Delighting in the Wholesome

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:42

The subject of tonight's talk is delighting in the wholesome.

At the end of the second day, as Sally pointed to last night, it's quite easy to remember that what you are undertaking is not an easy thing to do. With a week-long retreat, you can kind of blast through because the end is in sight. But when you start a month-long retreat, the end is too far out there. You lose track of it. You get into a month-long retreat and you can't see the end. It's sort of like you're here forever, for a while. It's going to feel like this retreat goes on forever, and that presents its own challenges and difficulties on top of the normal retreat experience.

I remember coming to the end of my first month-long retreat. There was one fellow who was finishing at the same time, and he'd gotten to the center a couple of months before me. I thought, "Wow, he's been practicing for months longer than I have. He must be really far along by now." So at the end of the retreat, I went up and asked him the only thing I really wanted to know: "Does it get any easier?" He said, "Not as far as I can tell."

But that was just after a few months. After a number of years, I can tell you it gets a lot easier, and retreats become a lot more delightful than painful. But it takes a while. You just have to trust in the evolution of the practice.

Even for veteran meditators, when we go into retreat, at some point we usually get challenged to the limit of what we can do or hold or bear. It challenges our patience, our courage, our determination, and our ability to tolerate what's going on. Because of that, often in retreats during the first days, I would find myself thinking, "What would I rather be doing?" The list got fairly long—there are many things I would really rather have fun doing than this.

But the good news is we're here because we want to come out of suffering. If you're able to bear the difficulties and pain of the retreat experience, this experience does lead us out of suffering. It's just a question of whether we can stand it while it's going on, and whether we can find the inner resources to bear it. If we can—and I'm confident all of you will for the time you're here—you're going to feel at the end what it has brought you. It brings such great gifts that don't come any other way that I know of.

In tonight's talk, as in Sally's talk last night on mindfulness, I want to remind us why we're doing this and what we're up to in being here, because it does take a lot of work. Classically, this is a factor of the path. Effort is one of the path factors in the meditation section of the Eightfold Path, and it means, in classical terms, letting go of what we can that's unwholesome and developing what we can that's wholesome in the

mind. It's those wholesome factors that lead us into happiness and eventually into freedom.

At several times in my practice lifetime, I've spent time with Tibetan teachers whom I really appreciate for the breadth of their vision and the openness of their hearts. I had the opportunity to practice with Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who was one of the great Dzogchen masters of the past century, while he was still alive, and took refuge with him in that lineage.

When you take refuge with a Tibetan teacher, you get a Tibetan name. My name was Urgyen Sandrul—Urgyen after him and his lineage, and Sandrul as the second word. Sandrul is the Tibetan word that corresponds to our word virya, which means energy for the practice. It's one of the factors of enlightenment, so it's a really important factor—energetic effort, something like that. But the way they understand it in Tibetan, it means delighting in what is wholesome.

So the energy that we apply to the practice is to delight in what is wholesome. That's all of what we're doing here, and that's what I want to talk about tonight: What are we doing here?

And I think we can all agree, whatever your aspiration, whatever your view of your Dharma practice, what we all share—demonstrated by our commitment to being here—is a deep love for what is wholesome. Without that deep love, you could not sustain yourself for a month's retreat or for a journey of a lifetime on the path. So let us all together delight in what is wholesome that we're doing here together.

While I was on retreat recently, I stepped back and took a high-level view of what practice is about for me and therefore what I understand teaching to be for. And things got really simple in a way that I wondered if I'm deluding myself. So I'm just going to tell you what I think. This is not from the Pali Canon. It's just from my own thoughts. See what you think of it.

It occurred to me that everything that we do in our practice and everything that we as teachers say to you is for one or more of three aims. There are really just three things I think that we're doing here.

The first is to brighten the mind. Brightening the mind means bringing about clearly wholesome qualities that bring joy, that bring energy, that uplift our spirits, that give us confidence and the energy to carry out this path. So that's the first part. Some instructions are to brighten the mind.

Another set of instructions has to do with finding inner peace. This is one of the greatest immediate benefits of our meditation practice. We find access to levels of peace that most people only touch for moments in a busy daily life. But we find a way to access them regularly and more and more to rest there, to abide with that peace. And that peace brings a great quality of contentment into our life.

And the third thing is that we are trying to understand more deeply the nature of things. We want to understand the nature of our human experience in a deeper way because ultimately it's the wisdom of seeing the way things are that frees our hearts and minds.

So I'm going to suggest that you think about your practice in these terms: brightening the mind, finding

greater inner peace, and developing understanding. And you might keep these in mind over the whole month and see if they resonate for you. See if these are in fact where your practice is heading. All of these three are very wholesome factors. And they are factors that grow directly out of our meditation practice.

I also think that the first level of brightening the mind might be sufficient for finding what I'd call normal human happiness. There is a way of being happy and content in the world that's available to anyone who develops these factors of brightening the mind. And I'll talk more about the details when we get into that topic.

And then the qualities of peace and insight are really on another track, which is more than normal human happiness. It's the path to liberation. It's the path to really freeing the mind from the deepest roots of human suffering or the suffering of sentient beings.

So as I think of it, there are these two directions that one can take meditation practice and Dharma practice. One is toward normal human happiness and there are specific practices for that. And the other is to liberation and as much freedom as you care to reach and there are practices for that. And so one can orient one's path in one direction or both directions.

In fact, if you orient your path to liberation, to freeing the heart and mind, you will cultivate the qualities for normal human happiness as you go. So you might almost say that normal human happiness is a side benefit of the path to liberation. But if your approach is more about just finding a happy life in the world, then there is a way for that as well.

Both paths are respected in the Buddhist tradition. It's not that you have to sign up for the PhD course in our practice. Both paths are respected and wonderful things to do because bringing a life into the world that is a genuinely happy life is a great contribution to the world. The world needs your happiness. It needs your care and positive energy. It seems like especially now, but I don't know that the world has ever been any different. But certainly it needs it now. It feels to me like we're going through a dark era right now. But maybe it's always felt like that. I'm not sure.

All right, so I want to talk a little more about both of these directions. First, the path of brightening the mind.

The Buddha said that there are three activities that are what he called the bases for meritorious action. That means action that's really, really wholesome to do. So one of these is giving. One of these is virtue or sila or ethical conduct, whatever you'd like to call it.

And the person I was talking to about organizing this said, "Oh yes, that's wonderful. A lunch for the whole monastery would cost about $35."

$35 to feed 750 people lunch! I was just astonished. I said, "Well, my donor gave me several hundred dollars. What else could we offer?" And he said, "Well, we could sponsor lunch for a week, or we could

sponsor breakfast and lunch for several days."

So we ended up sponsoring meals for quite a while with this donation. But what really struck me was the simplicity of their needs and how little it took to make such a meaningful offering.

And then I got to witness something extraordinary during my time there. Every single day, laypeople would come to the monastery to offer food. Not just once in a while - every single day. There would be families, individuals, sometimes groups of people who would arrive with enormous pots of rice, curries, vegetables, fruit. They would come at dawn to prepare the meal, and they would serve it to all 750 people with such joy and devotion.

I watched grandmothers bent over from age still insisting on serving the monks their food personally. I watched families who clearly didn't have very much materially speaking offer what they could with such genuine happiness. Children would come with their parents, learning this practice of generosity from the earliest age.

And what was so moving was to see how much joy it brought them. They weren't giving reluctantly or out of obligation. They were radiant. There was this quality of delight in their giving that was unmistakable.

This is what the Buddha was pointing to when he talked about dana as a basis for meritorious action. Generosity naturally brightens the mind. When we give - whether it's our time, our resources, our attention - something in us opens up. The tight, grasping quality of the mind relaxes. We feel connected to something larger than our small self and its endless wanting.

And it doesn't have to be dramatic gestures. It can be as simple as offering your seat on the bus, bringing flowers from your garden to a friend, volunteering an hour at a food bank, or listening deeply when someone needs to be heard. The scale matters much less than the spirit behind it.

Seven hundred and fifty people—about four hundred monks, one hundred and fifty nuns, and the rest a mix of laywomen and laymen. So we thought it would be nice to offer a lunch.

As you know, Burma is one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth. Because of the corrupt military dictatorship that has taken all the funds, they're rich in natural resources, but these have been controlled by the dictators and their cronies. So the people are very poor, generally very poor. And this monastery was out in the country.

I spoke with the clerk of the monastery, wanting to offer a lunch for dana, and he said, "I'm sorry, all lunches have already been sponsored for the next three months." The poorest country—one of the poorest countries on the face of the earth—and people had already pledged to provide lunches for seven hundred and fifty practitioners because they so valued what those people were doing.

Every day, I would come down for the meal, and there was a big whiteboard with the name of the family or village—sometimes it would be a whole clan that had offered the lunch for that day, because it was not

cheap feeding seven hundred and fifty people. The donors would be sitting off to the side, watching the monks and nuns go through the line and fill their bowls with the food they had provided. Many of them were rural villagers who came dressed in their best clothes, and they would be so happy to witness this. They'd see Pauk Sayadaw, the head of the line—a monk with basically sixty years in robes, an acknowledged master all over the country—as the first to take his meal from their offering. And they would look so happy.

So this is the joy and the brightening that generosity gives. Where Buddhism has been implanted in the culture for a long time, you really feel this very strongly. The reason it's such an important part of dharma practice is that we might represent clinging or attachment like this with a closed fist, and generosity is the open fist that offers what we have to share with others. So it actually is a practice that undoes grasping and clinging and attachment. It also generates empathy because it makes us tune into other people's situations. We have to think about the needs of the people that we're offering to. And that brings happiness in itself.

I don't know if you see it this way, but one of the reasons I love the holiday season—whether it's Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa, they all are connected with giving gifts—is that it's a time of year when a lot of us are thinking about what we can get to give somebody that they will really enjoy having. And I find there's just this uplift of spirit around those times because of the practice of generosity. Of course, as a kid, I felt an uplift of spirit from a different motive, but the adults seemed happier then too, so that was nice.

If you think about giving to someone or think about a gift that you've given that was appreciated, how does it make you feel? You feel bright, don't you? Feel happy, a little bit uplifted. That's the beauty of generosity.

The second part of the brightening practice is about ethical conduct, or sila, sometimes called virtue. I don't think there's a great word in English to translate this quality, so I'm going to use the word sila a lot. That's the Pali term for it. Virtue sounds a little Victorian, and ethical conduct sounds a little too much like it came out of a philosophy class, so I just kind of like sila.

We took the five precepts together when we arrived, and this is the basis for sila for us as laypeople. Monks and nuns take many more precepts than this, but for us this is a good start. It involves, as you know, the commitment to not killing, not taking what isn't given, not using our sexuality in ways that will harm others, not speaking falsely, and not using drugs and intoxicants that cause heedlessness for us.

These are called and understood in our tradition not as commandments but as training precepts. In other words, we undertake these as part of dharma training to learn the habit of being considerate in our conduct. Sometimes it's not our natural inclination. There are many times when the forces in our own heart of greed, aversion, and delusion would lead us to break these precepts. But because we've taken the precepts as commitments, we restrain the acting out of greed, aversion, and delusion, which can cause suffering to us and suffering to others. So we hold back or restrain these forces from the mind that can

cause harm so they don't come out in actions.

But we know we're not going to do it perfectly because these forces are strong in us. So we don't take the precepts thinking that we're going to keep them perfectly. We take them knowing we're going to break them. But that's okay because then we learn, "Oh, this is what happens if I don't follow the precept." So they're kind of like our educators. They're our guidelines to learn from. We just do the best we can. It protects others and in that it protects us also.

We were at a Christmas gathering with some friends and the invitation was just tossed out: "Do you have an aspiration for the new year?" This could be like a resolution, but being Buddhists, we tend not to take resolutions. So our aspiration—we were just asked to state our aspirations. Just on the spur of the moment, I said, "I'd like to go through the year without getting verbally angry at anybody." And so that's my intention or aspiration for the year. So far, so good, but we're only a month in. And United Airlines came really close to testing me on that one.

But so far, so good.

So we take the precepts to avoid causing suffering to others, and it benefits us as well. This is from the Buddha again: "The purpose of sila is for freedom from remorse." That means we don't reflect on our actions and feel bad about what we've done. And freedom from remorse is for gladness. So when we can look back at our actions and feel we haven't done things in violation of the precepts, that also brightens the mind. That brings a quality of joy to the mind.

And then the sequence goes on. The purpose of gladness is to let us settle into the present moment, and settling into the present moment is to see things as they are, and seeing things as they are is to awaken. So sila ties directly into the path of awakening.

Here's another thing the Buddha said about this. He said there are four kinds of bliss available to lay people. I think there are more, but here are his four: having enough money to get by, enjoying the money that we have, not being in debt, and being free of blame in our conduct. And he said of these, the greatest is the bliss of blamelessness—the bliss of reviewing our conduct and feeling it was not blameworthy.

The third of the brightening factors is loving-kindness. You could say generally it's about developing a really good heart. And loving-kindness is a good place to start. Loving-kindness leads naturally into other qualities like compassion and joy. So we see it as a beginning, and then it develops further.

All the brahmaviharas, which I think Bonnie introduced this afternoon, are states that uplift the heart and mind and bring gladness and brightness to us. So it's interesting, isn't it? Because metta is the quality of caring about ourselves, yes, but also others. It's interesting that caring about others brightens our own mind. This is an interesting thing to learn about—that caring about others brings satisfaction, fulfillment, gladness to ourselves. That's a beautiful discovery.

Once we have developed these qualities like love, compassion, and joy, if we practice them a lot, they get stronger, and then they become allies in times of difficulty. There are going to be times that we need the support of love, compassion, and joy. And if we've developed them well, that brightness of mind will be a really good ally for us.

To continue the Burma monastery story: I ordained at the start of the rains retreat. I was right back in robes, very quickly. I didn't have much time to adjust to the environment. And in the years since I had not been a monk, I'd sort of forgotten how to tie my robes. You may know that if you're wearing Theravadan robes, it's basically just a big sheet that you've learned to wrap around yourself and tie with a kind of sleeve. Part of it gets formed into a sleeve, but that's a roll that can easily roll off your left shoulder. So that was happening to me.

It's called the Rains Retreat for a reason. So the first two weeks that I was there, I hardly saw the sun. I think it was raining on average three inches a day. The meditation hall was about a fifteen-minute walk uphill from my cottage, so I had to do that something like six times a day for the scheduled sittings.

The practice was difficult. We were doing meditation on the breath just at the upper lip. This was the only place one was allowed to go twenty-four hours a day if you were awake that much. In sitting, in walking, and in anything else, we were just following the breath here. There was no other instruction. I came to Sayadaw and I said, "Well, what about when hindrances come up?" He said, "Oh, if you're sleepy, pull your earlobe. And if you're having aversion, do some metta. Otherwise, just stay here." So it was a very narrow focus. You couldn't really go to explore emotions, much less do loving-kindness or beam out energy at the trees. So that was very narrow.

The schedule was difficult. We were sitting eight hours a day. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half. The longest sitting was two hours. The biggest spider I'd ever seen in my life was building a huge web right on the porch of my cottage, which I'd see every time I went out.

In those moments of struggle, walking back from the dining hall in the rain, juggling my bowl and umbrella while Burmese devotees bowed by the muddy path, everything felt overwhelming. The meditation practice wasn't progressing as I had hoped—it was adequate, but far from inspiring. When I asked the Sayadaw about working with hindrances, his only advice was to "pull your earlobes," which felt insufficient for the depth of discouragement I was experiencing.

I had brought with me a photograph of the Dalai Lama, who represents for me one of the most inspiring human beings I have ever encountered. This image sat on a small altar I had created in my cottage. In my moment of greatest need, I turned to him with genuine supplication. "Your Holiness," I said, "I'm really struggling now. Do you have any advice for me?"

What happened next was extraordinary. An answer came, crystal clear and unmistakably in his voice—that distinctive, high-pitched, Indian-accented English that is so characteristic of his speech. I could

hear him perfectly: "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the transmission ended.

The wisdom of these words struck me immediately. When would staying cheerful, optimistic, and confident not be helpful? This became my refuge during the remaining difficult moments. When discouragement arose, I would remind myself: stay cheerful, stay optimistic, stay confident. It will work out. While I couldn't always remember what cheerfulness actually felt like, this guidance provided an anchor.

What made this practice accessible was my previous cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, and joy. Because I had spent time developing these wholesome mental factors, I retained some memory of their texture and quality. Even in my depleted state, I could sometimes call these bright states back into awareness.

This points to something profound about the practices of dana, sila, and metta—generosity, ethics, and loving-kindness. These practices genuinely bring brightness to the mind. When sustained over time, they create an ever-increasing sense of happiness and well-being. But what's most significant is that all three are fundamentally relational practices.

These are not solitary exercises conducted in isolation. They are practices that unfold in relationship—with other beings, with people, with animals, with life itself. They connect us to the web of existence, and it is precisely through these connections that brightness emerges. This is not merely coincidental; it reveals something essential about the nature of happiness and spiritual development. The sources of true brightness are found not in withdrawal from the world, but in our compassionate engagement with it.

And because they're relational practices, they're available to anybody. You don't have to be Buddhist to do these. You can find these same expressions, the importance of these, in all major religions that carry these as important values. This is also why some of these practices are getting so widespread in the world. Mindfulness is becoming—it's the new yoga. Just as yoga was in the nineties, mindfulness is now. It's in hospitals, it's in schools, it's in prisons, it's in sports.

This is a quote from Steve Kerr, the coach of the Golden State Warriors: "There are four values I try to instill in my team. They are joy, mindfulness, compassion, and competition." When I read that, I thought he was channeling James. I thought he'd taken James' Awakening Joy course when he said that. Of course, we don't have to do competition, but if you want to get into it... no, we won't go there.

Those are the qualities that brighten the mind. If you think about people you know who are truly happy, see if they don't embody generosity, conduct, and loving-kindness. In my experience, they do. These are the sources of human happiness.

Then we have this whole other track that's about freeing the mind. Of course, all of you are here for a long

retreat, a month or two months. We're going to talk a lot about freeing the mind. We're going to assume that this is a track that you're interested in and a track that we will be encouraging you to be interested in for the time that you're here.

To the extent that we walk it, we free the mind to that extent. It can be walked to such an extent that the mind becomes fully liberated. In our tradition, that means from the forces—the internal forces of greed, of hatred, and of delusion. This is possible for a human being: to liberate the mind to that extent that those forces no longer operate within us.

The first of these I mentioned was the deep sense of peace. Traditionally, this is called the development of samatha. I think Sally mentioned that this morning. Samatha is usually translated as tranquility or serenity. The development of insight, which is the complementary half of that, is called vipassana. That's the name given to our meditation practice generally and is translated as insight meditation—the understanding that seeing things as they are is what frees the mind.

The Buddha said that this freedom from greed, hatred, and delusion is the highest form of happiness. This is what he called nibbana. This is where the path of mindfulness and the Eightfold Path is leading. It's heading in that direction. We can choose to walk it as far as we want, but for all of us, that's the direction that it's going in when we apply the factors of the Eightfold Path.

Let me talk briefly about the quality of peace and the quality of insight by focusing on two factors in the path. With peace, I want to talk about the path factor called Right Concentration, samma samadhi. This refers to a mind that has become composed, collected and stable in the present moment.

You've all experienced this to greater or lesser degrees. When you feel yourself really arrive in the present moment and you can connect with two or three breaths in a row and thoughts aren't shoving you away out of the moment for a while, that is the first indicator of this quality of samadhi or collectedness. I invite you to examine that experience because I think what you'll find is there's a strength and a stability in that way of being that is very satisfying, because it is starting to touch into this quality of inner peace. It gives the mind a great source of strength and that is satisfying.

Concentration develops just from frequent moments of mindfulness. The more continuous the moments of mindfulness are, the sooner the quality of steadiness will develop. You don't have to press for concentration. You don't have to think, "Oh, I'm going to try for concentration now." All you have to do is be mindful in each moment when you have a choice. The moments of mindfulness do the work of concentration.

Concentration can't be willed, can't be forced, can't be brought about by active volition. But by volition, you can pay attention. And moments of paying attention lead to this quality of being present.

This is just like a law of gravity—this is the way it happens. So don't think, "I can't do this. I'll never know concentration; it's beyond me." All you have to do is be mindful as much as you can, and this will develop.

I love this quote from Joseph's first teacher, Munindraji: "If you sit and know that you're sitting, the whole of the Dharma will unfold for you." This is the trust in mindfulness, just simple mindfulness. So this will bring about that sense of stillness and peace that then becomes the foundation for understanding. When the mind is still, it can see more clearly.

The insight piece is about understanding the nature of things. In the Eightfold Path, it's represented by the first two path factors, which are right view and right intention. Of these, I want to talk specifically about right view. It's the first step in the Eightfold Path, and it's the most important. All the eightfold path is there to generate the factor of right view. But we have to start with it so that we get on the right track from the beginning. Then everything else feeds into it. Concentration feeds into seeing things the way they are.

Classically, right view is defined as understanding the Four Noble Truths. Sometimes it's a little tricky—what does right view mean? Think of it as understanding the Four Noble Truths. We'll talk a lot more about these as we go, but the Four Noble Truths are suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to the end of suffering. Obviously, suffering and its end are the aim of the Eightfold Path. That's what the path is all about. That's what the Buddha's liberation teachings are all about.

Of course, this is a big field. The field of suffering is huge in our world, and it's always been huge. I want to read this from a research project: "According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1200-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 identified by just their initials for the purpose of the survey 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 afterward, 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."

So, science confirming what we already know. You may feel like this sometimes—life is just too hard, or practice is just too hard. Unfortunately, your chance of getting something in the mail has gone away. Too bad.

The Four Noble Truths are all about understanding suffering and coming to its end. But the noble truths are not just things that we believe in. These aren't just concepts that we're supposed to adopt. The Four Noble Truths are calls to action, and every truth has its own call and its own action.

The first noble truth, the truth of suffering—the Buddha said it's to be understood. That's our call: to understand what creates suffering. Of course we want to understand it for ourselves. Where does our own personal suffering originate from? How is it created and maintained? This is a key focus for our practice during this period, during this month or two months. How does suffering arise in our direct experience,

moment by moment? This is our call, especially on retreat. You all have generated the time and space in your life to devote to the examination of this question: How can I understand suffering and therefore hopefully release it?

In the world, and to some extent here too, we want to understand this on a broader level, not just our personal suffering. We also want to understand the social suffering and the suffering in the world that is avoidable if we understand correctly. I think some of the really important issues of our time involve understanding how our attitudes, which we haven't examined closely, may be helping to perpetuate racial injustice in the world.

For all of us to understand how our actions and our use of resources are contributing to the climate crisis that could overwhelm many human beings, many creatures, and change the environment for a long time to come. For us all to understand how our habits of eating are landing on the animals who have some role in the production of that food. What is the suffering like in their realm as they are slaughtered or as they are used for milk or eggs? These too are the direct result of our own actions.

So we want to understand these issues socially and in the world, and in retreat we especially want to look at our own suffering.

The second part, the second noble truth, tells us that the cause of suffering is to be abandoned, and that is identified as craving. So we are encouraged to abandon craving, which is a synonym for greed, hatred, and delusion. They cover the same ground. We're asked: how can we give up greed? How can we give up hatred? How can we give up confusion? First comes the acknowledgment that these are forces in our own hearts and minds. We are being asked to give up deep forces that are part of us.

There's this very moving scene in the movie *Kundun*, Scorsese's film about the life of the Dalai Lama. In it, he shows the young Dalai Lama being tutored when he still lived in the Potala Palace before the invasion of his country. His tutors were grilling him on the meaning of the second noble truth.

"The second noble truth is the cause of suffering is craving," he said.

"No, no, no, make it more personal. What does it mean to you?"

"The second noble truth—that's because I have craving."

"No, no, no, that's too general. What does it mean to you?"

Finally he said, "The cause of most of my suffering are the habits of my own mind."

"Oh, very good. Very good."

This is the pointer of the second noble truth. The cause of most of our suffering comes from the habits of our own mind. In this retreat we'll be led to see this again and again.

Now our own mind may have been shaped by forces way beyond our control or wish. It may have been shaped by childhood abuse or mistreatment, by prejudice and discrimination and the oppression of racism, by gender discrimination, homophobia—all sorts of forces in the world have shaped our minds. The world is generally not going to fix that. To fix that, we are going to have to look at what we have been left with. This is the area of the second noble truth.

The third noble truth is that the end of suffering is to be realized. This applies both long term—we are to realize the complete end of suffering in our path—but in the short term, any time we're suffering, that end of suffering is to be realized, is to be reached. How does that happen? By abandoning craving.

So in any moment in which craving has gripped us—which is the second noble truth, causing suffering—can we learn to release that and move temporarily into the third noble truth, the opening to freedom from that particular instance of craving? In this way, the third noble truth, the truth of the freedom from suffering, gets realized again and again and again in our practice. That's what we're here for: to learn how to move from the second noble truth to the third noble truth, from being caught to being free.

The way to the end of this suffering is the Eightfold Path, which we've talked about some and will continue to talk about. Specifically here, the development of the meditation portion supported by sila, leading to wisdom.

So, Right View. Sariputta, one of the Buddha's two great disciples, said that there are two conditions for the arising of Right View. The first is hearing the voice of another. That's all he said, but I find this really interesting. What I understand it to mean is we hear the voice of a spiritual friend or a teacher who comes from Right View. We hear someone like the Buddha or disciples speaking the correct understanding.

What this means to me is that Right View is contagious. We get it from other people. We get it from people who have walked the path before us and who have gone further on the path than we have. By listening to them and their understanding of the world, themselves, us, the path, and practice, that draws us into alignment with Right View—which is, as I understand it, the way the Buddha saw the world and saw our situation, centered around the Four Noble Truths. How do we orient our lives around suffering and its end as calls to action?

This is what Right View is about—orienting our lives around these truths. And this is the best environment I know of to do that. So, continuing to really listen as we attempt to talk about these truths as best as we understand them and can communicate them. Not that you have to agree with us on everything, but just to understand that part of what we're trying to do is share right view and align us all in that direction.

The second part is wise attention. Wise attention means: is your attention going into something that's going to be helpful for you? Because where we give our attention, there we give our energy. There we invest our care and the resources of our heart and mind. So a simple question is, where was your

attention today? Was it on the Four Noble Truths? Could you see the suffering of the moment as a noble truth? Or was it going into a lot of thinking about personal problems?

Personal problems naturally arise—they have kind of the pull of gravity when we get into silence. If you've chipped a part of your tooth off, your tongue goes looking for it all the time, just keeps wanting to feel that chip that's absent. Personal problems are like that. When there's a personal problem in our mind, thoughts want to go there and try to figure it out. But thinking seldom gets us through personal problems. What tends to get us through personal problems is dropping to a deeper level of silence and having a new understanding.

So I want to recommend that as thoughts come up centering around personal problems, see if you can say, "Not now." Return the attention to the present moment. Giving attention to the present moment is wise attention, even if the attention is on a hindrance. In this moment, I'm feeling confused. Good. Mindfulness knows confusion. In this moment, I'm feeling worry. Good. Mindfulness knows worry. This is wise attention. But dwelling with thoughts isn't so helpful. We want to learn not to give all our attention in that direction.

So this is the unfolding of Right View and the Eightfold Path. And this is the way to free the mind, either a little bit or all the way. One of the things people ask, in retreat and in daily life, is: is that really possible, to free the mind all the way? Which is asking, is full enlightenment a real possibility today?

I want to close with this reading from the autobiography of a teacher named Ajahn Liem. Ajahn Liem is the current abbot of Wat Ba Pong in Thailand, which is the monastery founded by Ajahn Chah, who was Jack Kornfield's teacher and Ajahn Sumedho's teacher. This is a story of his practice when he was a monk under Ajahn Chah, going back to the year 1969. Ajahn Liem is older now, but this is from his practice when he was a younger monk, still practicing under the direction of Ajahn Chah.

"Around the middle of the rainy season, Luang Por Chah—Luang Por just means spiritual father, another word for Ajahn—encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity, so Ajahn Liem increased his efforts, and results became evident. Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit in 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 were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused 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. 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.

"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. The experience of this feeling has lasted continuously all the time since then."

There has been no change all the way up to the present day."

Let us sit together for a moment and allow these words to settle deeply within us. "Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any." This same state continues to last—stable, continuous, and without change.

What we have witnessed in Luang Por Chah's account is nothing less than the complete transformation that comes with the ending of suffering. This is not a temporary peak experience or a fleeting glimpse of peace, but the permanent establishment of the unconditioned. The kilesas that had tormented him simply vanished, leaving behind a peace that knows no disturbance.

When he says "questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any," we hear the voice of one who has crossed to the far shore. This is not the absence of pain or discomfort in the body, but the complete extinction of the mental suffering that comes from our resistance to life as it is. The heart that was once agitated by the endless arising and passing of phenomena now rests in unshakeable equanimity.

This teaching reminds us of what is truly possible through the path of Dhamma. It points beyond the gradual reduction of suffering to its complete cessation. Luang Por Chah's experience stands as a beacon, showing us that the Buddha's promise of liberation is not metaphorical but utterly real and achievable.

As we reflect on these words, let them inspire our own practice. The same potential for complete freedom lies within each of us, waiting to be uncovered through patient cultivation of mindfulness, wisdom, and letting go. The peace that Luang Por Chah found—stable, continuous, and unchanging—is the birthright of every sincere practitioner who follows the path to its ultimate completion.

May his example encourage us to practice with unwavering dedication, knowing that the goal is not merely the management of suffering, but its total transcendence.

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