First and Second Noble Truths (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:40

I'd like to talk this evening about some of the most classic teachings from the Buddha, which is part of the Four Noble Truths. Because it's a longer retreat, we want to go into a little more detail, so I'm just going to talk about the First and Second Noble Truths.

Sometimes when people hear this topic, some resistance comes up. "Oh, I don't want to know anymore about suffering." But what the Buddha said about it is that the understanding of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So I hope this will be your experience in the talk this evening.

I will base this talk in part on the discourse in the suttas that relates this teaching. It's part of the Connected Discourses of the Buddha from the Samyutta Nikaya.

You may know the background to it. The Buddha had spent six years in very intensive meditation practice, seeking the liberation of heart and mind. When he finally came to that realization that freed him underneath the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya in Northern India, he didn't do anything for forty-nine days. He just sat under the Bodhi tree and in the area and delighted in the bliss of deliverance. He soaked in the joy of liberation.

He thought that he probably wouldn't teach. He said, "People won't understand. What I've seen is subtle and hard to get. I don't want to bother trying to put this out." Then it is said that a heavenly being came down and said, "Venerable sir, there are those with little dust in their eyes. Please make the effort to teach for the benefit of beings." So he said, "Okay."

He looked around to see what beings might have little dust in their eyes. He came upon this group of five people that he had been practicing with earlier. He had been on a very ascetic path, and these five other men were his companions in that journey. With his psychic vision, he saw that they were now residing near Benares in Sarnath, in the deer park. So he decided to walk there. It was 150 miles, and it was apparently in the springtime. He just set out walking, collecting alms along the way.

Days and days later, he reached there and found this group of five. They saw him coming and thought, "Gautama looks too fat. He's eaten. That's no good. So he's fallen off the path. We don't want to listen to him." But he approached them. He said, "You should listen to me." And they said, "No, no, no, you're too fat now. We don't want to hear you."

But they were struck by his bearing and his dignity and his radiance. They said, "Well, maybe he's got

something to say, so we'll give him a chance."

So after six years of practice, full liberation, forty-nine days of reflection, and a 150-mile hike, this is what he said:

"There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus..." In this context, bhikkhus refers to—serious commentators say—any serious practitioners. Normally it means a monk, a mendicant. But in this context, it means a sincere and dedicated practitioner of either or any gender. So you are all bhikkhus by this term as we're practicing here together.

"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, unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.

"Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way." Tathagata is the term that the Buddha most often used to refer to himself, so it's synonymous with Buddha. "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."

He is staking out a new spiritual vision in this teaching, which avoids the extreme of indulgence in sense pleasures or making sense pleasures the central focus of one's life. He's not saying that lay people shouldn't enjoy sense pleasures—we enjoy a lot of sense pleasures.

We experience music and food, relationships and entertainment, clothing and art, travel and countless other pleasures. The Buddha is not saying we should reject these entirely. Rather, he is cautioning against making the pursuit of such pleasures the central organizing principle of our lives.

When we look around the world today, we can observe countless people whose existence revolves entirely around chasing these kinds of sensory experiences. We see individuals addicted to substances, to entertainment, to food, to endless acquisition. This represents one extreme that the Buddha advised we avoid.

The other extreme to be avoided is self-mortification—those ascetic practices the Buddha himself had pursued during the earlier years of his spiritual quest. He discovered that inflicting pain upon the body does not lead to genuine health, happiness, or freedom. We encourage this same understanding here in our practice: do not punish your body through excessive sitting, walking, sleep deprivation, or over-effort. Do not become rigid or tense in your practice. The middle way embodies harmony and ease.

The Buddha continued: "And what, bhikkhus, is the middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision and leads to nibbana? It is this Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

This marks the Buddha's first declaration of his path. He presents it as the middle way and delineates the

eight components we are practicing and developing together during this retreat. We are cultivating all eight aspects of this path in our time here.

Carol spoke extensively about right view recently, and it bears noting that the classical definition of right view encompasses the Four Noble Truths. To truly align ourselves with the Buddha's understanding—which is the essence of right view—we must orient ourselves toward these Four Truths. This is why they hold such central importance in the entire framework of dharma teachings.

Tonight we will explore the first two truths, with the others to follow as our retreat unfolds. I wanted to offer this teaching now to establish a common vocabulary we can carry forward together. The Four Noble Truths form the foundational framework of all the Buddha's teachings, and this language will resurface throughout our time together.

Let me briefly outline these truths: The first truth acknowledges suffering. The second identifies craving as suffering's cause. The third proclaims that suffering's end lies in the cessation of craving. The fourth reveals that the path to suffering's end is the Noble Eightfold Path itself.

This structure possesses an elegant symmetry. The first pair addresses suffering and its origin, while the second pair presents suffering's cessation and the means to achieve it. We can imagine the Buddha, with his profound wisdom, compassion, and clarity, contemplating how best to share his discovery and creating this beautiful framework.

What strikes me as particularly significant is how causality rests at the very heart of this teaching. When you examine the Buddha's core teachings closely, you discover that cause and effect permeates everything—the Four Noble Truths, the law of karma, and dependent origination all rely on this principle.

Why does causation hold such central importance in Buddhist understanding? We will return to this question, but I suggest it is because when we remove the notion of a controlling self as the agent behind all events, we must explain reality's unfolding through selfless processes. This happens through the interaction of causes and conditions operating according to natural laws. In Buddhism, these causes and conditions replace both the concept of a controlling self and the idea of a creator deity orchestrating every detail of existence.

This provides our overall framework, which will likely resurface many times throughout our retreat.

Now let us hear what the discourse reveals about the first Noble Truth. The Buddha continues directly: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering."

I find this formulation deeply moving because of its universal applicability. Is there anyone who has not encountered these experiences? While you may not remember your birth...

Well, I can't remember that actually, but I bet my mother did. So there is definitely suffering in birth. Aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. I can attest to aging and illness. I can't yet attest to death, but I suspect. Union with what is displeasing—has that occurred since you've been here? Probably. Separation from what is pleasing—we experience that a lot. Not to get what one wants—it happens all the time, doesn't it?

So these are very universal statements. We can see how true they are for us. And then he sums it up by saying, continuing in brief, "the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering." The five aggregates are a description of the mind-body process of a human being. And when there is clinging involved with the five aggregates, they're suffering in that experience of living. So that's a very broad and universal definition of suffering.

But actually, there's a Pali word that's being translated as suffering, which most of you probably know—the Pali word *dukkha*. It's a word that is not really translatable into English. So most translators use this word suffering, but it's not quite the right fit because other translators have used for it anguish, stress, unsatisfactoriness, unreliability, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction. Because in fact, *dukkha* points to a range of the unsatisfactory aspects of life that go from very subtle friction to the most intense physical and mental pain imaginable. So *dukkha* encompasses that whole spectrum.

And it also has an underlying quality—you might say that it's impossible to put it all right, that this unsatisfactoriness is an integral part of our experience of living, and it's impossible to fix that part.

Now, sometimes people say that the first noble truth says life is suffering, but it doesn't say that. That would be a very gloomy statement for a religion, and Buddhism does not say that. But it does say that unsatisfactoriness is an integral part of life and will continue in all these different ways.

But it is kind of interesting that for a religion that has suffering as the first truth, there are a lot of happy people in the Dharma. And there are a lot of happy people in life generally, but Dharma practice leads to a lot of happiness. This is kind of interesting. So it's almost pointing that the more we open to suffering and accept it, the happier we become. And even though *dukkha* is unavoidable in different ways, it is true that one can live life as a basically happy person and that the outcome of our dharma practice leads in that direction.

So don't be misled by the emphasis here on *dukkha*—that a huge amount of suffering is always intrinsic to every human life. It's not like that. As we understand more and more with wisdom, the baseline of life becomes happiness and contentment. And the obstacles that come along can be accommodated more and more easily.

But it does point to something about human life that has a quality, when unexamined, of a lack of fulfillment, a lack of satisfaction. And of course, this is very widespread. We may see it, but the whole world feels it. This is a wide, wide truth.

This is from an article in the New Yorker: According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be given everything it must put up with.

Nine out of ten 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. From Duke University.

So you may feel like that here sometimes—life is so hard, I don't know how I'll get through it. Unfortunately, your chance of getting something in the mail has now gone away. You're stuck.

This can be a little bit of a daunting picture when we start to take in the width of unsatisfactoriness. And yet it is an integral part of our practice to open to this and unfold in it with wisdom.

This is a comment from Ajahn Suchitto that stresses the difficulty of the work. Ajahn Suchitto says, "We may feel that somehow we have to get ourselves out of this predicament, but then we realize we are the predicament. So how do we get out of that?"

So it's a very interesting process, coming to terms with this first noble truth and the truth of suffering. Often before we meet the Dharma—and even after—we may think "I am suffering," and that suffering tends to isolate us. But if we can see it in the context of the first noble truth, we realize that suffering is everywhere. Rather than separating or isolating us, if we understand it rightly, it connects us, because every human being, as we understand this truth, is dealing with the same realities that we are.

This both opens a doorway to compassion and overcomes feelings of isolation or loneliness. This is from a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American poet. The poem is called "Kindness": "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."

All of us are in this situation together. We all share this vulnerability of human life.

The Buddha talked about three particular kinds of dukkha that we should investigate. The first he called dukkha-dukkha. This is like when you go get a double shot of espresso—this is the double shot of dukkha, which means it's the pain of pain. The pain of pain we see all around us on the evening news at night. We read or hear reports of the wars in Syria. It got to the point where I couldn't turn on the evening news because I couldn't stand to see another hospital full of bleeding children in Syria. It was too much for me.

The war in Iraq continues. Flare-ups in combat in Afghanistan are still ongoing. On those massive scales, people are undergoing horrendous suffering in that part of the world.

Illness is rampant. Malarial deaths in Africa are about half a million a year now—something that should be easy to fix with mosquito nets, but still 500,000 people a year are dying from that disease. Closer to home, we read frequent accounts of murder, domestic violence, and child abuse. As we start to wake up to the social aspects of this country, of the United States, we start to understand how racism has oppressed and harmed people of color, how homophobia has oppressed and harmed the LGBTQI community. Often from very young—as soon as people are able to perceive themselves as different from the dominant cultural norm—there is often an overlay of not being quite good enough. That message, communicated again and again, is its own kind of trauma for people who grow up marginalized and excluded from what looks like the mainstream.

Even in a sangha like ours, we talked a few years ago in a group of senior students about the most common forms of suffering, the most difficult forms that people were experiencing. These were people who had good jobs and health care and reasonable health. They cited things like loneliness and lack of connection with others, the frequency of difficult emotions like depression, sadness, or anger, pressures at work, fear of inadequacy, fear of not being able to perform to standards, their own aging and illness, looking after aging parents, looking after children who were having a hard time coming out of their teens and into young adulthood, and anxiety about the future. All these forms of difficulty are part of the pain of pain, the suffering of painful experiences in life, and they meet all of us. None of us are free yet from these.

The second kind of suffering that the Buddha talked about is called the unsatisfactoriness of alternation—in Pali, viparinama dukkha. This just means that even when conditions are good, they will eventually change. When they change, if we're clinging to them, we'll suffer with their change. This really highlights the problem in clinging. If conditions are difficult and we hold on to that, we suffer right away. If conditions are good but we cling to that, they're subject to change and then we'll suffer when they change.

Ajahn Chah said it's like grabbing a poisonous snake. If you grab it by the head, you get bitten right away—and that's taking hold of the painful parts of life. But if you grab it by the tail, the head will swing around and bite you—and that's taking hold of the enjoyable aspects of life because they will change. So this is the suffering of alternation or change.

The third kind is the most subtle, and it's called the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena—in Pali, sankhara dukkha. This is a very interesting one to explore. What is being pointed to here is that all conditioned phenomena are unstable. We were at a set of teachings from the Dalai Lama some years ago down in Mountain View.

We were outside at the Shoreline Amphitheater. It was a beautiful spring day, and Shoreline is set up to

have a number of seats toward the front of the amphitheater and a big grassy area at the back. They had the stage arranged to accommodate the Dalai Lama on a high throne, which he emphasized was not because he's vain or egotistical, but because these are high teachings, and he wanted the respect for the teachings. Actually, what he was teaching on was the Heart Sutra, a central discourse about emptiness.

The stage backdrop, where all the speakers for the Grateful Dead would have been, was filled with this huge canvas painting of the Potala Palace back in the days when that was the Dalai Lama's home before the invasion and occupation. Seated on the floor of the stage were monks and nuns of every different Buddhist background. There were the black robes of the Japanese Zen monks and the brown robes of the Koreans and the ochre robes of the Theravadans, and there were monks and nuns and then of course many of the red robes of the Tibetan monks, all seated side by side on the stage.

Honestly, it felt like a Dharma Woodstock. I was just delighted to be sitting on the grass and feeling the vibes of all these beautiful people and hearing these teachings. But our minds stayed clear. So that was cool. Unlike Woodstock.

The Dalai Lama was talking about emptiness and he got to this part of talking about the three kinds of dukkha. He talked about sankara dukkha, and he said, "You have to understand this teaching on impermanence deeply. It's not that things go along solid for a while and then change and that that's impermanence." He said, "Things aren't solid for even a moment. Everything in our sense sphere is dissolving moment by moment as we experience it."

So the connection to emptiness is that not only should we not cling because eventually something will change into its opposite, there is in truth no thing there to cling to in the first place. There is nothing solid in our field of sense experiences that is hard enough to be taken hold of. Everything in the sense sphere—and you can look at this directly in your own experience in meditation—is dissolving moment after moment after moment.

The first two kinds of dukkha, the dukkha of pain and the dukkha of alternation, we can kind of see conceptually and we can understand by just reflecting on our experience over a long period of time. This third kind, the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena, we can only penetrate through meditative insight. And yet this is ultimately the most fundamental and the most freeing of the understandings of dukkha. So this is what we develop our meditative stability and investigation to learn about—this constantly dissolving nature of things.

There's one line in the discourses where a heavenly being comes down and is talking about their understanding of the Dharma. The heavenly being, talking about bodies, says, "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." So this could include actually all matter. Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form.

Of course it's not just form that is dissolving, but our mental states are as well. So the hindrances arise and

pass quickly. Beautiful states arise and pass quickly. Even meditative states—mindfulness and concentration arising, passing, arising, passing.

So this is what we need to understand: these three levels of dukkha. And the Dalai Lama said that if we truly want to help others, we need to understand all three ways in which people are affected by the truth of dukkha.

This sometimes seems like unhappy news, right? Because we think we'd like something to be steady and stable, something that we could hold on to that would be permanent and lasting. But it's not just bad news. This is from the Buddha: "If there was one speck of permanent form, the holy life for liberation would not be possible." So if permanence was an aspect of this universe, real permanence, we couldn't transform our hearts and minds and come to liberation. So it's not all bad news.

Now the Noble Truths, as it continues in this discourse, are not just philosophy. This is not something that we're supposed to believe in. Each one has a call to action. And this is a really important piece to understand.

So Right View is not just, "Oh, I believe that there is dukkha in life." There is a call to action. And what the call to action is for the First Noble Truth—this Noble Truth of suffering—is to be fully understood. This is our job, this is our work: to be fully understood.

The implication is we don't understand it fully yet. We may conceptually, but we're not living out that realization. Because if we saw clearly the insubstantial nature, the dissolving nature of things the way they are, we wouldn't try to hold on. But we do.

The Buddha put it this way: there is one thing because of the not seeing of which keeps you bound, and that is dukkha. In other words, we keep holding on because we don't fully understand the unsatisfactoriness of things. So we need to reflect on this truth again and again in our direct experience. We need to understand how dukkha is showing up in our immediate experience and recognize it as an aspect of the First Noble Truth.

Here's a question: When difficulty comes along, do we see it as an aspect of the First Noble Truth? When you're in struggle, when you're in suffering, do you note, "Oh, First Noble Truth"? I would say seldom. Because we do a lot of other things with that difficulty. We have a lot of stories about our suffering, about our pain.

Sometimes we deny it. Sometimes we blame ourselves for it. I remember doing this a lot before I met the Dharma. I thought, "Oh, there's something wrong with me." I took the pain really personally. I invalidated myself. I judged myself for the suffering that I was having. Or we might blame our parents or our teachers or society or our partner for it. Or we distract ourselves—we watch TV or have a drink. If we're in meditation, we turn to a pleasant fantasy.

But there's always the opportunity to just come and feel the pain and say, "This is the First Noble Truth. This is what the Buddha was pointing to." When we can do that, we put it in the context of practice, the context of understanding, and it also connects us to every being that lives today.

It's a delicate point because we want to open to and recognize the direct immediate experience of dukkha as the First Noble Truth. This is a practice point—an important one. Essentially, this is freeing. It's meant to be freeing to see this in its universal aspect and in its connecting aspect.

But if we make up a view or a belief about our life or about life in general, that it's all dukkha, that just gets depressing. That's taking it out of direct experience and making a belief about it. I hope you can feel the difference. This is not something to be believed in as a solid thing that is applied to all of life. "Oh, all of life is suffering." If we hold on to that view, that's depressing. We're going to get averse to life. We're going to get afraid of life. We're going to get negative. But that's not the way it's meant. If we can see the truth of it in the moment, that's what is freeing.

So we want to not deny this truth, and we also don't want to cling to it as a view. Clearly this was not the Buddha's intention in teaching—for us to cling and become depressed. The Buddha said, "A bhikkhu is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm herself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure."

So we have to open to the suffering and even, I would say, embrace it. Let me ask: Has suffering ever been useful in your practice? Have you learned from it? Would you be the person you are today if you hadn't had that suffering? Has it developed strengths in you? When we bring wisdom to our difficulties, it's a tremendous source of learning and growth.

I was practicing at IMS one year, working with Joseph Goldstein as my teacher, and I was about five weeks into a long retreat when I hit a really difficult patch. I was becoming very agitated. Some fear was coming up. A lot of physical energy was arising. A lot of thoughts and emotions were just racing through. I couldn't stabilize my mind on the present moment, on the breath or the body or anything. I was getting very discouraged. I went into Joseph and explained what was going on.

And he said, "Well, are you upset about this?" And I said, "Yeah, I'm upset about this." And he said, "Why?" I said, "Because I feel like my practice was deepening and now that stopped. I've lost the deepening of my practice. I've lost the thread."

And Joseph just sat back and smiled and said, "Guy, this is the deepening of your practice."

And then I got it. That's what I had to work with next. So I learned a lot from working with that. It opened a lot for me.

You all probably know who Ajahn Chah is. He was Jack Kornfield's first teacher and Ajahn Sumedho's teacher, a very revered monk in Thailand and great teacher. When he died, he passed the leadership of his

monastery, which was Wat Ba Pong in the northeast of Thailand, to a senior monk at that time named Ajahn Liam or Lungpao Liam. Lungpao means spiritual father.

Lungpao Liam had been practicing with Ajahn Chah for a long time, and now he is still the abbot at Wat Ba Pong. He occasionally travels to the US and does a little bit of teaching. Well, Lungpao Liam was asked by another abbot of a monastery, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?" And he replied, "I would have to say that fear was the hardest thing for me." But then he paused. He said, "But just to say that it was hard isn't quite right. I would have to say that it was a worthy opponent. Working with fear brought about the growth of a lot of wisdom."

So this is part of the deal for all of us. These hindrances that come and the different forms of pain that arise really are our worthy opponents. And in this setting, we have the environment and we have the tools to learn to work with them. And I'm going to make a bold statement here: to master them, to find ways to overcome the suffering that these things could catch us in.

So these are challenges to our practice, but they are also the sources of a lot of wisdom. And we find through working with them strengths that we didn't know we had. So this is really what grows us up as human beings and opens us to a lot of understanding and a lot of compassion, lets us be able to help others going through the same thing.

The second noble truth. Don't worry, I'm not going another forty-five minutes. Just briefly, we'll go into the second noble truth. I'll read what the discourse says about that:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence."

I was so relieved when I heard this second noble truth because it said the suffering you're experiencing has a cause. At that time, I thought my suffering was just a solid block that I couldn't understand. And this said, no, there's a cause to it. Because where there's a cause, there's a possibility of taking out that cause. So this statement really shows a way to freedom, a way to release.

Craving is the translation of the Pali word taṇhā. And in the Buddha's time, that was just an ordinary word that meant thirst. So you could say the cause of suffering is thirst. I like this expression because it suggests something about the craving. It suggests that it's a kind of natural thing that comes up, that it can be satisfied, but only temporarily.

Right? You're thirsty, you drink some water, thirst is gone. How long before it comes back? It comes back.

So that's the way it is with craving. We crave something, we give ourselves that thing, it ends the craving, we feel satisfied, but in not too much longer, craving comes back. So what is being pointed to here is that craving is a very deep-rooted tendency in the mind and will fasten on different objects, seeking delight

now here, now there. But the fact is that it will keep coming again and again and again.

When thirst arises, do you tend to feel satisfied or unsatisfied? You tend to feel unsatisfied, don't you? When craving arises, do you tend to feel satisfied?

No.

So craving itself and its frequent reoccurrence engenders this frequent feeling of discontent. There may be nothing wrong in the situation as such, but when craving comes again and again, it feels like there's something missing. I need something more or I need something to go away. That's the meaning that comes when craving arises.

So one thing I just want to point out here is that craving, although it's a desire word, is not just about desire. Craving is essentially wanting things to be different than they are. Sometimes that means I want something pleasant to come in. Sometimes that means I want something unpleasant to go away. So craving, the word tanha, although it's a desire word in English, actually encompasses both wanting and aversion. Greed and aversion are both included in craving.

And delusion is also included in craving. This may not be clear why delusion is included, but I want to explain it in two ways.

One is we don't pay attention to the forces of wanting and pushing away. Because if we did, if we saw them with wisdom, we would see they don't work. These things keep us stirred up all the time. Take a look when you're sitting and some craving is there. You want the experience to be different. You want a little less body pain or you want a bit fewer thoughts or you want a little more concentration or you want back the bliss of the sitting that you had two days ago. We do things to make that happen. You've probably seen this. That's why our sittings are not peaceful—because we're fidgeting mentally and sometimes we're fidgeting physically due to the force, this frequent force of craving, wanting things to be a little bit different, more positive, less discomfort.

But we don't see that clearly and so we keep doing it. Are all those little adjustments that craving wants you to keep making ever really successful? Check it out. They keep us off balance, but rarely do they satisfy. So we don't see that. And so we keep doing that. We keep trying to make it a little bit better, a little bit better, a little bit better. But the very activity of that is what disturbs our natural peace.

The Tibetans have a saying: the essence of samsara is correcting. Samsara is the wheel of continued existence—birth, death, next birth, next death, and so on. It can be understood over many lifetimes, but it can also be understood moment to moment: forming a new sense of self, dissolving, forming a new sense of self, dissolving. That's what keeps us on the wheel. We want to make the moment just a little better. The moment's not right the way life has given it to us. We've got to correct the moment. That's what greed and aversion keep trying to do. But we don't see that we're doing it and we don't see how that disturbs our basic peace. So that's how delusion is wrapped up in craving.

The other way delusion is wrapped up in craving is this: when our vision is set on bringing in pleasure and pushing away pain, that's all we're interested in. The pleasurable things stand out strong in our field of experience. The painful things stand out strong in our field of experience. What about the neutral things? We blow those off. They don't register.

The Buddha has this nice statement: "Lust is a maker of measurement. Hatred is a maker of measurement." So we measure things by their ability to bring us pleasure or bring us pain. We're constantly measuring our sense experiences through that filter.

That's delusion because clarity is to see pleasant experiences, unpleasant experiences, and neutral experiences all with equanimity, with the same amount of clarity and emphasis. But when we're so focused on pleasure and pain, an element of delusion comes in and we don't see the neutral clearly. It doesn't have a charge for us, so we write it off.

This sutta talks about three different kinds of craving: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence.

Craving for sense pleasures means pleasant experiences in the five physical senses. This is obviously a huge area of pursuit for human beings. I was curious about the statistics, so I looked on the web this afternoon. The restaurant industry in the United States generated $783 billion in 2016. Now, of course, people have to eat, but it's a lot cheaper to eat at home. $783 billion in the restaurant industry. Movies—the sense pleasure of seeing—$11 billion in the US in 2016. Recorded music, $15 billion in 2015. These are dipping, by the way. You probably know the music industry is in trouble. That's pleasant sounds, dipping.

But this one got me: the perfume industry. Pleasant scents. And this is just one kind of pleasant scents. This doesn't include deodorant and moisturizer and such. The perfume industry alone, worldwide, $29 billion a year on pleasant scents. Unfortunately, they're not wanted here because we are scent-free. But that's a lot of money for pleasant scents.

This is clearly a big pursuit for human beings. Why? Well, sense pleasures do bring some happiness. I love eating a warm chocolate chip cookie. It brings a real hit of happiness for me. But it doesn't last. They're temporary. It's not like a good meditation—it doesn't always last either, but it lasts longer. So there's craving for sense pleasures. They provide a temporary hit, but they don't bring lasting satisfaction. If we orient our lives around trying to get more and more of them, we're caught up in some level of frustration.

Craving for existence basically means wanting to be alive. According to the Buddhist teachings, we are all here because we wanted to take birth again. There was some unfinished urge from a past life that led us to want to be experiencing things again, and that's why we're here.

You notice how this plays out for us today—we don't want to die, by and large. Every being that lives does not want to die, and that's because of this deeply rooted craving for existence. In some ways, it's not all

that rational. What if you went to bed tonight and just didn't wake up in the morning? Would that be a problem? It might be a problem for other people, but would it be a problem for you? If this train of consciousness just finished, there'd be no one to feel the problem. Yet we'd be terrified if we thought that was going to happen. This is just a very deeply rooted wish to be in this form, to have the sense experiences that we're having—one of the most deeply rooted wishes in our being.

Bhavatanha, the Pali term, also means craving for becoming. It means the wish to be something, to have an identity that we can coagulate around and identify ourselves as being something. We may want to have a particular career. We may want to be in a relationship. We may want to be a parent.

rich. We may want to be famous or athletic or something like that. Those are wishes for a particular form of existence that we call becoming. I like this quote from Lily Tomlin: "I always knew I wanted to be someone, but I guess I should have been more specific." So this is *bhava taṇhā* also.

And then *vibhava taṇhā*, craving for non-existence—this is basically the wish to turn it all off. When life becomes too much, when it's painful, this is the impulse to non-existence that is the motive for suicide. Don't want to experience anymore what's happening in the body, what's happening in the mind, what's happening in the senses. So this is based on a deep aversion to life.

So these are the forms of craving. And the second noble truth also comes with a call to action. And that call is this: the noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. Abandoned.

So suffering was to be understood, and the cause of suffering, craving, is to be abandoned. This is our work. When we meet craving and its forms of greed, aversion, and delusion, we are to learn how to let go of those.

So you can talk about it in terms of the three *kilesas*, greed, aversion, delusion. You can talk about it in terms of the five hindrances that Bonnie talked about. You can talk about it in terms of the taints or *āsavas* . They're all pointing to the same letting go of these impurities that are deeply rooted in our mental habits.

Because they are so deeply rooted, we can't get rid of them through an act of will. We can't just decide, "Oh, I'm not going to have any more aversion today." It doesn't work that way. The abandoning of these forces comes only through deep insight. And in the Buddhist tradition, the understanding is that it comes through the direct realization of the unconditioned element or *nibbāna*. And that is what constitutes enlightenment.

So it is the direct realization of the unconditioned that has the potential for uprooting these forces in the mind.

So just really briefly, the second noble truth of craving is to be abandoned. The third noble truth, as I mentioned in the beginning, is that the end of craving is the end of suffering. The call to action there is that the third noble truth is to be realized. And the fourth noble truth of the Eightfold Path as the way to

the end of suffering—the fourth noble truth is to be developed. So that is what we're doing here. But we will spend a lot of time looking at especially the second and third noble truths.

Some form of craving expressed as greed, aversion, or delusion. The abandoning of that means that in the moment that craving goes out of the mind—it disappears—in that moment, we move into a momentary experience of the third noble truth of the immediate end of that particular suffering.

So we could say that the heart of our dharma practice is to move from the second noble truth of craving momentarily into the third noble truth of the end of craving. This is the heart of the dharma. This is the heart of our practice. And as one teacher put it, our practice is to change the habits of mind that lead to suffering. There is no other practice.

Second noble truth moving into third noble truth. This is what we want to find again and again and again. And the more often we're able to find it on a moment-to-moment basis, the more often that quality of peace becomes established as the baseline of our meditation and of our life.

Okay, let's sit together for just a minute, please.

This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood. This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. This noble truth of the end of suffering is to be realized. This noble truth of the way leading to the end of suffering is to be developed.

So we have about thirty minutes for walking and then we'll come back.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.