Third Noble Truth & Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:49

Tonight I'd like to talk about the Third Noble Truth and conjoin it with the topic of Nibbāna. We're going to have two talks on this topic, and tonight what I want to do is present an overview of the classical meaning of Nibbāna as it's found in the discourses of the Buddha. At times this may seem a little theoretical to you or a little remote, but then Carol tomorrow night is going to talk about how we can make it approachable and relevant in our own practice and find elements of this quality in our direct experience here and now. So we'll have both a theoretical background, an overview, and then tomorrow night a more practical approach to the Third Noble Truth.

You remember we talked last time about the Buddha leaving home at age twenty-nine, embarking on this quest for what he called "the unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless security from bondage"—Nibbāna. He found what he was looking for on the night of his awakening under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

There was a poem that he spontaneously uttered right after his awakening. It goes like this:

"Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridge pole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving."

His comment is "painful is birth again and again." He's reflecting on the thousands and thousands of lives that he saw that he had lived in this cycle, and the attendant dukkha in each one. In this evening's insight, he had found a way to be free of all that. The house that he was talking about—the builder of this house—the house is the body that takes birth again and again. The house builder is craving. The ridge pole that gets shattered is ignorance. Then as he says, "my mind has attained the unconditioned." Unconditioned is a synonym for Nibbāna and "reached the very end of craving."

This brings us back to the statement of the Third Noble Truth that we talked about on the first full day of the retreat: "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."

Through the poem and the Third Noble Truth, we are getting this equation, this correspondence between the Third Noble Truth, the end of suffering, the end of craving, Nibbāna, and the unconditioned. What we want to do in this talk is explore all these different ways of talking about the Third Noble Truth and how they relate.

This brings us immediately to the question: what is Nibbāna? I'd say that this is the hardest topic to talk about in all of Buddhism. Yet fools will rush in where angels fear to tread, and so I'm going to talk about it tonight.

It's hard because, one, the Buddha was deliberately vague on the details here. He didn't want to paint detailed pictures of it, because people could get a misleading impression from words. He just wanted to show people the way, and then when people followed the way, they would find it and know for themselves what it is.

A second thing is that the ultimate kind of experience that one can have in religious terms is beyond words. All the great religious traditions say this, and this is true in Buddhism also. Different people will put words to the insight into Nibbāna, but the descriptions may sound different. It's very interesting to listen to two different teachers describe it, and you'll hear entirely different descriptions, and yet both may have undergone similar degrees of liberation. The descriptions and the views on what constitute it will differ, but the liberations can be the same.

It is indescribable. The ultimate cannot be put into words because words discriminate, and the ultimate is beyond discrimination. The Buddha said this about it: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand. It's subtle, to be experienced by the wise."

The talk tonight may not be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So don't try too hard to figure it out. This is not really a conceptual thing. Get the feeling of it. Let the feeling come through. Even though some of the descriptions may seem a little remote right now, let the principle of it guide your practice. I'll explain some practice directions tonight. Carol will talk about more tomorrow.

The literal meaning of the term Nibbāna is extinguishing or blowing out or quenching. It's a fire that has been put out. Now, when a fire is put out, where is it to be found? It's nowhere, is it? It ceased to be. So the fire in this case is the fire of clinging or of craving.

And when it is extinguished, it's gone. The mind experiences a great coolness that is the relief from the burning energy of craving or clinging. So nibbana is often described in terms of coolness and peace—this is the experience of it.

Sariputta gave perhaps the most concise description of it in all of the suttas when he said, "The destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbana." We realize that craving encompasses greed, aversion, and delusion. When craving is destroyed, these tendencies of mind, these deep-rooted unconscious tendencies are also ended.

So the one who has released greed, aversion, and delusion has come into a state of great freedom. These forces no longer afflict one. Craving no longer afflicts one. Suffering no longer afflicts one. And the experience is one of a great freedom—unshakable freedom.

Nirvana is pointing to a state of mind of an enlightened being, a liberated being. But it's also usually understood as a deathless element that's already present in each of us. This becomes very interesting—an unconditioned element that's already here and now within our being. That makes it not so remote. That means some aspect or flavor of this unconditioned element may be felt in this very moment.

But why is it hard to see? Why is it hard for us to discover and touch? The reason is that its vibration is very subtle, and the vibrations of greed, aversion, and delusion are very gross and they mask it or obscure it. When the mind is active with greed, aversion, delusion, it's too busy, too active for this very subtle vibration of nirvana to come into the foreground.

That's why the path of meditation is to calm down the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion, so that the very nature of the mind becomes closer to that of nibbana. When it becomes very close, then there's the possibility of opening to it and seeing it directly.

The most reliable guidelines I know for a meditative approach to nibbana are the seven factors of enlightenment. I understand their purpose as shaping the mind so that it is as close as possible to the vibration of nirvana. With that convergence, there's a possibility that it can be revealed, that we can know it directly.

This unconditioned element is already present. The aim of practice, according to the Third Noble Truth, is for us to realize it. This expression of the unconditioned element as something present in us was most clearly stated in this passage from a text called the Udana. These are the words of the Buddha:

"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."

What the Buddha is pointing to here is a contrast between all the conditioned elements of our experience—which include all the mental states, all the sense contact, all the impermanent things that come and go and catch us in craving—and this latent element, which is unborn, meaning it hasn't come into creation in the same way as sense objects. It's uncompounded in that it doesn't arise from prior conditions. It's said that it is not subject to arising and passing. That's why it's available at any time.

These are some synonyms that the Buddha gave for this element—also called the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge, the beyond.

This is considered nibbana—the highest kind of happiness available to us. It's above sense pleasures. It's even above yam burgers with chipotle sauce, which is a very high form of sense pleasure. I thought that was like the best retreat dinner I've maybe ever had tonight, so many thanks to our cooks. It's even above the blissful states of meditation, jhana states, which can be very blissful and pleasant, because it's so

happy because it's a place of safety. We're no longer subject to the torments of mind—of greed, aversion, and delusion. We are sheltered from all that, and that peace comes as a huge relief.

It's said also in the Dhammapada that peace is the highest happiness. Whether you consider it the ultimate peace of nirvana or relative peace, I think this is a really interesting comment on our psychology. Do we believe it? Because peace is available in any moment when we let go of our activities. There is a relief in that kind of peace. If we believe that's the highest happiness, wouldn't that incline us to stop pursuing all the worldly, impermanent things that we pursue? Because they all stir us up. But we can contact this peace that we can rest in, in any moment in which we give up all those pursuits, all that activity of striving and pushing and pulling.

So this is really, I think, a very profound psychological insight that is not well understood in the West. Peace is the highest form of happiness. It's not a bubbly kind of happiness, peace. It's not like always coming out as this great bubbly joy. But the very peaceful nature of it is satisfying in a way that sense pleasures aren't.

So how do we get in that direction to the unconditioned, to liberation, to freedom? Again, from the Buddha: "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines toward the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates the Noble Eightfold Path slants, slopes, and inclines towards nibbana."

You're only going in one direction. I hope you want to go there because that's where this is heading. And as Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you're going, you might end up somewhere else."

So this is where we're all going. Some people are surprised by this when they, just somewhere down the way, they thought, "Oh, I thought I was going for this bliss and uplifting joy. No, you're going to peace. Oh, I'm not sure I want to go there."

Trust us. This is the place to go. This is the highest happiness. This is where the Buddha was pointing us to.

This path is outlined in many discourses. There's one where it's described very beautifully in kind of two stages. There's one stage that goes from suffering to contentment, or you could say to normal happiness. And then there's another part of the path that goes from happiness to liberation.

So Munindra-ji, Joseph's first teacher, likes to say, "If you aim for the highest happiness, all the others will follow in the wake." So normal human happiness, worldly happiness, joy and delight all come in the wake of aiming for the highest happiness of peace.

Now, there are two ways that the path can be understood within all the Buddhist traditions. You'll hear these different flavors. Our approach is very much along the lines of strengthening the positive qualities of mind, developing them to such a degree, especially the seven factors of enlightenment, that they converge on awakening. They converge on nirvana. So this is a path of effort where factors are cultivated deliberately and brought into maturity and strength so that the mind is poised for awakening to take

place.

There's another view of the path which says that the natural purity of our being is already here. And you can think of the unconditioned element in this way—that natural purity within us is already here. And all that has to happen is that we thin out the clouds or the clouds thin out through awareness. And then this natural purity comes through.

I think this is interesting because one way stresses effort. The other way stresses trust. And things unfold best, I think, when you put both together. You make the effort to cultivation and you trust that that purity of nature is there as well.

Effort can take us very close, but effort can't do the work to take us to the fullness of the third noble truth. Why? Because nibbana is desireless. Nibbana is aimless. And any kind of effort directed toward a goal is not of the nature of nibbana. So effort can build the mind to this beautiful balance of conditioned peacefulness, but it can't open the door to the unconditioned element. That only comes from grace, some uncontrollable, unpredictable element.

So in our meditation, what we want to do is to develop all the factors to get us as close as possible and then trust. Because at some point we have to stop trying because trying does not align with the energy of the desirelessness of the unconditioned.

So there's this nice story about Ananda. You all probably know Ananda is like the sweetest guy in the whole of the Pali Canon. He was a cousin of the Buddha's who was his attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. Very loyal, devoted, and friendly. It's said that Ananda had a big part in the establishment of the bhikkhuni order, the nuns' order, which the Buddha initially refused because it was just not done at the time to have women practicing seriously in India of that age. But Ananda pleaded their case to the Buddha, who eventually agreed. So Ananda is like everybody's best friend.

But he devoted all his time to serving the Buddha, and he hadn't had a lot of time for his own practice. So after the Buddha's death, there was a gathering. It was said of five hundred fully awakened beings, and their purpose was to collect the teachings so that they could be passed on to other generations. But the gathering was only for fully awakened beings and Ananda was not one.

However, Ananda possessed an extraordinary memory and had spent twenty-five years at the Buddha's side, hearing all the teachings and developing the ability to recite them perfectly. So the assembly found themselves in a dilemma: they desperately needed Ananda's presence, but he had not yet awakened.

Ananda felt this conflict deeply. He understood that he needed to attain awakening to join his fellow practitioners. So he resolved to practice with utmost dedication until the council began. This gathering became known as the First Council.

Through the night before the meeting, Ananda sat and walked in meditation, practicing with tremendous

fervor and staying awake in his determined effort to reach enlightenment. Yet despite all his striving and intense effort, awakening eluded him. As morning approached, he realized he wasn't going to succeed.

"I guess it's not going to happen for me this time," he thought to himself. "Well, I might as well take some rest and perhaps I can be helpful in some other way tomorrow."

In that moment, Ananda simply relaxed his effort. He sat on his bed and prepared to lie down for rest. But just as he was about to place his head on the pillow, the final moment of enlightenment dawned for him. He went to sleep as an ordinary practitioner and awakened the next morning as an Arhat, fully liberated, ready to join the council.

All the suttas you encounter that begin with the phrase "Thus have I heard" were recited by Ananda from his perfect recollection. It was his extraordinary memory of the Buddha's teachings that preserved these texts for us. This story beautifully illustrates how effort carries us to a certain point, but then relaxation and grace bring the final opening.

It's important to understand that Ananda was not a beginner. In our tradition, there are considered to be four distinct stages of awakening, and each stage releases some of the fetters that bind us. These fetters—ten in total—keep us bound to continued existence, to spiritual blindness, to fundamental misunderstanding.

The first stage is called stream entry, characterized by the same experience we encountered with Añña Kondañña in our opening sutta. When the Buddha delivered his first teaching, Kondañña immediately understood. The phrase describing his realization has become standard in the suttas for this preliminary enlightenment: "While this discourse was being spoken, there arose in the Venerable Kondañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation."

Stream entry means the practitioner—whether woman or man, as both are described in the suttas—has experienced their first direct realization of the deathless element, the unconditioned, nirvana itself. This opening of mind to the ultimate reality is profoundly transformative, constituting what we call an enlightenment moment. It transforms us because it permanently uproots some of the fetters that blind us.

Stream entry eliminates three specific fetters. The first is personality view—essentially the belief that there truly exists a self within this mind-body process. This first contact with the unconditioned removes the fundamental belief in selfhood. While the sense of self will continue to arise for a stream enterer, they can examine it closely and see through its illusory nature. The belief itself has been extracted.

The second fetter eliminated is doubt—specifically doubt about the path and whether the Buddha's teachings actually lead to ultimate freedom. This doubt dissolves because one has directly experienced the truth of the unconditioned, that momentary but unshakable peace. Having tasted this reality personally, one knows with absolute certainty that complete liberation is possible through developing the factors of the path.

The third fetter is attachment to rules and observances, sometimes called rites and rituals. While this may seem less relevant to Western practitioners today, it was tremendously significant in the Buddha's time. The Brahmin caste maintained elaborate ritual systems—sacred bathing, priestly chants, animal sacrifices, and countless ceremonial practices—all believed to purify the mind. The Buddha declared these ineffective. Similarly, while sila or ethical conduct serves as valuable support for the path, moral behavior alone cannot liberate the heart and mind.

The tradition teaches that a stream enterer is destined to reach full enlightenment within at most seven more births. This represents a kind of spiritual guarantee—having reached this milestone, one's eventual liberation becomes assured. Before this point, one might wander from birth to birth for countless lifetimes. Such is the profound power of this particular insight.

This is not merely an ancient Indian legend. Practitioners today, both in the West and perhaps even more commonly in Asia, do reach this stage of understanding. These openings happen primarily during extended retreats—the two-month programs at Spirit Rock and the three-month course at IMS. Dedicated practitioners who have been cultivating their practice over time do experience these realizations in our current era. Those who do feel deeply inspired and gain tremendous confidence in their spiritual journey.

It's sometimes not possible to know whether an experience is a valid enlightenment experience. You're a practitioner who has heard many stories and words, but when the actual thing comes, is it that or something else?

Ajahn Sumedho had a question like this. He was practicing under Ajahn Chah, having been ordained with him in Thailand in the late sixties—I believe the first Western monk to ordain with Ajahn Chah. After practicing very diligently for several years, he had an experience that he thought might be stream entry. So he went to ask Ajahn Chah about it, wanting confirmation. He described what had happened and asked, "Was that stream entry?"

Ajahn Chah replied, "How should I know? I wasn't there."

This is a great reflection. Western Vipassana teachers tend to have this same humble attitude about students' enlightenment experiences. We don't confirm or deny because we can't really tell. Only the person who has had the experience can truly know, and sometimes only after time passes can they determine whether it has actually purified the heart and uprooted some of the fetters of the mind. According to the suttas, the Buddha could tell, but we cannot. So we don't tend to make those kinds of evaluations.

The next stage of enlightenment is called a once-returner, meaning one will return to the human realm only one more time before full enlightenment is assured. In a once-returner, no fetters are completely uprooted, but the primary defilements of lust, hatred, and delusion are greatly weakened. The characteristic of a once-returner is greatly reduced lust and aversion. I believe some Westerners we know

have probably reached this stage, though I don't query my colleagues about it. Even if I did, I'm not sure I would always trust their evaluation. This is not easy to achieve and remains an uncommon occurrence, at least in the West.

The third stage is called a non-returner. Here, significant fetters are uprooted—sense desire and ill will are ended. The possibility for anger is gone. Lust is gone. Dipa Ma was said to have reached this stage of awakening. She was a Bengali woman who also practiced under Munindra, developing a very strong meditation practice and high levels of attainment.

One of Dipa Ma's comments about the third stage was that family life is no longer possible after reaching it. Family life, I believe, is the Indian euphemism for sex. After the third stage, because sexual desire and sensual desire are no longer present, there's no purpose to intimate physical relationship.

But she said the reason it's so hard to reach the third stage—why so few people do—is because it requires opening to the truth of dukkha on such a deep level. We spoke today about how opening to the First Noble Truth is an important ingredient in activating the path, meaning we really need to feel the suffering. Someone called it penetrating the suffering, which is a fine way to express it. We really have to feel it, feel the hurt of the suffering. Dipa Ma's comment was that to reach the third stage, one has to feel the unsatisfactoriness of our existential condition in a very, very deep way.

Yet the degree of freedom at this stage is immense. Carol and I both had the chance to spend about a month with Dipa Ma when she first came to the States. We were looking after her, cooking for her, taking her shopping. I never saw a flicker of any reactivity in her during that entire month. She was always peaceful, equanimous, untroubled—a very impressive being.

If you haven't read her biography, simply called *Dipa Ma*, it's a wonderful read. It's especially inspiring for women because there are a limited number of strong women teachers in our lineage. Dipa Ma is someone in our lifetimes who truly manifested great awakened spirit—a very inspiring person.

The fourth stage is what's called the fully awakened or fully enlightened one, known as an Arahant.

So in this final stage, all the earlier fetters have already been removed, leaving only the five remaining fetters to go. Some of these are quite subtle and refined. There is attachment to fine sense realms and attachment to immaterial realms—these are more purified ways of being that are cultivated through states of concentration and jhana than the ordinary human realm, which is a mixture of pleasure and pain. These are very refined states developed on the basis of strong concentration that can be quite satisfying and blissful, but not ultimately so. At a certain point in meditative development, these refined states can themselves become attachments. The Arhat has let go of even these most refined states as objects of clinging.

But here are the three most significant fetters that fall away. The Arhat has completely ended conceit, which means any sense of self at all—not just the belief in a self, but any residual sense of selfhood

whatsoever. There's a story about an Arhat who was captured by bandits who were planning to kill him. I'm not sure why—that's just what bandits did in India in those days. If they caught you, they killed you. The bandits were shocked that he wasn't afraid when they told him of their intention. He said, "What should I be afraid of? There's no owner of this body and mind. What should I fear?" The bandits were so impressed with his character that they let him go, as these stories always end happily.

Here's another fascinating fetter that only disappears at this final stage: restlessness. You might think that when you're sitting quietly in meditation, your mind shouldn't be restless. But only in the Arhat's mind is there true freedom from restlessness. We can concentrate our mind and restlessness can be temporarily absent, but the underlying tendency toward restlessness continues to exist within us. What this restlessness really represents, I believe, is the persistent sense that there must be something better somewhere else—the constant searching, the inability to be completely at peace with what is. Let me see if I can find it, or think about it, or move toward it. In the Arhat, this is completely gone. There is no longer any looking for anything else.

Finally, ignorance is gone. Any confusion about the way things are, about the nature of impermanent conditioned formations, the nature of craving and clinging, the mechanisms by which we enter into suffering—all of this is seen clearly. There is complete clarity and wisdom about the fundamental nature of existence. This wisdom is what prevents one from ever again falling into those states of suffering.

It's said that the fully enlightened one will no longer be born in any realm, will no longer take birth again. There's this beautiful quote from the canon: "The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. He or she is not shaken and they are not agitated, for there is nothing present in them by which they might be born." The urges that would lead to rebirth are extinguished. This is the meaning of extinguishing—those fundamental urges are gone.

This is what the Buddha referred to as "an unshakable deliverance of mind." Because the fetters that cause restlessness or craving are completely gone, the mind can't be shaken by anything. This is what he declared to be the goal of his teaching—this unshakable deliverance of mind.

He said: "This holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration, or knowledge and insight. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of the holy life, its heartwood and its end."

Even in the modern age, some of our masters continue to experience this degree of liberation. I read recently Luang Por Liam's remarkably candid account of his own awakening, where he describes how dukkha was no longer present. There's another Thai forest master, Ajahn Maha Bua, who has also recounted his awakening. He had been a monk for ten years when he decided to make an extraordinarily strong effort during one rains retreat—the traditional three-month practice period in late summer. What he committed to do was sit up all night, every night, without moving.

He developed this profound fearlessness, this complete loss of fear of death. The pain from death couldn't possibly be worse than the pain he had experienced sitting through those nights without moving. From that point forward, he said, he kept making progress until his mind was like rock—skilled enough in concentration's stability that it became like a slab of stone, unable to be easily affected by anything at all.

Can you imagine having a mind that stable and firm? No restlessness, no craving. But he wasn't yet awakened. He said he remained stuck in that concentration for five years. It was so satisfying, so peaceful, that he didn't look for anything else. But then he realized he was trapped.

So he turned to wisdom and began investigating—craving and the absence of craving, suffering and the absence of suffering. But he saw that all of these were changing. He came back to basic mindfulness and wisdom, paying simple attention. He watched as these faculties became steady, impartial, and impassive. The mind was not tending toward anything.

At that moment, he said, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne in the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

This eradication of ignorance was his declaration of liberation—a very beautiful account.

One never knows in practice when a moment of opening might come. There's a collection called the Therigatha, verses of the elder nuns collected around the time of the Buddha and shortly after. Reading these accounts of women practicing in that era is remarkable. There's a wonderful book called *First Buddhist Women* that weaves together these stories, combining the verses with their biographies.

One nun was called Siha, and this is her practice story: "Obsessed by sensuality, I never got to the origin, but was agitated, my mind beyond control. I dreamed of great happiness. I was passionate but had no peace. Pale and thin, I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night."

Imagine—seven years as a nun, wandering through the forest seeking peace. "Pale and thin, I wandered seven years, unhappy day and night. Then I took a rope into the forest and thought, 'I'd rather hang than go back to that narrow life.' I tied a strong noose to the branch of a tree and put it around my neck. Just then my heart was set free."

Amazing. Someone brought right to the edge, and there must have been some profound letting go, and then liberation.

One fascinating aspect of this awakening process is that enlightened beings can have remarkably different personalities. You might think that once the self goes, once greed, hatred, and delusion disappear, everyone becomes identical. It's not like that at all. These people can be real characters, and they often manifest much the same personality they had for years, though in a purified form.

For instance, Mahasi Sayadaw, one of the greatest meditation masters of the past century—Carol and I had

the chance to meet him and practice with him at IMS in the late seventies. He embodied tremendous equanimity. You could feel the unshakability of his mind, but there wasn't a huge amount of metta radiating from him. You didn't feel like you wanted to crawl up and cuddle with him like a grandfather. He was quite remote, but profoundly cooled out.

Dipa Ma, on the other hand, you would have loved to have as your grandmother.

When she came to the States, she brought her grandson, whose name was Rishi, and she was so warm and kind and loving with him. She was loving with everyone that she met. She just always had a smile for people.

Ajahn Chah had the most amazing sense of humor of any monk I've ever encountered. He was very playful and could use his humor to poke at people, but what he would be pointing to were the character traits that needed development. So he was a real person-oriented Dharma teacher with tremendous wisdom that he shared about managing families and businesses, training children, and all kinds of practical matters. Very practical and very funny.

But his teacher, Ajahn Mun, was very fierce. If you see photographs of him—and you can look him up online where there are just a handful of photos—he always looks very serious and stern. It's said that he would make his students sit through the whole meditation schedule even if they had malaria. If you've ever had malaria, that is not a pleasant disease—high fever, your body feels awful—and he would make practitioners continue sitting so they would lose concern for pleasure or pain.

And then you have someone like the Dalai Lama, who I don't know what level of awakening he's at, but I think it's really high. He has this amazing manifestation of joy and compassion. To me, he's the most inspiring person on the planet, even though he's not Theravadan. He's still pretty remarkable—a very free, very free heart.

So this fourth stage material can seem really far off, but even in the suttas describing arahants, we can find excellent pointers for our practice. Carol will give more tomorrow night that will be relevant for us, but I want to highlight a few things to head us in a certain direction.

One phrase that appears frequently in the suttas is "liberation through non-clinging." This is mentioned repeatedly, and when you think about it, it's actually a practice instruction. When we practice non-clinging and not holding onto things, that becomes a path. Where non-clinging leads is to this experience of liberation.

Ajahn Chah said it quite succinctly: "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace."

So play with this as a meditation instruction. What does it feel like if you let go? You're just sitting there. Maybe there's a little holding, maybe there's not. But simply bring to mind non-clinging—letting go,

abandoning, releasing, however you want to think of it. Just see what happens in that moment. It's an instruction you can give yourself. See what the effect is. See what your experience becomes.

I find that it opens the mind and brings back some kind of expansiveness that has an element of greater freedom and ease in it. This can obviously be carried to quite some depth.

Here's a dialogue between two of the Buddha's greatest disciples, Anuruddha and Sariputta. Sariputta had already become an arahant and was helping Anuruddha, who had not yet become fully enlightened but was a great practitioner, as you'll see. Anuruddha was asking Sariputta for meditation advice.

He said, "Friend Sariputta, here's what's going on for me. With the divine eye, which is purified and surpasses the human, I survey a thousand-fold world system." That's his first point. I'm still waiting for a yogi to come and report that in an interview—hasn't happened yet.

"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. This is why he's looking for advice.

This is Sariputta's reply: "Friend Anuruddha, when you say that the divine eye surveys a thousandfold world system, that is your conceit. When you say that energy is aroused and mindfulness is established and your mind is concentrated, that is your restlessness. And when you say your mind is still not liberated from the taints, that is your remorse. It would be good for you if you would abandon these three qualities and stop attending to them. Instead, direct your attention to the deathless element."

That's a sort of wisdom. Sariputta was basically saying, "Don't wander off into these thoughts and evaluations about what's going on in your practice. Quiet your mind. Direct your attention to the deathless element," which is a synonym for the unconditioned or nibbana.

It's likely Anuruddha knew the deathless element from prior experience. He may have been a stream-enterer, although it doesn't record that for sure, but it's quite likely. Once one has reached stream-entry, one knows the flavor of the unconditioned, one knows the flavor of the deathless element, and one can incline the mind toward that. So Sariputta is saying that would be the best meditation instruction for you: direct your mind to the deathless element.

So Anuruddha went off and practiced, and it said a short while later he realized for himself the liberation for which he was practicing, and Anuruddha became one of the arahants.

Now that's great if one is a stream-enterer and already knows from direct experience what the deathless element feels like, you might say. But suppose one doesn't know what the deathless element feels like?

Then there's another sutta that gives some more direction toward this end. The Buddha was talking to a group of monks, including one called Malunkyaputta, and so this sutta is named after Malunkyaputta. This is one of the more beautiful and concise pointings in the canon. It's in the Majjhima Nikaya.

The Buddha says: "Whatever exists of sense objects and states of mind, one sees those states as impermanent, as suffering, as void, as not-self." In other words, one sees the three characteristics of all conditioned phenomena. "One turns the mind away from those states and directs it toward the deathless element thus."

So again, the instruction is: move away from conditioned things because they're impermanent and unsatisfactory. Turn toward the deathless element. Direct your attention there.

"Direct it toward the deathless element thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

The way I read this, it's like the Buddha's up in the air traffic control tower and you're flying in for a landing. You're not quite sure where the landing strip is—your instruments aren't quite tuned—and he's telling you how to land in nibbana.

So you discover what's peaceful. You find what's sublime. And that is the stilling of all formations. That means the mind stops moving toward the sense objects. How does one get there? Through the relinquishment of attaching, through letting go.

And then two other qualities come in. The first is dispassion. That means one is no longer caught up in lust for any of the sense experiences. And why would one be? Because one has seen them all as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and void. Any ones that we run after are just going to crumple. So this is the quality of dispassion. You might call it also equanimity. The literal meaning of the word is "without lust"—viraga, without lust. One ceases to lust after the sense experiences.

And that leads into the state the Buddha calls cessation.

Now, cessation has many applications in the Buddha's teachings. We see it in the Third Noble Truth: the cessation of craving is the cessation of suffering. So here we can take it as the cessation of craving and the cessation of suffering. The formations have stilled. Lust has gone away. All attachments have been let go. And one practices the cessation of craving. One does not give rise to greed, aversion, or delusion in any direction. And that is what opens the door to the deathless element of nibbana.

So these are instructions that we can reflect on: the stilling of formations and the relinquishment of attachments, the peaceful, sublime quality of that, not lusting after anything and discovering the cessation of craving. That's what can open us to that unconditioned deathless element.

I want to close with just one more quotation. This is from the Udana, also about nibbana. This is from the Buddha: "One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering."

Here, dependent means dependent on something in the present moment. When we're leaning on something or attached to something, pushing or pulling, we are dependent on it. 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 there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

So let's just sit for a minute and let the words settle. "She turns her mind away from conditioned states and directs it toward the deathless element thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishment of all attachments, dispassion, cessation, nibbana."

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