The Four Noble Truths

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:41

The subject of the talk this evening is the Four Noble Truths. Sometimes when I would be on retreat and the teacher would announce that the topic was the Four Noble Truths, my body would sort of go into this contraction. And I'd think, oh no, not more dukkha. I can't hear about any more dukkha. So I thought I would open this talk with a quotation from the Buddha, from the Samyutta Nikaya, where he says that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So let's let that be the tone for the discourse this evening.

I want to base this talk on the Buddha's first discourse where he expounded the Four Noble Truths. Just to set the stage a little for that event, he had become enlightened near the town of Gaya. After his enlightenment, he stayed around the Bodhi tree for another seven weeks. In those forty-nine days, he was simply enjoying the bliss of his deliverance and reflecting on what he had come to understand.

He was inclined not to teach. He thought nobody would understand. Then Brahma came down and asked him to teach, saying there are beings with little dust on their eyes who would understand. The Buddha thought, who do I know who might get it? He thought of his first two meditation teachers. Then he looked with his psychic vision and saw that both of them had just recently died, so they were not available for him to teach.

Then he thought of five friends with whom he had been doing ascetic practice. He thought these five ascetics would be able to understand. Again, with his psychic vision, he saw that they were in Varanasi. So he walked to Varanasi to find them.

He encountered them at the deer park, what's now Sarnath. When they saw him coming, they didn't want to talk to him. They saw that he'd put on weight and therefore knew he had fallen off the true path. He was no longer mortifying his body, so they weren't interested. But he persisted, and finally they agreed to lend an ear.

The sutta has come to be called the Dhammacakka-Pavattana Sutta, which means setting in motion the wheel of the dhamma. Giving these teachings set this entire history of Buddhist teachings and awakening in motion that we are now participating in. It was all set in motion on this day over twenty-five hundred years ago.

The Buddha described to his five friends his progress in this way. He said the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which leads to enlightenment. This middle way he described as going between the extremes of indulgence in sense pleasures—trying to seek happiness through the pleasure of the

body—and the extreme of self-mortification, of harming the body. He called both these extremes ignoble and unbeneficial.

It's also a way of balance between many other extremes. There's an extreme of trying to pull pleasure toward us called greed. There's another extreme of trying to push the unpleasant away called aversion. The middle way finds a balanced way in between those two. There's an extreme of over-efforting where we push ourselves too hard, become brittle and tense. There's a way of under-efforting where we're actually lazy and don't have the energy to fire the practice. There are extremes of eternalism and nihilism, believing that the world is eternal or believing that nothing is really here. The extremes of existence and non-existence. This middle way has profound depth to it, as became clear when the Buddha continued to teach.

So the Buddha began to expound his understanding to the five friends in the form of the Four Noble Truths. He declared that the first truth was the truth of suffering. This is often misstated as "life is suffering," but that's not what the Buddha said. He never made a statement like that. What he did say is that there is suffering that's an inevitable component of life.

The term he used, of course, was dukkha, and as you all know, this has many meanings. It's usually translated as suffering, but other good connotations include unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, unreliability, or stress. He went on to explain what he meant by this first noble truth. I'd like to read this passage from the text: "Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering."

Sorrow, grief, pain, distress, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering.

I love this formulation because it's so universal. It's something that all of us can relate to. It describes our inner experience. When we look at the kinds of suffering that the Buddha touches on, we can see that we're subject to all of them. And when we look around the world, we see the world subject to these very intense kinds of suffering.

The events of three weeks ago are one extreme form that touched us and people that we know quite closely. But if we use that as an eye to look upon the world, we see that Americans or New Yorkers are certainly not alone in that kind of suffering. Just in recent years, we can look at the conflicts in Bosnia or Kosovo or the Middle East, and we see the influence of war, of starvation and poverty, the acting out of genocide and exploitation, and the occurrence as instruments of state policy of torture and rape. Even in our own country, which is said to be relatively civilized, the widespread influence of racism and abuse in its many forms touches so many lives with suffering.

These are the grosser forms that we can see on the face of the planet going on every day. Often we feel we're exempt somehow from these grosser forms. A couple of years ago, I was leading a class of senior students at Spirit Rock—people who have quite a few years of Dharma practice—and I asked them to talk

about the kinds of suffering that they felt in their own lives. What really constituted dukkha for them?

This is some of what people said: They felt lonely or isolated or not connected with others. They had conflict in their intimate relationships. They were plagued by the afflictive emotions of fear or depression, sorrow or anger. They had to deal with their own aging, sickness, physical pain, and they also had to deal with the aging of their parents and the death of people that they loved. They described pressures in their work life, the pressure to perform, the sense of overwhelm from having too many tasks, a fear of inadequacy in their jobs. They noted they had a lot of self-judgments, that they were critical of themselves and others were critical of them. And they had fear and anxiety about their future.

All these forms of suffering we are also exposed to. We're not immune from them.

The Buddha went on to describe that there are basically three kinds of suffering that we encounter as human beings. The first he called dukkha dukkha, or you could say the suffering of pain itself. This is the suffering that comes from difficult experiences in mind and body, the difficult emotions—desire, disliking, anger, fear, grief—and the physical pain, bodily experiences of pain, of tension, or injury, or illness, or aging.

A more subtle kind of pain—almost anyone can feel and describe this kind of dukkha-dukkha—a more subtle kind of pain he called parinamadukkha, the suffering of alternation or change. And this is the unsatisfactoriness that comes even from the pleasant in life, because in time the pleasant will decay and fall away and fade. And when it goes, if we've been clinging to it, we will suffer from its passing. Everything that comes to us will also change, will alternate.

In talking about these two, the first two kinds of dukkha, Ajahn Chah said that it's like grabbing a poisonous snake. If you grab the head of the snake, it bites you and you feel the pain immediately. This is dukkha dukkha, grabbing the head of a poisonous snake, feeling the direct pain in mind or body. But he said if you grab the tail, this is like parinamadukkha, the pain of alternation. You grab the tail, which seems pleasant enough, but soon the head whips around and bites you. And then there's dukkha dukkha. So the one leads to the other.

The third kind that the Buddha talked about he called sankhara dukkha. You could describe this as the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory because they're not solid or stable. They're decaying even as we experience them. Every state that is compounded, that is conditioned, that arises out of causes and prior conditions, is already falling apart.

Carol and I were teaching this May, this spring in California by the Dalai Lama. It was really a beautiful event. It was three days of teachings on the Heart Sutra. It was outdoors in Mountain View in the Bay Area. It was beautiful weather. There was a big stage and a huge amphitheater with probably about 6,000 people sitting and listening. And up on the stage were about 100 monks and nuns from all the Buddhist traditions with their colorful robes. The Dalai Lama was up on a high throne decorated the way only the

Tibetans can decorate. And behind him, there was this beautiful, huge canvas that stretched across the whole stage—a stage that is used in rock concerts—on which was painted the Potala against an evening kind of twilight, really deep blue in the sky.

It was almost like seeing His Holiness back in his home of Lhasa. The energy there was like a dharma Woodstock. We'd run into people we knew and hang out on the grass, have our lunch, and soak in the vibes he was emanating. It was really a beautiful event.

In talking about the Heart Sutra, which is on the theme of emptiness, the Dalai Lama said—and this is also in connection with bodhicitta—if you really want to help others, you have to understand all the ways that they suffer. Each of these three kinds of suffering that the Buddha talked about is a little more subtle than the one before. It's fairly easy to grasp dukkha-dukkha, and it's fairly easy to grasp the pain of alternation. But he said it requires quite a lot of meditative subtlety to see this third kind, the sankhara-dukkha, the pain of formations that are not stable.

He made a point of emphasizing this. He said that we sometimes have the idea that impermanence means that things are stable now, but at some time in the future they're going to decay. He said that's the wrong understanding. The right understanding is that everything is unstable, even in this moment. If you look at the body through the eye of meditation, through the eye of samadhi, you can feel how the body sensations are just coming and going moment after moment, and there's nothing solid that we can rest in throughout the whole body.

His Holiness was saying that this whole world of conditioned phenomena is just like that. It is always unstable. This is why certain mental states—happiness, joy, delight—don't last. Even refined states like mindfulness and concentration, much less the outer situations like job satisfaction and harmony in personal relationships and the health of the body, are not fundamentally lasting. They're not stable. They're not capable of that.

This is a verse from the Samyutta Nikaya: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not delight in form." We can feel this as we sit in meditation, feeling the fluttery energy within the body, which a number of people have talked about during this retreat as connected with anxiety or symptomatic of anxiety. As you pay attention to that fluttery energy throughout the body, you feel how there's nothing solid that we can hold to there.

But we don't usually see like this. We don't see these three kinds of dukkha that clearly. We really have a deep felt longing for the world to be stable, for phenomena to be solid, for there to be something that we can hang on to. We really would like the world to be quite safe, cozy, predictable, warm, inviting, and not changing. Sort of like curling up in a Winnie the Pooh story. It would be really nice just to live with Pooh and Christopher Robin where everything would be taken care of. You have great adventures, but basically come to bed at night and get warm milk and a cookie.

But the world isn't like that. As we see through our meditation, it's quite intense, this world. The impingement of mind and body on our delicate consciousness is quite intense. It feels kind of piercing at times. It's very vivid. The pleasure and pain we take quite raw, undiluted, often. This is more the way the world is. Can we align our perceptions to it? Can we align our expectations to the way that the world really is?

It's not altogether bad that the world is this way. It's not good news when we first hear it—kind of upsetting, because we'd like that Winnie the Pooh world. But it's not altogether bad. The Buddha actually said that if there was one speck of form or matter in this world that was permanent, there could be no living of the holy life. There could be no liberation. That's an amazing statement.

The reason liberation is possible is because of the emptiness of created phenomena. If form were solid, suffering could be solid, and then it wouldn't be able to be abandoned. Because form is not solid, neither is suffering, and it's able to be abandoned.

The Buddha said that this truth of dukkha is to be understood. This was his advice. The truth of dukkha is to be understood. How do we relate to that point? This is an important point in our practice—how we hold the truth of dukkha. It's a painful truth to take in. It's not an easy one to hold.

It's very easy when we hear this truth of dukkha and learn about its pervasiveness to see the world as a scary place or view it in an aversive light. But on the other hand, if we don't stay in touch with it, we get fixated on ambition. We think that we can set goals and reach them, believing our meditation is going to land us on some cozy plateau of mindfulness and concentration that we can stay at forever—a kind of spiritual materialism. We get gaining ideas.

But as we hang out with the truth of dukkha, it's easy to let it condition a kind of aversion to life. If life is unsatisfying, then I can't like it. This is not the intention. The Buddha addressed this directly. He said, "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with the Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure."

I think this is a very interesting statement. If we feel ourselves overwhelmed with the suffering in our practice, we're not quite on the Buddha's track. Then we need to bring some uplift into the mind and to find ways that work for you to bring that uplift.

One of the ways that's been really helpful for me in practice has been the cultivation of loving-kindness. Developing the practice of loving-kindness generates a kind of friendliness toward the world, and with it a kind of joy that can hold the seeing of dukkha. So that in a way, the insight into dukkha and the presence in the heart of loving-kindness or friendliness can grow up together, side by side as we walk the path. This factor of metta is an antidote to aversion. Metta and aversion can't coexist. I think this is a very skillful way to deepen one's practice of opening to dukkha without falling into aversion.

Closely tied to that is the factor of compassion. Compassion actually arises out of the seeing of dukkha. It's

said that suffering is the proximate cause of compassion. So if we feel strongly caught in the grip of dukkha, we can convert in that moment to a feeling of compassion for ourselves, first of all, and by extension to all other beings, knowing that this suffering is universal, knowing that we all feel it.

There was a great teacher in India from the 7th or 8th century named Atisha, who taught from a Mahayana point of view and gave a number of pith teachings that were like pointers for people along the path. One of his pith sayings that I recall again and again was, "Always keep a cheerful mind." I love this reminder: always keep a cheerful mind. It's not easy to do—I'm sure you've found this many times—but I love it as a direction. We can steer ourselves more in that direction, and we can find things like metta that bring us uplift. Or as Joseph talked about, the qualities of devotion, whether to the three gems of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, to a benefactor, to a teacher that you particularly love or are inspired by, like the Dalai Lama—to remember what is wholesome in life and on the spiritual path.

When Jack Kornfield went to practice with Ajahn Chah as a young monk, one of the first things that Ajahn Chah said to him was, "I hope you're not afraid to suffer." And Jack said, "Suffer? I didn't come here to suffer. What are you talking about?" Ajahn Chah said that there are two kinds of suffering: there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. "Hopefully, you're here to practice the suffering that leads to the end of suffering."

Suffering is a vital deepener of our practice. I don't think we can deepen our practice without touching suffering. And yet we have such a fear around it. We hold ourselves back from going in and touching it in all its energy and all its rawness. Sometimes this is skillful. Sometimes we know that too much suffering can overwhelm us, and we need to hold ourselves back. But at other times when we're in a balanced place, can we get an interest in that suffering and a kind of fearlessness about it, knowing that we can learn from it and not holding back?

I was on retreat here a few years ago and I was seeing Joseph as my teacher. I was in retreat for about a month, and I hit this phase of a lot of mental agitation and confusion. I was just having a real whirring of thoughts and energy and restlessness. It was very unsettling because my practice had been getting quite calm and pleasant and deepening very nicely up to that point. Then I hit this mass of confusion. I got particularly upset about it because I thought, "Oh no, I'm not going to be able to further my practice because of this."

So I went to Joseph, and I was crying on his shoulder about all this agitation and confusion. He said, "Well, what bothers you the most about it?" And I said, "Well, it's because my practice isn't going to deepen." Joseph replied, "Guess what, guy?

He said, this is the deepening of your practice.

That put such a different light on it for me. I could suddenly take it as a source of learning, something I could grow from and come to understand. It's another manifestation of dukkha. Let me open to this and

understand this. It gave me a whole new relationship to it.

Sometimes when we find ourselves in a place of suffering and we aren't able to release, it's very helpful just to note it as suffering. Or "suffering is like this." Or simply "dukkha." I sometimes will just drop in the note "dukkha" if I'm really stuck in it, and it gives me a different relationship to it. It actually opens the door to compassion because I connect with the universality of it. I realize that it's not that anything has gone wrong with my practice. This is an integral part of life. As long as we're not awakened, this is an integral part of our practice. It's okay. It doesn't mean we've done anything wrong.

So the Buddha continued with the second noble truth, which he said is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. "Now, what 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 now here and now there. That is, craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence."

To me, this is one of the most beautiful passages in human history—to know that there is a cause for suffering. When I came into the dharma, I didn't know that. I thought my suffering was this impenetrable block in my being, something I had no way of working with or changing. I thought it was just a mass that was an inevitable part of life. But when the Buddha said there is an origin of suffering, I realized that anytime there's an origin, there can be an ending. This is a fantastic doorway.

Craving in this passage is the translation of the Pali word tanha. The original meaning of tanha is very simple—it means thirst. This is a really evocative word in this context. The cause of suffering is thirst.

Number one, it points to the deep root of it. Which of us thinks we'll ever get beyond being thirsty? But it also points to the recurring nature of it—how it's just arising in our being, latching onto an object, getting satisfied, ending, and then coming back. When you're thirsty, you know how great it feels to drink a glass of cool, clear water. It feels fantastic, and the thirst goes. But how long is it before the thirst comes back?

Craving—another word often used to translate tanha—is desire. But I think this misses a little bit of the point of tanha. Of course, desire gets a really bad reputation in Buddhism. I mean, if you were the source of suffering, you'd get a bad reputation too. But not all desire should get tarred with the same brush.

There are all these words in the language of the Buddha that point to unwholesome forms of desire: tanha or craving, lobha or greed, raga or lust, kamachanda or sense desire. These are considered unwholesome forms of desire. But there are also wholesome forms of desire, and this is important to remember. Not all desire is bad.

One of the four bases for spiritual power—the qualities that when cultivated lead to liberation—is a factor called chanda, which literally means desire. It's often translated as zeal in most Western translations, but that kind of glosses over the simple meaning of chanda, which is desire.

The desire for liberation, the desire for freedom and enlightenment, is a potent force that carries us along

the path. This is a very wholesome kind of desire. In the Eightfold Path, the second factor, samma-sankappa, is sometimes translated as right aspiration—another form of desire, we could say, of aiming ourselves toward liberation. In the metta phrases, we wish for happiness for others. This is a form of wanting: I want others to be happy. I sincerely do. This is a kind of desire, too. These are all wholesome desires.

But this craving is not. It is the source of suffering. Yet it's also not unidimensional—it's not just about desiring, although in this passage it sounds that way. The text speaks of craving "which is accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight now here and now there." It sounds like it's only about desire, but I think a better way to understand it is that it's the wanting things to be different than they are. The source of suffering is wanting things to be different than they are.

So this craving actually expresses itself not only in the force of wanting the positive, wanting the pleasurable, but also in the force of pushing away the unpleasant, and also in the force of confusion so we don't see those movements of greed and aversion. Basically, I understand craving as equated with greed, aversion, and delusion—the three unwholesome roots in the mind. So it encompasses wanting, fear, anger, sorrow, confusion, all of those kinds of unwholesome states.

The Buddha describes it as finding delight "now here, now there." This is evocative also. Craving picks different objects, but it's always the same force. It's always the same thirst. We tend with our conventional mind to get fixated on the object and to think the object is really important, as though in satisfying or acquiring the object, we will end the longing.

But I think the genius of the Buddha was turning the mind back to look at the force itself—the force of wanting—and seeing that as the problem. When we want something, there's actually, if you look, a storyline underneath that says something like, "If I get that, I'll be happy." There's a kind of promise of lasting happiness in the force of wanting. And of course, when we do experience it, it does satisfy for a while. But as we mentioned, the craving just comes again later.

We usually don't go back to the source, which is the craving. We usually get fascinated all over again by the new object, alighting "now here and now there." When we bring it back to look at the force in the mind, we see it's the same, whatever the external object. And we start to see that craving is something that just springs from our being again and again, clothing itself in all different kinds of masks and disguises—all the hindrances and all the variations on the hindrances—to fool us and trick us. But it's just one movement: wanting things to be different than they are.

And so the power of our practice is when we bring our full awareness in alignment with the way things are in this moment, when the mindfulness and the steadiness of mind are such that the awareness is fully meeting the arising phenomena. The awareness is knowing the dhammas of that moment. They are so close together that there's no room for the oozing out of craving. There's no room for the disturbance of greed or aversion. We are not wanting things to be different because we're exactly with the way things

are.

So this is the retraining of the mind and pointing it in the direction of freedom, experiencing the freedom. But what we see is when the mind falls away from that kind of mindfulness and concentration and that real unity of awareness and experience, then almost like a dam has been opened, the deluded mind, the unfree mind, just starts spinning off craving in all its different manifestations.

One of the things that I notice on retreat a lot, one of the cravings that comes for me, is the craving for stillness. I don't know if you've noticed this—particularly after a quiet sitting, a peaceful sitting, you come back and the mind's busy again, and I start to really want to feel that stillness again. And I start to feel it as a strain in my body, that craving for stillness. And then after some time, I rediscover the stillness. It lasts a while, and it's pleasant, and it also passes quickly. And once again, I notice a craving for stillness.

What's the meaning of it all? Just going through that cycle: craving for stillness, having it be satisfied, and then having it pass again. And so sooner or later, we start to learn we actually don't need to crave for the stillness when it's not there. That craving is just an extra distortion in the heart and mind. And we just settle into the restlessness or the sleepiness or the wandering mind, the inability to focus, and have that be okay—just bringing more and more acceptance to the way things are.

Another way to think about this craving is in terms of self-centeredness. What we're craving is almost always our own benefit, our own betterment, our own welfare, our own pleasure. You notice how it's not so hard to put up with other people's problems? We don't usually get that bent out of shape because our neighbor has lost their job. But when we lose a job, it's a big deal.

So this self-centeredness gets activated again and again and again. And this is really the operation of karma. Karma is all the force of our self-centered actions—karma based on greed and aversion and confusion, all of our self-centered actions trying to bring ourselves happiness. But what the Buddha said is this self-centeredness is the source of the suffering.

This is a quotation from Shantideva, a ninth-century Indian teacher: "Whatever sorrow there is in the world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy. Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy." There's a beautiful expression of dana and compassion and metta. And it also points to the power of bodhicitta—that when we can take the welfare of others even a little bit into our heart, it is such a wholesome force, because it starts to undo a little tiny bit of the self-centeredness. And undoing the self-centeredness undoes the craving, and that undoes the suffering.

There's also the beauty of the practice of loving kindness, opening ourselves to caring about others. Even young people kind of get the sense of this course of things. There was a family retreat going on here one year, and one of the teachers came up to a five-year-old boy who'd been kind of rambunctious during the day and asked the child, "What do you think will happen if you spend your whole life going around just trying to get what you want?" And he said, "Trouble." The thing is, as we grow up, the amount of trouble

we can create gets a lot bigger. A lot bigger.

So the Buddha in this passage talked about three kinds of craving. He said the craving for sense pleasures, the craving for existence, and the craving for non-existence. The craving for sense pleasures is kama tanha. This really came home to me on a retreat that Carol and I taught in Italy a little over a year ago. It was early in the retreat, and we were doing one-to-one interviews. This really nice young guy came into the interview—nice-looking guy, good energy. And he said, "I'm having a hard time settling into this retreat." It was only the second day, so I thought that wasn't too unusual. I said, "Well, what's going on?" He said, "I don't want to be here." I said, "Oh, really? Well, why did you come?"

And he said, "Well, I had a choice. This is my vacation time. It's August. And some friends invited me to go to the Caribbean with them and have a vacation in a tropical country. Or I could come on this meditation retreat. I really wanted to go to the Caribbean, but there were no more airplane tickets left. So I came on this meditation retreat instead."

I understood why he didn't want to be here. His mind was full of blue tropical water and warmth... I shouldn't talk about this, should I? You can imagine the kind of pleasant images that were going through his mind. So we just had to talk about how desire works and how the force of desire is obscuring the ability to appreciate the present moment. And when the force of desire is absent, we can appreciate the present moment. And then he settled in and got into the retreat and had a great experience.

But it's like this too when we find ourselves drifting off into pleasant fantasies. And we start to see this connection between suffering and craving. When there's more suffering, there tends to be more craving because we want to get out of the suffering. And when there's less suffering, the craving also goes down often. And then when there's more craving, it tends to generate more suffering. So suffering and craving kind of go in this tightening circle until we can bring some mindful presence to it.

And that kind of cuts through the cycle.

The second kind of craving the Buddha talked about is the craving for existence, *bhava tanha*, sometimes called the craving for becoming. And in addition to pleasant fantasies, one of the ways that I see my mind go a lot when I'm sitting is into plans. I go into future plans where I'm living in some part of the world or having some particular job or close to some particular community or hanging out with some particular people or doing some particular kind of work, or doing something around home that I really enjoy.

What I'm actually feeding off of is a quest for an identity. I paint this beautiful picture of what life could be like, as though if I got all those externals, I would have a solid identity that I could hang myself from. This is the flavor of the desire for becoming. Let me be this. That will satisfy my insecurity, my confusion, my unhappiness, my unfulfillment.

The Buddha said, again from the *Samyutta*, "When one intends and plans and has a tendency toward anything, that becomes a basis for future renewed existence." That generates this desire for becoming,

which comes to fruition.

The third type of craving is the craving for non-existence, called *vibhava tanha*. This basically means wanting to get rid of what is unpleasant. This is where the force of aversion gets expressed through *tanha*. When I talked earlier about having an aversion to life that is conditioned by seeing *dukkha*, this is really nothing other than a form of *vibhava tanha*, a desire for non-existence, a not liking of some things that have come into existence—the painful aspects of existence.

So the Buddha said that this noble truth of the origin of suffering, this craving, is to be abandoned. The first noble truth was to be understood. The second noble truth is to be abandoned.

We've all heard this before: to let go. Especially in times of suffering, we know it's a good idea. We're not unintelligent. We would do it if we could. Sometimes we just can't. We know what we ought to do, and sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't.

Again, you might try, when you're caught in that place of knowing that there's a holding and not being able to let go, just noting "craving" or "thirst"—just to connect with that impersonal, universal force that comes into the mind.

This is also a place where the feeling tone might be helpful, *vedana*. If there's a force of wanting, you might just notice underlying it: What pleasant experience is being wanted? Where's the feeling tone that's creating the sense of pleasantness that we're wanting? If it's not liking, where is the feeling tone creating that unpleasantness that's engaging the pushing away? It can be very helpful for cutting through some of the stickiness.

The third noble truth the Buddha described as the noble truth of the end of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, the freedom from it. Elsewhere, it's described as the extinction of greed, the extinction of aversion, the extinction of delusion. And it's said that this indeed is called *nibbana*, or the unconditioned.

This extinction of greed, aversion, delusion is what constituted the awakening of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree—that full enlightenment. I just wanted to read this verse that he is said to have uttered upon awakening. You've probably heard it many times. I love its beauty:

"Through many a birth I wandered in *samsara*, 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."

This noble truth of the end of suffering is to be realized. How can we realize this in our practice? I think it's helpful to understand that this noble truth can be taken either as a permanent end of suffering—the full enlightenment, full awakening that the Buddha experienced—but it can also be taken as a temporary

end of suffering. And that temporary end of suffering gives us a little hint of what the permanent end of suffering is about.

The Buddha often said that peace was the highest happiness. And this peace is available any time that we're willing to let go of craving. Ajahn Chah said, "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace."

If you let go completely, there's complete peace.

So to whatever extent we can let go, we can touch that peace. And in touching that peace, we get a little bit of a taste of the flavor of nibbana, of the unconditioned, the end of suffering.

I think it's very helpful in practice to pay close attention to how it feels when a particular form of suffering or craving ends. You're following a mind state like desire or fear or anger or sorrow. You're following it really closely, being with it, being with it, being with it—mindful, mindful, mindful. And then you notice the moment when it's no longer there. What is the feeling right then? What is that quality in the mind?

There's a feeling of relief, of release, of freedom, of ease, of peace. All these things are pointers to that final peace the Buddha talked about.

This flavor of release or peace is called deathless because it's always present. It's always available in any moment when we're willing or able to let go. It's not something that has to be conjured up. It's not a conditioned thing. It's there in letting go of craving. Ajahn Buddhadasa said that nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any defilements.

There are really two routes into this kind of peace, this kind of freedom. One is a letting go. This is the way we usually know. We've been caught in some form of craving, some kind of desire or aversion, and we mindfully follow it, let it go, and we feel the change. This is one way in.

But there's another way in, which is without reference to anything else, without reference to conditioned phenomena, to access that peace directly—not referring to what is clung to, not referring to whether there's clinging or not in the moment, but directly putting the mind into a state of freedom or non-clinging. As we become more familiar with the feeling of this state, we are able to just go there, to just put ourselves there.

Sometimes it's available, sometimes it's not. If it's not available, don't get hung up. Then go back to the mindfulness in connection with the difficult state that might be present.

But one of the ways that the Buddha described accessing this directly—this suggestion appears like a meditation instruction in at least a couple of places in the Pali Canon—is to direct one's attention to the deathless element, *amatadhatu*, the deathless element, which is a synonym for nibbana, or this peace. And the Buddha basically said, let go of everything that's conditioned. Direct your attention to the deathless element thus: "This is the peaceful. This is the sublime. The stilling of all formations. Nibbana."

We become able to access this more and more directly as we get used to abiding in that place of freedom, in that place of not clinging. And at times in our practice, that can be the predominant meditation instruction. That can be the predominant direction in our practice—resting in the peaceful, in the stilling of all formations. Resting in the deathless.

The fourth noble truth is that there is a way to the end of suffering, and that way is this noble eightfold path, which you know well: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The Buddha said that this noble truth of the way leading to the end of suffering is to be developed.

These four noble truths are to be understood, abandoned, realized, and developed for the last one. So I'm not going to go into detail on the Eightfold Path. We've talked about it a lot. More importantly, you're doing it. Every day, every hour, you're really activating that path.

I just wanted to close with a reading where the Buddha described this path. This is also from the Samyutta:

"It is just as if a man wandering through the forest were to see an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by people of former times. He would follow it, and following it he would see an ancient city, an ancient capital inhabited by people of former times, complete with parks, groves, and ponds, walled and delightful.

"In the same way I saw an ancient path, an ancient road, traveled by the fully self-awakened ones of former times. And what is that ancient path? Just this noble eightfold path of right view and so on. I followed that path. Following it, I came to the direct knowledge of suffering, the direct knowledge of the origin of suffering, the direct knowledge of the end of suffering, and direct knowledge of the way leading to the end of suffering.

"Knowing that directly, I have revealed it to monks, nuns, male lay followers, and female lay followers, so that this holy life has become powerful, rich, detailed, well-populated, widespread, and proclaimed among devas and humans."

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