu uses the word stress. Stephen Batchelor likes the word anguish. Other words that other translators have used have been unsatisfactoriness, unreliability, dissatisfaction, or my current favorite—and I don't understand why more people don't use this—unhappiness.

It seems to me that really what the Buddha is pointing to is this thread of unhappiness that runs through human life. But the sense of unsatisfactoriness is probably the most comprehensive and the one that we can continue to focus on if we have questions about it. And it suggests that in some way the basic circumstances of human life aren't capable of giving us in and of themselves a lasting kind of satisfaction. And the Buddha has pointed to all the various reasons why.

And what I like about his formulation is how universal it is. There's nothing in this formulation that is

particularly Indian or particularly ancient. But the way that he described it applies to humans today just as much as it did to people back in his day in Northern India about twenty-six hundred years ago. He's talking about universals like birth and aging, illness and death, sorrow and grief, association with what we don't like, separation from what we like, not getting what we want, clinging that runs through the heart and mind.

So in another way, even though he doesn't say "life is suffering," there is in his description of it the sense that this thread is pervasive and by the reference to clinging is tied to our very own inclinations of heart and mind. As Greg's talk pointed to a couple of nights ago, this tendency to clinging is responsible for the arising of this mass of difficulty.

So Ajahn Sucitto, I thought, had a nice comment on this point that this goes very deep in us. He said, "We may feel that somehow we have to get ourselves out of this predicament. But when we *are* the predicament, how do we get out?"

So this is kind of the situation that we're in. We *are* the predicament. This fact of clinging runs very deeply in us. So we recognize the universal nature. But the other thing I appreciate about the Buddha's description is that it's not personalized. He doesn't say, "I am suffering" or "you are suffering." Feel into that when we say something like "I am suffering" and we take that on as a kind of burden. How does that feel? It feels like a weight. It feels like a personal failure, perhaps a personal source of guilt or embarrassment or shame.

He simply says there is this element of dukkha. It's universal, and in that universal way, it's not terribly personal. It's part of the human package when it hasn't been examined. So in this universal nature, in this impersonal nature, this understanding of the difficulty in human life really becomes a source of connection for us. As we investigate this shared vulnerability to suffering, we see that we're all in the same boat.

I love this poem from Naomi Shihab Nye. She's a Palestinian American poet. This is called "Kindness." I'm just going to read a short 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 is our human condition. We could all be lying dead by the side of the road somewhere and the simple breath had run out for us. This is the condition of all seven billion of us on this planet.

The Buddha went into a more detailed description of the kinds of dukkha that exist for us. He said that there are basically three kinds. The first is called dukkha dukkha. You can get the flavor of that one—the dukkha of pain, the pain of dukkha, whichever way you like to express it. This is the direct experience of

the painful nature of life that comes sometimes. The painful states of body, painful states of mind and heart that we sometimes come in contact with that are very oppressive, the source of our most intense kinds of suffering.

We can look around the world and see this, the magnitude of this kind of pain every night on the evening news. The wars that are taking place—the civil war in Iraq or Syria, the continuing strife in Afghanistan, all of our soldiers who've come home wounded, traumatized, lives shattered by their contact with war. We can look at the spread of illness. About a million children a year die of malaria, mostly in Africa—totally innocent victims of a disease that could be controlled if the resources were there for it.

Even around us in one of the richest countries of the world, we hear every day stories of murder, of rape, of sexual assault, of the abuse of children. And one of the hidden stories today for many people is the existence of racism in our culture, really quite prevalent in the culture. As a white person, I had grown up very ignorant about it until I sat down and was educated by films, by conversations with people of color, and got a sense of the magnitude of the impact of this kind of discrimination that afflicts many, many millions of people of color growing up in this culture—something to which I think many white people are completely blind and unaware, yet it's a deeply affecting and troubling condition in our society.

A few years ago I was teaching a group of senior students, and I just wanted to find out in their own lives what was most difficult for them. So we were talking about the Four Noble Truths, and I asked, "What are the real difficult areas of suffering in your life?" These were people who'd been practicing the Dharma in most cases for ten years, fifteen years, had done a lot of retreat practice, a lot of home practice over that time. These were some of the things that they mentioned as being sources of suffering for them:

A sense of isolation and a lack of community and connection with others. The presence of afflictive emotions in their lives—depression, sadness, anger, fear. The pressures of work—the time pressure, the workload, the fear of inadequacy, of not being able to meet the demands. The fact of aging and illness in themselves and their partners and their friends, meeting that day by day. Caring for aging parents who are losing their capabilities, either their mental capacity or their physical capacities as they get into their sixties, seventies, and eighties and near death. And an underlying sense of anxiety about the future, not knowing what was going to come for them economically, physically, emotionally—changes in their life.

These are the different forms of dukkha dukkha, the pain of suffering that we're vulnerable to, that everybody around the world is vulnerable to and has to deal with.

The second kind of dukkha that the Buddha pointed to is called in Pali viparinama dukkha. In English, this means the dukkha of alternation. What it points to is that with the truth of change, even pleasant circumstances don't stay that way, don't stay pleasant. We may be going along in a very pleasant circumstance for some time, but because of the truth of impermanence, at some point it's going to change. It will either disappear—that pleasant circumstance may disappear, such as the physical health we have at present that at some point will not be there—or it will turn into its opposite.

It will turn into directly unpleasant circumstances.

This truth applies to all conditions in the world, including what the Buddha called the eight worldly vicissitudes—the inevitable changes that affect all conditioned existence. We witness this pattern clearly in our meditation practice. One sitting may be deeply calm, collected, delightful, and peaceful. The very next sitting can be agitated, with the body uncomfortable and the mind restless. We encounter these shifting conditions hour by hour as we move through our retreat days.

This alternation is not a mistake on our part. It's not because we haven't been good yogis or because we've somehow ruined our meditation. This is simply what the conditions of mind and body do at this stage in our development—they continually alternate. When we cling to the pleasant experiences, their inevitable departure brings pain, loss, and unhappiness.

Ajahn Chah offered a vivid metaphor for this dynamic. He said that grasping worldly conditions is like grabbing hold of a poisonous snake. If you take the head—the obviously painful end—it bites you directly. If you grab the tail, which appears to be the neutral, safe end, and hold on, the head will eventually swing around and bite you anyway. Either way you grasp that poisonous snake, you're going to get bitten. This is precisely what happens when we grasp worldly conditions—the law of alternation will inevitably bring difficulty.

The third kind of suffering the Buddha identified is called sankhāra dukkha. Sankhāra means formations, and the Buddha used this term in several ways throughout his teaching. In this context, we can understand it as referring to all conditioned things—all formations that arise through causes and conditions. This could be translated as "the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned formations."

This third form of dukkha points to a profound truth: everything that arises has such a momentary nature that it never quite exists as a solid thing in the first place. This characteristic is not easy to perceive until you develop a meditative eye. One of the first places practitioners begin to discover this truth is in the body.

Most people sitting down to meditate for the first time feel that the body is quite solid. They sense the substantial earth element that Andrea spoke about this morning. The body feels definite, really there—after all, we've seen anatomy textbooks showing solid flesh and bones. But when you begin investigating with the eye of mindfulness that has been cultivated through close contact with the present moment, can you actually find anything solid within your direct experience of the body?

Can you locate any sensation that isn't characterized by impermanence on a momentary level? When you observe closely, even a strong sense of pressure—which normally gives us the impression of hardness and earth element—reveals fluctuations in intensity. You begin to feel it as waves of pressure, waves of intensity. This is even more apparent with the pulsing, vibrating, changing nature of what we typically consider neutral sensations in the body.

As you examine closely, you discover that the body has no solidity whatsoever. It's simply arising, changing, and passing away moment after moment after moment. This momentary, arising-and-passing nature characterizes everything that comes into existence. Everything we experience through the senses is continuously arising, changing, and passing moment by moment. This is what gives the world its fundamentally unsatisfactory nature—we cannot find anywhere solid to land because things don't exist in a solid, substantial way.

This is the essential message of emptiness: things do not exist in the solid and substantial manner we imagine them to. A few years ago, the Dalai Lama was giving teachings at Shoreline Theater in Mountain View, and several of us attended. It was a beautiful day in May—sunny, with lovely weather.

He was on this outdoor stage, if you know the Shoreline setup. A bunch of people were sitting in the seats, and then many of us were on the grassy field behind them. On the stage was His Holiness in a big, tall throne so that everybody could see him. He explained that the tall throne was not about making a big deal out of the individual or promoting the person—it was giving respect to the teachings. I thought that was interesting. It's not an egotistical thing.

He was on this big tall throne, and the stage was filled with nuns and monks from many different Buddhist traditions. There were the Tibetans with their bright red robes, Theravadans in their ochre to orange to yellow robes, Koreans in their gray, and Japanese Zen practitioners in their black. The stage was simply filled with all of them. Behind the Dalai Lama was a huge mural of the Potala, the palace where he used to live in Lhasa, kind of illuminated by the setting sun. It was nostalgic because you could just imagine the years when he was actually able to live there and teach from there and be considered the head of Tibet.

There was this splendid assembly, and we were all enjoying the weather and the teachings and, of course, his presence. It was kind of like a Buddhist Woodstock—no drugs going around, but otherwise it felt a lot like that vibe.

He was teaching on the Heart Sutra, which is one of the clear expressions of emptiness. When he got to this point, he took some time to go over it carefully. He said, "If you really want to help others come out of suffering, you have to understand all the reasons that they're suffering. It's pretty easy to see the pain of pain, the dukkha dukkha. It's pretty easy to see conceptually the pain of alternation, how things change. We can all get that. But it's not so easy to see this form of sankara dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of conditions. If you really want to help other people, you need to understand this also."

It's the most subtle of the three to see, and you need to understand it so that you can really know why people cannot find a solid happiness in this life. There is no solidity there. He said, "If you think that things are stable for a while and then change, that's not the right understanding. The right understanding is that things are falling apart moment after moment after moment. There is no ground in phenomenal existence."

This was expressed in a beautiful quote in the Discourses. This is actually a Brahma, a heavenly being who comes down and makes this comment. I love the way it is put: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." Form is a technical term—the Pali word is rupa. It's one of the five aggregates and it means the whole physical world. So when the word form is used here, it means physical matter or the physical world.

This is what we learn when we investigate the nature of the body with our meditative insight: it is chronically trembling. It is always shifting. It is never continuous.

This is one of the understandings of impermanence that comes through the practice in a retreat. The way these things fall apart was nicely summed up by Joseph Goldstein when he said, "If it's not one thing, it's another." Daily life is kind of like that, isn't it? You just get your relationship in place and then work falls apart. Or you just get work in place and then your kids do something. You know, you just get your kids together and your parents get ill. If it's not one thing, it's another.

This doesn't mean that it's not possible to be basically happy in the world. We all have this vulnerability, but there are a lot of basically happy people in the world. Some of them are Buddhists, some of them are not. Some of them are spiritual people and some of them are not. I find it so delightful and inspiring when I meet happy people, whether it's come out of a path of practice or some people just have it as a native temperament from birth. It's really delightful.

But I will say, looking at these happy people with my Buddhist glasses on, I see three qualities that they share. I want to suggest that these three qualities are kind of like a recipe for worldly happiness. If you want to pursue a path of normal worldly happiness, you can do it by developing these three qualities. And they are generosity, ethical conduct, and loving-kindness.

In Buddhism, these are considered the basis of wholesome worldly action. I think they provide a really good recipe for how to be happy in the world. And don't take my word for it, but check it out. When you meet people who have this native quality of happiness, see if they don't manifest these three areas: generosity, ethical conduct, and loving-kindness.

So this kind of happiness is available to us. It is changeable. And the Eightfold Path is designed to lead to a happiness that is not changeable. So it is a higher aspiration. And many beings have discovered it. Many beings have realized that happiness which is beyond change. I'll talk about one of those beings later in this talk.

So the Noble Truths, all of them, are not just nice philosophical propositions. They're all calls to action. Each of them has something for us to do about it. And the call to action for the First Noble Truth is it's to be understood. That is, the Noble Truth of suffering is to be, and the Buddha's words were, fully understood.

So if we're not fully enlightened, that means we haven't yet carried out that instruction to fully

understand the First Noble Truth. It sounds kind of easy, doesn't it? I mean, we can look through this definition. Yeah, I get it. Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Illness is suffering. I get that. I understand it. No. We haven't got it yet.

Because if we fully understood the truth of suffering, we wouldn't hang on. We wouldn't cling. That's the power in understanding fully the Noble Truth of suffering. We would understand that there is in all the conditioned world nothing suitable for hanging on to. That's the quote from the Buddha that Greg mentioned the other night. Nothing whatsoever should be clung to, is suitable to be clung to.

But we haven't got that yet. So things come along and they're attractive and so we go, it won't hurt to just go after that one. And so we go after that one, maybe we get it, and then it provides some happiness for a while and then you know what? It always goes poof. It always dissolves, whether it's the new car that loses its smell after a year or so or gets a few dings when you take it in the parking lot. Or it's a new relationship where after six months you realize the partner actually does have a flaw or two. Whatever it is, it doesn't keep that ability to satisfy.

So we cling to the next thing and then it satisfies for a little while and then it kind of goes poof. And you can see this in meditation. Oh, let me just arrange the body in a vertical way and the breath just at that point and a little bit of peace comes along and then it gets disturbed. Let me try again. I'll get it back again.

Or something that we're trying to avoid, some unpleasant thing comes on the horizon. Oh, no, I don't want to experience that. I've got to resist that. Meanwhile, it's still there, association with what is displeasing. It's still there, but we're resisting opening to it. But it's with us. We're feeling it. We're not liking it. We're resisting it to the very last moment, and then it goes. Oh, what was that all about? I didn't have to resist that so hard. It was going to go anyway. And yet we keep doing it, don't we?

Trying to maintain the association with what is pleasing, trying to push away any contact with what is displeasing. This is the struggle we're involved in. This is the round of birth and death that constitutes samsara on a moment-to-moment basis in our practice.

The Buddha put it this way: there is one thing, the not seeing of which keeps you bound, and that is dukkha. Because we keep clinging, we don't see how we keep clinging to what is eventually going to go. The going is its unsatisfactoriness, our clinging and its change is the dukkha.

So how can we open to this truth? How can we work with it? How can we understand it better? How can we relate? This is a very delicate point in practice, I think. Because if we don't open to this truth, we're really going to keep deluding ourselves.

We are a step ahead of the curve because we've seen it doesn't work in outside life, or we wouldn't be here. If we thought we could fix the problem in outside life, it's much more fun out there—we'd be there. But we've seen that, and so we're here.

But sometimes we might think we can solve the problem through generating different states in meditation. So we think, "Okay, if I develop mindfulness strongly enough and infuse it with some loving kindness and then really work on the concentration, I'm going to get to a steady state in my meditation and I'm just going to cruise for the rest of the month." Maybe not. But it's as though we bring that habit of acquisition into meditation and we imagine that we're going to, as we develop our skill, create kind of a cozy little plateau where we can wrap ourselves up with our meditative skills and our concentration and then that will last.

This is a little bit a continuation of what I call a Winnie the Pooh view of the world. You know how Christopher Robin went through his days. He could go out and have these kind of scary adventures in the woods with his friends—Winnie and Piglet and Eeyore and all of that. And then he'd come home at night and his mother would tuck him in and give him some hot chocolate, and then he'd go to bed like a good British lad would. It was all very safe.

But our world isn't quite like that. Our world isn't safe and cozy and predictable like that. Our world is kind of intense. It gets raw at times. It gets very vivid. And sometimes it is just really intense with issues of birth and death and aging and loss and everything else.

So the question really is, how do we stay in touch with that truth—this truth of the pervasive nature of dukkha—but not get it, not fix on it as a view? Because when we fix on it as a view, life is... it turns out something like "life is dukkha." And then we pick that up and we attach to that view and we carry it around like a burden. And if we have that view—life is dukkha—it will be felt as a burden and will develop a resistance and actually an aversion and a fear of life.

You can see this in some practitioners. They've taken the First Noble Truth and they've turned it into a view. The First Noble Truth is not meant to be a view or a belief. It's meant to be an insight. And insight is a living experience of the truth in this moment.

When we have a living insight into the nature of dukkha, it's liberating. Try it sometime. You're in some state of conflict. Things are painful. There's struggle. There's discord. Just name it: "Oh, this is dukkha." And see if that doesn't create some spaciousness, some impersonalizing, depersonalizing of the experience. And then drop it. When the dukkha goes, you drop it.

But if we carry around this view—"Oh, life is all suffering, it's all gloom, nobody's exempt, there's no way out, it's all meaningless, and then we die"—you'll get depressed. I would get depressed if I thought that.

So these are meant to be fresh insights that we discover through our investigation, not meant to become the way we take life to be.

We'll develop a sense of aversion and fear. So that's not skillful. But we want to keep touching into it, keep reminding ourselves. The Buddha put it this way: A bhikku is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is

not infatuated with that pleasure.

There's a great deal of pleasure available through our meditation practice—these states of calm, harmony, acceptance, loving-kindness, peace, relaxation, ease. They're all available moment by moment, and many of you are touching into them already. I know because I hear it in the interviews. There's a delight in our meditation practice that is actually much greater and more reliable than the delight of sense pleasures.

The Buddha didn't object to sense pleasures because they were morally repugnant. He pointed to their limitations because they're not capable of lasting satisfaction. And there's a higher kind of pleasure available through the Dhamma. So the pleasures of meditation are very sustaining, supporting, encouraging. They generate faith and point in the right direction. They're onward leading. They lead us to deeper wisdom, deeper freedom, and deeper happiness.

At the stage we're at, they're not totally consistent yet either, or totally reliable. But they lead in the direction of total reliability and freedom. So we appreciate the pleasure that comes from our Dhamma practice. We learn to cultivate it, grow it, and enjoy it.

And we don't shy away from the experience of suffering. I think the world is mad in a way because it has shied away from the experience of suffering. Freud said something really insightful about this. He said neurosis is basically the refusal to suffer. We're unwilling to open to suffering and so we choose neurotic pathways. We choose neurotic adjustments to keep from feeling this essential part of being alive.

But as a practitioner, suffering can be a great ally. I know it's not something that we welcome easily. It's not probably what you came to the retreat for, but I just ask each of you to reflect on your own practice. Has suffering ever been useful for you in your course of Dhamma? Has it ever brought you greater understanding? Has it made you look more deeply? Has it made you reflect on your actions, your choices, your motivations, your intentions? Has it taught you anything about what leads to happiness and what leads away from happiness? Have you developed courage in relation to difficulty? Have you developed compassion out of meeting your own pain? And has that compassion then translated to being touched by other people's pain?

Suffering has the power to do all these things. It leads most of us to the path in the first place. Some of us come to the path out of intellectual curiosity about a foreign religion, but that's usually not enough to sustain us through a month-long retreat or a two-month retreat. What sustains us is our faith that this practice can really help us come out of our own pain and sorrow. So it's our own suffering that has led to that understanding. It leads us into wisdom. It leads us into compassion. It leads us to that quality of faith because we've verified that the practice has the power to bring us out of suffering.

Otherwise, why could this be called a noble truth? So much of the world is in a state of suffering, and it's not very noble. Mostly in the world, suffering leads to more suffering. It does not lead to beauty. It does not lead to maturity. And it doesn't lead to dignity and nobility. In some cases it does. It's quite

amazing—the spiritual nature, I would say, of human beings, that for some people it does.

I'm thinking about Morgan Freeman. Morgan Freeman was born in 1937 and grew up in the state of Mississippi.

Imagine what it was like to be a black man in Mississippi in 1937. Do you think that was an easy path? Do you think that was a path of privilege? I don't think so. I'm sure he experienced many painful episodes of discrimination, abuse, prejudice, racism—maybe in some of its most violent forms. I don't know the details, but I'm sure he felt it.

He didn't become famous until he was fifty-two. It was that movie, *Driving Miss Daisy*, that really put him on the map. Since then, who has played God in more movies than any other actor? Morgan Freeman. Who has narrated more great nature documentaries? Morgan Freeman.

I really love his presence. Actually, Sally and I were at a play one evening on Broadway in New York City, and we're walking down the street after the play when who should come walking up the sidewalk toward us but Morgan Freeman. He was dressed in this very handsome black wool overcoat and had such dignity and such presence that I wouldn't have known anything else to do except to stand slightly aside and let him pass as a way of honoring him.

So out of that childhood, as difficult as it may have been, came a man with some of the greatest dignity and nobility that I've been around, that I've felt up close. Sometimes it happens, but for us it can happen because of our practice. We learn how to transmute this suffering into nobility.

After Ajahn Chah died in Thailand, the person who became the abbot of Wat Ba Pong—the monastery where he had been abbot for many years, where Jack Kornfield practiced with him and Ajahn Sumedho first practiced with him—was a teacher named Ajahn Liem, who is still alive and still the abbot of Wat Ba Pong.

Ajahn Liem was visiting this country a while ago, and some of the monks at Abhayagiri took him to visit the monastery of Ten Thousand Buddhas, which is also up there in Ukiah. The two abbots got to meet—the abbot of Ten Thousand Buddhas, who I think is Chinese, because it's a Chinese Mahayana lineage, and Ajahn Liem got to have a dialogue.

So the abbot of the Chinese monastery asked Ajahn Liem, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?"

Isn't that a great question? Only one practitioner would think to ask that question of another practitioner. What was the hardest thing in your practice?

Ajahn Liem thought for a moment. He said, "I think the hardest thing in my practice was fear." And then he paused. "But just to say it was the hardest thing isn't quite right. It doesn't really tell the story. It was my worthy opponent. Because without it, there wouldn't have been the growth in wisdom that I came to."

For all of us, whatever form our suffering takes, that's our worthy opponent. That is exactly where we grow.

If we're overwhelmed by the suffering, we need to find a way to change that around. We need to find lots of skillful means—whether it's loving-kindness practice or patience or a cup of tea in the dining hall or a walk in the hills and a gazing at the sky for a while. We need to find lots of skillful means to help us bear that suffering.

But then, when we have the strength, we really need to meet it. We need to touch it directly. And I would say we can even welcome it because it is the messenger of our own growth and therefore of our own movement to greater wisdom and toward freedom.

So suffering is an invaluable companion on this journey. And our attitude can become one of real welcoming of it. Let me learn. Our attitude is: let me learn from this.

Ajahn Chah put it this way: there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. What makes the difference is this willingness to learn—the willingness to open and the willingness to learn.

So this is our call. We can't understand suffering at arm's length. We can't understand it from a book. We've got to understand it from direct, immediate contact and, to some degree, resolution. We have to understand what led us into it. We have to understand how we're hooked into it.

And we have to understand in our direct experience how to release it. We can't do that except by meeting it head on.

So meditation practice will lead us in one of two directions at different moments. It will lead us into great states of peace and ease and relaxation and insight and warmth and loving kindness. That will come. Those moments are very helpful for giving us the confidence and strength that we're looking for.

Or it will lead us into moments of struggle, of difficulty, of some kind of pain, of conflict, difficult emotions relating with body pain. Then we have the opportunity to develop our insight further, to expand our field of compassion and understanding, to learn how to relate to that suffering and how to release it.

So whichever is showing up for you on any particular day, in any particular sitting or walking, in any particular moment, whether it's ease or difficulty, both are really helpful on this path. Both are great sources of learning. They're sources of strength and sources of wisdom.

You know where the Four Noble Truths goes from here. As we fully understand the way dukkha works, we learn to let go, and that means we are letting go of craving. What I think Greg talked about is the abandoning of craving. And then as we abandon craving, we find that the mind moves into the reduction or the end of suffering, which is pointed to by the Third Noble Truth. And it's by following the Eightfold Path, the Fourth Noble Truth, that all of that takes place.

But this question about the end of suffering—it's a really interesting question today. I hear it from people. Is there anybody today who's fully awakened and has really brought suffering to a complete end? Does that still happen in this world? And I think it does.

So I want to close by reading you an excerpt from the biography of Ajahn Liem, who is now the abbot of Wat Ba Pong. In it he describes in his own words his meditation experience during a rains retreat when Ajahn Chah was his teacher. This is from 1969.

Around the middle of the rainy season of 1969, Ajahn Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity. So Ajahn Liem increased his efforts and as he did so, the results became evident. And the rest of this is a direct quote from Ajahn Liem:

"Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and 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. The body felt cool, a coolness effusing the whole body, an experience of the whole body becoming completely light and at ease, cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness. The body felt tranquil, cool, and light.

"This experience continued on throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years, all from that one time. It feels like there are no sankhāras, no proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before, the kilesas concerning sexual desire, or all kinds of ambitions that I had 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 changes."

So let's just sit together for a few minutes and let the words settle. "All the suffering that arises with kilesas that had bothered me before, I don't know where they all disappeared to. There isn't anything to be concerned about. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like."

Thank you for listening.

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