First Noble Truth: Suffering (Dukkha)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 56:12

The talk tonight is on suffering and the cause of suffering. You may recognize this is an abridgment of the Four Noble Truths, focusing only on the unhappy parts, so prepare yourselves.

I was once about to give the Four Noble Truths talk here and someone in the staff room said to me, "Do you really want to talk about that? We've really heard quite a lot about dukkha already in this retreat." But hey, that's what being in a Theravadan center is all about, so I hope you'll feel right at home. The Buddha said at one point that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy, so I hope that will be your experience tonight.

I'm sure you all have heard the story of the Buddha's awakening under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gaya—how he thought of not teaching but was urged to do so by a Brahma who descended and said there are beings who will understand. He then traveled across a couple of hundred miles of northern India to find five friends he had practiced with before in his ascetic period, called the group of five bhikkhus in the discourses. He located them in the deer park in Sarnath near Benares, approached them, and delivered his first Dharma discourse. In that discourse he laid out the basic teaching on the Four Noble Truths.

The talk tonight is primarily based on his first discourse called the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, which translates as "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma"—this wheel that he established almost 2,600 years ago and which is still transforming beings' lives even today. The rest of his forty-five years of teachings until he was eighty were really just an amplification of this first talk, sort of like footnotes to it.

You may also remember that famous sutta of the handful of leaves, where the Buddha said, "Which is greater, O monks, the handful of leaves that I've collected in my hand or the leaves in the trees in the forest around us?" The monks, being no simpletons, said, "Well, of course, the handful of leaves is not nearly as great as the leaves in all the forest." But what you may not know is that he went on to say in that discourse: "Just so is what I have shared with you—very small compared to all the things I know by direct knowledge. But what I have shared with you is enough for you to gain complete liberation, and what I have shared with you, what you are to understand, are the Four Noble Truths." So he again reiterated that as the essence of the handful of leaves that his teaching had disclosed.

I'll mention the Four Noble Truths briefly as a way of review. The first is the truth of suffering. The second is the truth that the origin of suffering is craving. The third is the truth that the end of suffering lies in the end of craving. And the fourth is that the way to the end of suffering is through the Noble Eightfold Path.

Tonight I want to talk about these first two noble truths. What distinguishes the Buddha from simply a

philosopher is that in addition to the insights of the Four Noble Truths as just outlined, he added to each one an injunction, a direction, a command. It was not sufficient just to hear the teachings; with each of the Four Noble Truths there was a suggestion or prescription that those listening needed to carry out. From the very first days of his sasana, of his teaching, the Buddha was not simply philosophizing—he was directing people how to walk the path to liberation. I'll talk about the injunctions or prescriptions as well as we go through these Four Noble Truths.

The way he expressed the first truth is like this: "This is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, lamenting, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Association with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not getting what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering."

This truth is sometimes represented, especially in the non-Buddhist world, as "Oh, the Buddha taught that life is suffering" or "everything is suffering," which casts a kind of gloomy pall around the notion of Buddhism. But this is not what the Buddha is saying, and it's not implicit in this statement. It's not what he meant either, I don't believe.

The word he was using throughout the Four Noble Truths, which we usually translate as suffering, is the Pali word dukkha. No English word is adequate to translate the range of meanings implicit within this Pali term. I'm going to use suffering as the primary translation as we go through the talk, but please be aware that it's not a very good translation—it's simply such a common one that I'll use it.

Dukkha has a whole range of meanings, from the most intense kind of pain imaginable, which usually carries a strong experience of suffering, down to very subtle levels of unsatisfactoriness or unreliability. The basic sense is that this world, as available through our six senses, is not capable of providing lasting satisfaction. You could say that perhaps the best general translation for dukkha is "incapable of satisfying," but that's cumbersome, so we shorten it to suffering. The range extends from intense experiences of unhappiness to very subtle experiences of lack of fulfillment.

Some other translations you'll read in different texts include unsatisfactoriness, unhappiness, unreliability, stress, and anguish. All of these convey facets of the meaning of dukkha. When you come to any specific passage, it's helpful to understand which aspect or nuance of meaning the passage is particularly pointing to, because some passages point to direct experiences of pain while others point to the more subtle manifestations of unreliability.

as pointing to a kind of lack, or you could say a lack of fulfillment, that is universal in the way that as humans we live our lives until we undergo the training that leads to freedom. There is a universal sense of insufficiency, of feeling that something is missing. There is not a general and constant pervasive sense of contentment throughout the human world, as you may have noticed.

Even if we have everything externally—which so often these days we have in this Western paradise that

technology has helped to give us—it seems that the basic level of unhappiness is perhaps even increasing in our world.

But this also doesn't mean that everything is miserable. There are people whose lives are basically happy, who have a great deal of happiness and even contentment in their lives—ordinary people, untrained. Yet even for such people, where there's a baseline of happiness and contentment, there are good days and bad days. There are pleasurable experiences and unpleasurable experiences. There are times of frustration as well as times of contentment. But this pointing to an essential lack of fulfillment is, I think, a good way to remember the essence of this truth.

One of the things I appreciate a lot in the way the Buddha phrased his teaching on the First Noble Truth is how universal it is. If he had come along and said, "Basically, life really sucks," a lot of people would have just turned off and gone to hear somebody else—probably in California—who was painting a much rosier view of the human condition. But everything that he says is hard to disagree with. Birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, and pain are all suffering. We can all relate to that. The association with what we don't like and the separation from what we like and not getting what we want—these are things that everyone can relate to as happening regularly in our lives.

The other thing I appreciate is that in its universality, it's also very impersonal. It doesn't say, "I am suffering," or "You are suffering," or "You should realize how much you're suffering, guys." It doesn't say it that way. And when you think about it, if we take it that way, that has a really different feeling.

How often in our minds do we kind of take it that way? "Oh, I really have a lot of suffering in my life. I have a problem in this part of my life. I've had this very painful pattern of emotion in my psychology for years and years. I don't know what I'm going to do about it. I don't know when I will get rid of it." These are the kinds of thoughts that tend to spin out when we phrase this as "I am suffering."

It's a very different feeling when we step back and take a look at the universality of suffering as a noble truth. When we go on in the vein of "I am suffering," does it feel very noble to you? It generally doesn't to me. When my mind runs in those directions, it feels lowering. I feel weighted down by the burden of those kinds of thoughts. It's not uplifting. It doesn't elevate me, and it doesn't give me dignity.

But when we see it as this universal psychological condition that all human beings are subject to, that to me is more what our friend Stephen Batchelor calls "ennobling." That becomes an ennobling truth.

Why? For a few reasons. Number one, if we don't take our own difficulties so personally, then we might be able to accept them more easily. When we realize that what we're struggling with is part of the universal human condition, well, maybe it's not so much our fault. Maybe it doesn't invalidate us as a person.

Secondly, it can help connect us to everyone else that we meet. In this culture, we tend to put a premium on being upbeat and happy and putting on a smiling face in public. And sometimes we are, let's say, taken in or forget to look under the surface of the cultural appearance to recognize that everybody is dealing

with these same issues of birth and aging and illness and death and being separated from what is pleasing. When we start to go a little deeper into this universal human condition of unsatisfactoriness, then we can start to connect also with everyone we meet, knowing that somehow we're in the same boat with them. And this kind of connectedness is the doorway to awakening compassion.

I think this is one of the great benefits of the Brahmavihara practices. As we go through the phrases in either metta or compassion, we realize we all share the same deep wishes, and we all have the same deep struggles in achieving them. The Brahmaviharas serve then as a way of uniting us in the human family, of allowing our compassion and goodwill to flow out.

Sometimes the sense that "I am suffering" and the claiming it as ours has just the opposite effect. It can feel quite isolating, as though we have to be ashamed of the pain that we feel—that we can't expose it, that we can't share it with anyone else.

There's a lovely poem by Naomi Shihab Nye that expresses this connection. It's called "Kindness."

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things.

Feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of 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.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows, and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The line I most appreciate in this poem is where she says, "you must speak to sorrow till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is vast. It's universal. It includes all sentient beings, all subject to the first noble truth of unsatisfactoriness.

As we start to explore the kinds of unsatisfactoriness that we encounter—and meditation practice is the only way I know of to plumb the depths of this kind of seeing—we come upon three kinds that the Buddha talked about. He said the three kinds are dukkha-dukkha. Can you guess what that is? That's like a double hit—the immediate pain of existence. Then there is viparinama dukkha, which is the pain of alternation:

we may have pleasurable circumstances for a while, but when they change, we feel the loss and separation, the pain of change. And the third is called sankhara dukkha. You could translate this as the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena.

Looking briefly at the level of dukkha-dukkha, it's helpful from time to time to reflect that this is an integral part of our world. The experiences of illness and death are clearly, for most of us, going to feel like dukkha-dukkha. When we look around the world and think of the wars and conflicts going on—the genocide and the torture, places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Tibet—we see big eruptions of this kind of intense suffering. Even in our own society, where there is not a time of war, if you really start to listen to the stories of the people that you meet, you'll find instances not so far from our own lives, in our own home, of murder, of rape, of racism, and abuse of children. All of this is going on in our own communities, all around us.

Living in the fairly privileged lives that I think most of us live, we are still subject to various kinds of dukkha-dukkha. Sally and I were leading a class a few years ago of senior students who had all been practicing for a while and were materially reasonably comfortable. We had been working together for some months, if not years at that point. And one evening I asked the group to talk about the pain that was in their own individual lives.

I'll mention just a few of the things that people shared that evening. They talked about a sense of isolation and a lack of connection with others. They talked about still dealing with their afflictive emotions—depression or sadness or anger or anxiety. They talked about feeling the pressures in their work life and the struggle to make ends meet and a fear of inadequacy, of not performing well enough in their work. Because this was a group partly of roughly our generation, they were already feeling the effects of aging and talked about the difficulty of that. And everyone knew the impact of illness. Again, probably because of the age of our group, there was a lot of discussion of aging parents who are losing their capacities and declining physically and mentally, which, as you know, is a very sad thing to see in people that you're close to. These were just some of the common experiences for people even in the fairly select circle of practitioners.

Viparinama dukkha, the pain of alternation or change, is something we're all subject to. We enjoy pleasurable conditions or experiences, and when they change, we tend to feel the loss of them. If there's been even the slightest inclination of grasping—even the slightest—then there will be at least some pain or friction when the change happens.

Ajahn Chah said this alternation of pain and pleasure is like a poisonous snake. He said if you grab the head of a poisonous snake, it will bite you right away, and that's dukkha-dukkha. But if you grab hold of the tail, which is the non-painful end, and you hold on, eventually the head will swing around and bite you too, and that's viparinama dukkha. So the lesson is: don't grab. It's not easy to do.

The third type of dukkha the Buddha talked about is called sankhara dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness of

conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory because they are unstable. They are all unstable. Every state that is put together from prior causes and conditions is already falling apart.

It's not like viparinama dukkha, where we see that something is going to fall apart at some time in the future. With the insight of sankara dukkha, we bring concentrated attention to our moment-to-moment experience and we see that every mind state, every physical sensation, and every external sense impression is arising and passing over and over again, moment after moment after moment. When we come into that level of seeing, we truly see the unreliability of conditioned phenomena.

We had the opportunity a few years ago in California to hear the Dalai Lama. Sally and I were there; I think Sharda was there too. He was outdoors in the Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View—it's a place that Led Zeppelin might have played twenty years ago. It's a huge stage, and if Led Zeppelin had been there, it would have been full of their speakers. But on this day, the backdrop to the stage was a huge painting. The whole stage was a painting of the Potala Palace, where the Dalai Lama used to live in Lhasa, painted in the colors of sunset. There were these purple and orange colors streaking the sky and reflecting off the windows of the painted Potala Palace. The Dalai Lama was on a big throne, projected over big screen televisions so that everyone—there were several thousand people in the seats and on the grass amphitheater—could see him. It was a very wonderful feeling. It was kind of like being at a Dharma Woodstock. It had that festival atmosphere. Being with the Dalai Lama for three days as he taught on the subject of emptiness from the Heart Sutra was wonderful to listen to.

What he said about these three kinds of dukkha is that each takes an increasing subtlety of attention to see and understand. Everyone can be aware of dukkha dukkha, the suffering of pain. With a little bit of thought and reflection and examination of experience, one comes to understand that even pleasurable experiences come to an end—but that takes some investigation and reflection. And then it's only with the very subtle attention of a concentrated mind that can see the moment-to-moment arising and passing that we really deeply understand the unreliability of all conditioned things. This is the way the Dalai Lama explained it also. And he said that if you really want to help people in this world completely become free of their suffering, you need to understand these three levels completely yourself. Only then will you be able to help others release their bondage in these forms of dukkha.

There is a quote from the Pali Canon, put in the mouth of a Brahma, one of the higher gods, but it expresses a dharmic teaching: "Having seen form's flaw, its chronic trembling, the wise do not cling to form." Sankara dukkha is a pointer to this trembling within form—that moment by moment things are not stable, not even for one moment, but they're constantly being created and dissolving, created and dissolving. Thus the wise do not cling to form.

Our problem, of course, is that we don't really see dukkha in this way. We're blinded by very deep conditioned tendencies. We have very strongly built-in biases to see the possibility of happiness in the world, to see the possibility of permanence, and to see a self—when in fact, as you all know, the things of

the world aren't capable of satisfying, they are impermanent, and they do not constitute a self. But our conditioned nature is such that we keep looking for lasting happiness, permanence, and self. It's a form of ignorance that is clouding our understanding.

So we approach spiritual practice with the same attitude that we've approached our worldly life. By and large, we are all intelligent enough to have understood that lasting happiness doesn't come from external things. But when we come into the spiritual world, we tend to think that true happiness may be found in lasting spiritual things. This is certainly true for me, and I see it still in my tendency when I'm not looking closely.

I keep thinking that if I just get my attention right and my posture right and my concentration right and my intention right, I'm going to be able to sort everything out. I'm going to find this nice plateau of peace and concentration and openness and metta, and then I'm just going to be able to hang there—for six weeks at least, hopefully the rest of my life, but six weeks would be a good start. And then every time it doesn't happen that way, I feel like I've blown it. I've got to go back and set those conditions better. I find in myself this tendency to look to land somewhere in some meditative state that's going to be ongoing.

Meditative states are also part of compounded phenomena. Until you realize the unconditioned, meditative states are all put together by prior conditions. So just as they were put together, they will also fall apart.

So we not only keep wanting things out in the world, but we bring the same attitude here and we keep wanting things to be a certain way in meditation.

Now, it is definitely true that there are skillful attitudes to cultivate, skillful states of mind to cultivate in Dharma practice. And it does so happen that those skillful attitudes and skillful states of mind tend to feel better than the unskillful ones. So do you see the dilemma here? We do want to cultivate the factors of the Eightfold Path, the seven factors of enlightenment. And the factors of the Eightfold Path and the seven factors of enlightenment do feel better than their opposites.

So the question is, are you cultivating them out of a desire for pleasant experience, or are you cultivating them out of wisdom, knowing that they are onward leading? This is an interesting one to explore. I'm going to come back and touch on it again a little later, but it's an interesting one to keep an eye on.

Life throughout—worldly life, spiritual life—doesn't have cozy plateaus. It is changeable. It is raw. It's very vivid. And it's often intense. That tends to be our experience here as well as outside. But this changeable quality, while it's initially disappointing, works to our benefit in the long run.

I came upon this quotation in the Samyutta, and it caused me to ponder for a few moments, but I love the way the Buddha says this. He says, basically—I'm paraphrasing—if there was one speck of permanent form as big as my fingernail, then the holy life lived for the purpose of liberation would not be possible. In other words, if there was this amount of permanence in the universe, it would gum up the works, and we

would not be able to transform our mind from its current state, clouded by ignorance, into a state of full enlightenment. So it is only due to the impermanent and essentially empty nature of our own being that we are able to make that transformation. Suffering is not stuck either.

So what was the injunction? What's the prescription that goes with the First Noble Truth? The Buddha said, "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." This is the injunction with the First Noble Truth: it is to be fully understood. Part of the implication of that is we don't understand it now. Even after listening to this very eloquent discourse, you probably do not fully understand the First Noble Truth. And I have to admit, I don't either.

What does that mean, that we don't fully understand it now? Well, I think as a practice direction, this is a wonderful instruction. In order to fully understand this truth, we need to keep applying it over and over in our experience until we understand its depth. That means we can use it as a frame to bring in again and again and again to look at the way our experience is unfolding.

Ajahn Sumedho said that of his own practice—he used the Four Noble Truths as his primary practice orientation for all the years of his unfolding. That meant he would bring them in and apply them, check them out in each situation that he found himself in. He calls this a lifetime's practice: the understanding and the application of the First Noble Truth.

So let's talk about some of the ways that we don't see it. When we are experiencing some difficulty, how often do we see it as, "Oh, this is the First Noble Truth revealing itself"? Is it the first thought that comes to mind? How often do we think, "Oh, I've screwed up again. It's my suffering that's coming to the fore." So often we see it as there's something wrong with me, there's something wrong with somebody else, or there's something wrong with the world—and the world includes this center, the facility, the food, the weather.

Notice that because we don't like to see the truth of dukkha, we have a lot of ways of missing the point. We might deny to ourselves that it's happening: "Oh no, this isn't pain. This isn't as bad as it was yesterday anyway." Or we could judge ourselves: "You just did something wrong. It's your fault that there's pain now." Because the Noble Truth encourages us to take responsibility for suffering and the end of suffering, one can get this impression from the Buddha's teachings that we are at fault if we're suffering.

There's a sutta reference where a questioner comes and asks the Buddha, "Am I the cause of my own suffering?" I was very surprised to read that the Buddha said no. I found this very liberating. And then the questioner went on, "Was another the cause of my suffering?"

Think about mom and dad, if nothing else. And the Buddha said no. And the questioner said, well, how is it then? And the Buddha went through the chain of dependent origination. When ignorance is present as a condition, karmic formations arise. With karmic formations as a condition, consciousness arises, and so on—a sequence of twelve steps that ends in suffering. We'll probably talk about it more later.

The interesting thing to me, something that has made me reflect a lot, is that the first step in that chain which leads to suffering is ignorance. So I want to ask each of you: did you put your ignorance there? Do you remember ever kind of knowingly creating it? There's an enlightened mind to start with, but you slid ignorance into the picture to cover it? No. In fact, the Buddha said that a beginning for ignorance cannot be discerned—that we have been traveling this round really since beginningless time.

So if we're not responsible for ignorance, and ignorance is the primary source of our suffering, how can we ultimately say it's our fault? This may sound abstract to you, but the more I came to see ignorance as the fundamental problem in my relationship to life, the less I had to say, "Oh, I made that happen." And I saw that all the mistakes and all the blunders I'd taken in life, all the suffering I'd caused, stemmed from that ignorance. So the judgment of ourselves is off the mark of the noble truths. There are many, many causes and conditions that have led to the situation we find ourselves in.

Similarly, if we try to escape from the experience of pain by blaming others, we're also missing the point of the first noble truth. You can blame other people all day long for your suffering. Does it ever alleviate it? It hasn't for me. It can keep us stuck in a resentful or blaming attitude, but it doesn't seem to lift it.

So can we, when we're in difficulty, if we see a tendency to blame ourselves or to blame others or to blame the world, just stop for a moment and say, "Oh, this is a form of dukkha. This is the first noble truth." And then we might inquire a little more into it: what is the real source of this dukkha? But being able to name it as dukkha in its universal quality, being able to see it as one more instance of the first noble truth—this is the beginning of the kind of insight where the noble truth of dukkha comes to be fully understood moment by moment.

Now, there's another point I want to make in relation to dukkha that is kind of delicate, about opening to the first noble truth. As I've said, it's not an easy truth to be with. We have a built-in bias not to see it. It's part of the Buddha's teaching that goes against the stream. How can we learn to relate?

If we don't stay in touch with this noble truth, then our normal—what are called vipalasa—our illusory way of perceiving the world will lead us to believe that there is permanence, lasting happiness, and a self. And we will project into the future this safe and cozy plateau, whether it be through external things or through internal meditative states. And we will aim our lives into the future to land there—putting our happiness into the future based on an illusory wish. Clearly, this is misleading and involves us in more delusion.

But the other thing is that if we start to dwell on the concept of dukkha a lot, we can start to see the whole world in terms of dukkha. And then we really start to feel that gloom that's sometimes attributed to Buddhism, and we go, "Oh my God, everything is dukkha. Life is dukkha. My life is dukkha. My friend's life is dukkha. Everybody's life is dukkha."

But the problem with this is we have taken an insight and converted it into a belief. We are not seeing the

true nature of things moment by moment. We've taken one experience, held on to that as a generalized view of the world, and then stapled it everywhere: "It's like that, it's like that, it's like that, it's like that." So basically what we're doing is clinging to a view. But when an insight is turned into a view, it's no longer true. An insight needs to be of how things are here and now. If we form a view about the world as being dukkha, then that covers over the living reality. Because there are many, many moments in the day when there is not—I'll say it—when there is not dukkha. Generally, these moments slip by us, and we don't notice those either. But I'll talk about this when we get to the third noble truth at another time.

So the intention of the first noble truth is not so that you'll get gloomy and develop an aversion about life.

That's not the point, and it's a misapplication. It's converting a truth into a view.

The Buddha said this: "A practitioner is not overwhelmed by suffering and does not overwhelm himself with suffering. She does not give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma, yet she is not infatuated with that pleasure." And many of the suttas that talk about the development of the factors of enlightenment and the higher qualities of the path speak of aspects of happiness, joy, and rapture as being integral to the evolution of the path.

So in order to understand suffering, it doesn't work to be overwhelmed by it. We have to be able to—Ajahn Sumedho likes this phrase—stand under it. That means we have to be able to support it on our own shoulders as we're standing up straight. We have to be able to hold it. Or he says, embrace it, accept it. In order to understand suffering, we have to be able to let it be in our lives just as it is and still be upright, still be dignified, still be ennobled.

So how can we do that? Let me ask you: has suffering ever been useful in your practice? Have you ever learned anything? Has it ever opened qualities of heart or mind? What have you found through connecting with suffering?

Compassion. Suffering is said to be the proximate cause of compassion. Empathy—being able to feel another's suffering from feeling and opening to our own. Impermanence—investigation of suffering leads to seeing impermanence, so wisdom is cultivated. Appreciation—experiencing suffering can really make us appreciate the times that are free from it. Patience. Strength. Confidence: I can bear this, I can understand it, I can work with it.

So in many ways, suffering is a training ground for the pāramīs. We grow, we develop, and we open through a wise relationship to suffering. But it depends on us not being overwhelmed by it. We have to find that inner strength that lets us maintain our balance while relating to it, while understanding it, while feeling it, coming into contact. That really is the power of equanimity. When equanimity is present, it gives us that strength to learn from suffering.

One actor that I always really enjoy seeing in movies is Morgan Freeman. I recently read a little bit about his life story. He was born in 1937, so he turned seventy this year, and he grew up in Mississippi. Being an

African-American young man in Mississippi through the thirties, forties, and fifties would not have been a primarily happy experience, I have the feeling. And yet when you look at his character today, I feel an incredible amount of dignity and self-respect in his bearing. I don't know if you're aware of this, but he was the actor chosen in two different movies to play the character of God. That's kind of a testament to his character. I don't know many people who could play God very well, but he was pretty good.

Sally and I were in New York last fall. We went to a Broadway show—it happened to be Spamalot, which was not particularly dignified, but it was a lot of fun. When we came out of the theater after the show, probably around eleven o'clock, there was Morgan Freeman walking down the sidewalk toward us with a woman he was with. He was dressed in a black wool overcoat, and he looked just like a character out of his movies. Tall and dignified, and you could just see the crowd of people parting in advance of his wake. He has, to me, a wonderful bearing and character. And I have to believe that a lot of that was learned in dealing with the adverse circumstances of growing up as a black man in a racist culture.

So there are many things that we can learn from suffering when we can bear it, when we are not overwhelmed by it—but we need to see it clearly moment after moment. One of the ways that we know we haven't fully understood dukkha is that we keep chasing things. If we really understood dukkha and the true meaning of impermanence, the thoroughgoingness of impermanence, we wouldn't chase material things, we wouldn't chase people, and we wouldn't chase meditation experiences.

So to the extent that we still do those things, those are signs that we still have a way to go in the full understanding of dukkha.

Also along the lines of the ennobling quality of dukkha, Ajahn Chah said this, which you've probably heard before, but I love this reflection. He said, "There is suffering that leads to more suffering, and there is suffering that leads to the end of suffering."

Now I wonder what makes the difference between those two. We see a lot of suffering in the world that seems to lead to more suffering. There seems to be this spiral of violence and unhappiness and pursuit of materialism going on in the world today. So what is the kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering? Or better, we should say, what is the quality of mind that can transform suffering toward the end of suffering?

I think one aspect is this base of equanimity—that we have to be strong enough to be able to bear it. The other is an interest. If we have an interest to learn from that suffering, that brings in a very wholesome factor of mind. This sort of interest and investigative quality is the second of the enlightenment factors. The first is mindfulness, which gets us there and puts us in touch with what's happening. The second is that we want to investigate how that suffering is arising, how it's being sustained, and how it can be ended.

So if we get interested in suffering, this is really, I would say, the turning point that starts to lead us

toward using that as the end of suffering. We have lots of opportunities in this retreat to see that, as I'm sure you've noticed. That simple practice of turning the attention to the attitude of mind, seeing if there's wanting, seeing if there's not wanting, seeing if there's delusion—those are pointers to conflict, to struggle, or having an agenda. They point to some way we may be in conflict with our situation and therefore in some degree of suffering, either gross or subtle.

If we can take that opportunity to learn what leads to suffering, how does it get created, how can it be released, and how can it be ended—that's the investigation that we're here for.

I heard a teacher giving a Dharma talk recently, and he said something like, "Changing the conditions that lead to suffering is what our practice is about. There is no other practice than this." Changing the conditions that lead to suffering is what our practice is all about. There is no other practice than this.

It is only through our own wisdom that we can change those conditions. We can't do it by force of will. Or maybe a better way to say it is that it is only wisdom that can change those conditions, not force of will. So we have to look, investigate, attend, be interested, be curious, until the wisdom itself reveals to us suffering, its cause, and its end. And if we are patient and we stay with that experience, knowing it as the first noble truth, the wisdom will reveal that to us. The wisdom will unfold the way out.

I didn't get to the cause of suffering tonight, so we're halfway there. We'll do that another night. But I just want to end with the Buddha's formulation from this same discourse, from the same sutta, of the third noble truth, just to point to the direction of the teaching. This is what the Buddha had to say about the third noble truth:

"This is the noble truth of the end of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of craving, the giving up and relinquishment of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

That is the end of suffering.

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