Second Noble Truth: Craving (Taṇhā)

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:00:31

Earlier in the retreat, I talked about the first noble truth in the Buddha's first discourse, which is the truth of dukkha with its wide range of meanings from direct suffering to unreliability. I talked about how along with each noble truth comes a line of advice, a prescription for what to do with it. With the first noble truth, the prescription was that the truth of suffering, of dukkha, is to be fully understood. We went into the range of what that means.

Tonight I want to talk about the second noble truth. I'll begin by reading what the Buddha said in that sutta, Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma:

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.

When I first started to hear the Buddha's teachings, this was a very meaningful teaching for me. I think I mentioned that I came into practice because of unhappiness and confusion in my life. The experience at that time was that I was suffering in this kind of dark cloud of unknowing. I had no idea which way to turn, if there was a way out, the direction of the way out, or anything. When I heard this teaching, it was a revelation because it said there is a cause for unhappiness, and the cause is craving. I knew that somebody had figured this puzzle out, and that gave me tremendous faith and inspiration. I wasn't just lost in this massive cloud any longer—somebody had found what was putting it together. And anytime something has a cause, that cause can be undone. So this was really my doorway to freedom, hearing the second noble truth. It was very meaningful for me.

The Buddha's pointing to craving as the cause of suffering doesn't deny other people's analyses of the causes of suffering. In the Western world, there are many other analyses of what causes suffering. Marx analyzed it and brought it down to political and economic factors. Those are still valid. Freud analyzed it in terms of childhood development. Those may still be valid. Franz Fanon analyzed it in terms of cultural oppression based on race. That is still valid. So there are solutions on other levels—economic, political, cultural, racial, psychological—that are valid in their own domains. But the Buddha's analysis is so valuable because the domain that it applies to is the domain of liberation. I don't know of any other system that provides an analysis that allows for our own liberation. This is the context of the second noble truth.

The word that he used, almost universally translated as craving, is the Pali term taṇhā. Its original meaning is simply thirst. This is not a complicated psychological term in Pali. It just means thirst. You'll

see that the Buddha did this often with his terminology—he would take a familiar word from the culture and reframe it to suit his teachings. Nirvana actually has a history within India prior to the Buddha's adopting it as well.

I like this metaphor of thirst because it points to the deeply embedded nature of taṇhā, and also its recurring feature. If we are thirsty and we take a drink, we're satisfied, we're quenched for a while. But as we go longer, the mouth gets dry again, and we're thirsty again. Taṇhā is like this. It recurs again and again. The satisfaction is only temporary, and then the thirst comes back. It's this recurrent nature of craving, the incessant quality of it, that I think explains the phrase Sally used a couple of talks ago when she spoke about our human inability to sustain contentment. We are unable to sustain contentment because, if we have not examined the mind, this force comes in again and again and tells us you need something else—and you need it now. So an initial contentment may be there. You'll find moments of deep peace and contentment in your practice. But watch: at some point, the following message will come. It's not enough. Now you need this thing. Finding delight now here and now there.

The word desire has gotten a bad rap in Buddhism. You'd get a bad rap too if you were the cause of suffering. But we have talked about the fact that there are different kinds of desire.

There are desires that lead to suffering, and there are desires that lead in the direction of freedom.

Some of the desires that lead toward suffering include tanha or craving, lobha or greed, raga or lust, and kamachanda or sense desire. Some of the ones that lead in the direction of wholesome states of mind are chanda—when connected with our practice, often translated as zeal—as a base for spiritual success. There is dhammachanda, a love for the Dhamma, the truth. There is sammasankapa, or right attitude, right intention, including the aspiration or the wish for freedom. And in all the metta and compassion phrases we've used, the wish for others' well-being and our own well-being—these are wholesome desires.

Craving is not. So let us be clear about this one. It is always viewed as a disturbing factor in the mind and a cause of suffering, either subtle or gross. Although it's put in terms of a desire force, it's important to understand that craving doesn't just mean the greed force. It encompasses the whole notion that things should be different than they are. It encompasses greed, aversion, and delusion.

You can see in this way that greed and aversion are just two sides of the same coin. When we have an idea of the way we want things to be, then we resist anything that is different from that. Greed and aversion depend on one another. Delusion is that we don't see how we're doing this—we don't see that we're trying to manipulate the present moment out of greed or aversion to shape it a different way. So the fundamental meaning of craving is wanting things to be different than the way they are.

One of the qualities you find in craving that you don't find in wholesome desires is that it lacks qualities of wisdom, because it's accompanied by delusion, and it lacks the quality of patience. Craving has an urgency that says, "I need it now." There's this immediate yearning and dissatisfaction with craving. We can have

an aspiration for freedom, but accompanied by wisdom, we understand that the path to freedom is one of some duration. We have the accompanying quality of patience that lets us settle in contentment and peace, even though we haven't reached the goal. Craving doesn't have this quality of patience.

Just to highlight this mixture of the kilesas, the Buddha said that one should make an end to suffering without making an end to greed, aversion, and delusion—that is impossible. These other three are bound up intrinsically in craving.

I like this word craving because it seems to apply so much to what we see in the world today. The world has changed a lot since I was a kid, and much of it, it seems to me, is not for the better. One of the things I see—and I suppose my generation has to take some responsibility—is a world where in Western society today, in America particularly, all kinds of restraints and prohibitions have just been thrown out the window. You see people involved in the naked pursuit of pleasure through many means.

Unrestrained sexuality is held up as a reasonable form of pursuit. Violence is condoned or even glamorized in our culture. Dress has gone far from the style of modesty I grew up with. The use of drugs has become so prevalent that it hardly gets noted until somebody gets arrested, which doesn't happen all that often. There's this culture that anything goes today. Anything goes. Young actresses and stars go out on the town and behave in outrageously bad ways, and it only serves to heighten their celebrity because gossip sells. Then they get a bigger contract than they had before.

I have to say—and I don't consider myself a prude by any means; I lived through the sixties and participated wholeheartedly—I was kind of shocked when the queen knighted Mick Jagger. If I can think of anyone who represents the excesses of behavior initiated by the sixties, it would probably be Mick Jagger. For him to be recognized and elevated to that status as a revered cultural icon was a little much. What message does that send to our children?

I started feeling a bit like a temperance preacher in the 1890s. But you have to ask the question: Is this lack of restraint leading to real happiness? Or was there something in those old-fashioned standards that were called morality? Now, I don't think they were necessarily pinned by a lot of wisdom. But maybe as they had evolved over millennia, concepts like refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from the use of drugs and intoxicants that cause heedlessness—maybe there's something to those quaint old ideas.

One of the things I find interesting to see in modern culture is the difference between the gratification of craving on the one hand and what leads to happiness on the other. As we explore the qualities of restraint through our precepts, we find what more genuinely leads to happiness. One of the things I sometimes reflect on is how you can see the outcome of someone's life in their face after a certain age. Someone said that by age fifty, human beings get the face they deserve. I don't know about that. But one photo that's very revealing to me is that of Keith Richards, the lead guitarist for the Stones.

Keith Richards was born in 1943, so he was 64 that year. And his face carries the lines of considerable

aging. Then you look at the face of the Dalai Lama, who was born eight years earlier than Richards, making him 72 that year. And you see the clarity of his skin, his complexion, and you have to ask: which is the wiser path to follow?

On a scale even bigger than the Rolling Stones, when we look through the whole world from a broad historical view, I think you've probably seen this many times—it itself is driven by the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion. As the Buddha commented in the third discourse he gave, he said, "All is burning." And burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, burning with the fire of hatred, burning with the fire of delusion.

The world looks like this today, and I think it has probably always looked like this. I doubt there has ever been a time in human history that there has not been war. War is the most visible eruption of the forces of greed and hatred and confusion, but it's not the only one. Throughout the world, we see the effects of corporate greed in the destruction of the environment, the level of pollution. We see personal greed in the frauds that have occurred on Wall Street. We see the effects of racism, domestic violence, the abuse of children. The list goes on and on. You look at any one of these and you can see the driving forces of greed, hatred, and delusion in the minds of individuals carrying out these actions.

The Buddha said, "Clouded by ignorance and driven by craving, sentient beings wander through samsara." This really is the story of the world today, and I think always has been the story of the world. So by purifying our hearts, we help to break this pattern. By reducing the force of greed, hatred, and delusion in our own individual being and taking that back into the world, we help to change it just a little bit at a time.

One of the other comments about craving that appears in this statement of the Second Noble Truth is the Buddha's observation that "it is this craving which leads to renewed existence." What he's pointing to here is the quality of rebirth. He's saying that it's craving—the force of craving in our mind—that leads to our being born again.

There was an interesting thing that happened on my very first three-month course. I sat here in 1977; it was the second three-month course here at IMS. One of my friends on that retreat came up to Joseph, who was of course teaching back then. And you know how, as yogis, you can get very kind of wide-eyed and innocent? The psychological term for it is "regressed," but I kind of like wide-eyed and innocent people. So my friend was in this very wide-eyed and open place, and she came up to Joseph. I think she just found him in the lobby one time and said, "Joseph, why are we here?" And Joseph said, "Do you mean here on this retreat, or do you mean here in this universe?" She said, "Here in this universe." And Joseph said, "Because you wanted to see and smell and taste and hear and touch. That's why you're here."

It is this craving that leads to renewed existence. We're all here because we wanted, again, to see and smell and hear and taste and touch. That's kind of mind-boggling, isn't it? That's the volition that brings us back to experience pleasant sensations again. It's kind of wild.

Retreat is, of course, the perfect place to look at this force of craving. It happens again and again, even though you know you're not going to get very much out of it. The retreat situation is rather bare of sense pleasures, but it doesn't stop the force of craving from arising. So we do get to see its conditioned and recurring nature over and over again. We're here, of course, not to gratify the force but to learn about it. We turn our intention from satisfaction to understanding. Then every arising becomes a new possibility for understanding. And what's important is to trust that we can learn from it and not have to run after it.

So if craving comes up in terms of desire, we can watch it. If it comes up in terms of aversion, we can avoid blaming the outer situation and instead try to understand our own response. Craving arises now here and now there. It picks different objects again and again and again, and this is the key to its entrancement, its ability to enchant us. It keeps directing our attention in new places, so we may get bored with one, but craving will find another. *Ah, that's really the one.* So it keeps the target moving.

But each new thing seems to offer the promise of some kind of lasting satisfaction. Part of the delusion within craving is that we forget about impermanence. We don't look beyond the achievement of that particular satisfaction. We get some sense, some subconscious sense, that it's going to be more lasting than it is.

This tendency has been verified by psychological research. There's a researcher from Harvard named Daniel Gilbert who has published a whole book on our inability to predict what will make us happy and what will make us unhappy. The conclusion is that in both cases we forget about impermanence. We forget how quickly happy things will fade, but we also forget that unhappy things—even things like breaking a leg—will also fade in time, and we are more afraid of them than we really need to be. There's a kind of homeostasis in our happiness level that we will return to, independent of these changing circumstances. But we don't understand that very well.

This pursuit is tiring. As you probably know, when you feel the mind in a state of agitation, it's not restful. And if it's like that all day, you probably want to go to bed about an hour before you do in a time when the mind is more balanced.

There was an interesting story in Newsweek about Disneyland—you know, the place where the motto is "Where happiness never ends." The reporter was investigating that, and they happened to go into the staff dining room. Inside, the characters were still dressed in their costumes because they didn't really have time to change on their lunch break. So Mickey Mouse was sitting down at a table talking to Donald Duck. And what Mickey Mouse said was, "I've got to get some overtime. I don't have enough money to pay my therapist." So even in Disneyland.

The beautiful thing about our practice is that as this force of recurrent craving comes again and again, and we are simply willing to observe it, the mindfulness starts to slow it down. In a way, mindfulness acts as a brake on this force which has a huge amount of momentum—you could call it mental habit of mind. When we have this rolling wheel of desire turning again and again, mindfulness is like a brake pad

applied to it, just starting to wear it away as we keep from reactivating or reconditioning it. And that's why the quality of peace begins to come in, because the craving stops leading us by the nose quite so often.

Another way to say craving is self-centeredness. The Dalai Lama often talks in these terms—that the root problem in the world is self-centeredness. This is really a synonym for craving. Do you notice how we don't get as upset about other people's problems? But the craving comes in around our problems.

This is one of the reasons the Dalai Lama is so lovable. I find this amazing. People often ask him, "Why do people like you so much? Why do people love you?" And he says, "I'm not really sure. But I think it's because I try to consider every other person as more important than myself." That's a bodhisattva of compassion. Wouldn't that be an amazing way to approach the world? Imagine, just a simple thing as going into lunch and feeling that everybody else's lunch was more important than our own. That would create such a different flavor and way to approach the table.

This is also the reason that the quality of bodhicitta, which Carol talked about the other night, is so powerful in meditation practice. Bodhicitta puts the emphasis in our practice on the well-being of others, so that even our dharma practice comes to be an expression of our caring and moves our very motivation just a little bit away from self-centeredness. Of course we care about ourselves also, but we begin to bring other beings into the very core of our dharma practice.

This self-centeredness is a tricky thing. There was a family retreat here at IMS—retreats where we try to introduce whole families into dharma practice. What's interesting is that these retreats are creating a bit of a Buddhist family culture in the West. Children of all ages come, from three and four on up into the early teens, and then later teens have their own retreat here. Parents come with the children, so it's a whole family bonding experience.

During the family retreat, one of the meditation teachers asked a five-year-old boy, "What do you think will happen if you spend your whole life going around just trying to get what you want?" And the boy said, "Trouble." Also the truth of craving. He knew it better than some of us.

So in the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha said that there are three kinds of craving.

Craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, craving for non-existence. I want to talk about these three kinds.

The craving for sense pleasures is this desire to have pleasant experience at the five senses: pleasant sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Interestingly, as I understand it, the mind door is not included in the craving for sense pleasures. At one point the Buddha was talking about the pleasure that came through his practice of strong concentration in the states of jhana. And he reflected on it as he was developing it, and he said, "I don't see anything to be afraid of in this kind of pleasure."

What I take that to mean is that as we start developing pleasant meditative states, if we have a desire for them—which we will and we do—that leads us to become more skillful in learning how to access them again and again. And we find that it is through relaxation and contentment and acceptance that those states start to open. So as I understand it, the desire for wholesome states of mind in our context leads us to greater skill in meditation and is not considered to be an unwholesome wish.

But I also want to point out that any wholesome desire—it could be the wish for liberation, the wish for concentration, or any wholesome state—can turn into craving. And the difference is if we demand that it happen now. If we can hold it with understanding that it's a quality that develops out of the proper causes and conditions, then we aren't ruffled when it isn't present. But if we start demanding that it happen now, then that becomes a craving also.

Look around the scope of the world and you can see how much time and money are spent satisfying these five sense desires. Just a simple one: taste—which isn't even the most compelling force in my life. The restaurant industry in the United States, in the year 2005, had annual revenues of $476 billion. And I think that was less than half of the overall food industry. So food alone is about a trillion dollars. But you can understand that restaurants are particularly about satisfying certain kinds of tastes, and it's half a trillion dollars just in this country.

Smell—which also doesn't seem like a big factor in my life of sense desire—perfumes alone had annual sales of $15 billion. Fifteen billion dollars, just for perfumes.

There's a lovely video up on the web, on YouTube, that I encourage you to watch when you get home. It was produced by the son of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was a Tibetan teacher who founded a big sangha in Boulder. His son is Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, a teacher in his own right and a very creative individual. From one of his poems, a student or fan of his created a music video. It's a very good dharma teaching. The title of the video is "What About Me?" I'll just read some of the lines—I won't sing it for you; I'm going to spare you that.

"What about me? That's my first thought every morning. What happened to me is my last thought every night. I say this mantra all day long: what about me? When I take a shower I think, what about me? I hope this shower makes me feel happy. I hope this lunch makes me feel happy. I hope these clothes make me feel happy."

This is the spirit of the quest for sense pleasures. We're looking for that hit of happiness again and again and again. And as I said, there's some indication we want the happiness to last, which it doesn't. But there is also a truth that sense pleasures do bring a kind of happiness, and it's not to overlook that either.

When we think about our lives, imagine that you had no sense pleasures and that you also had no support of meditative states. That would be like being on retreat but you couldn't meditate well. That would be tough, wouldn't it? That could feel pretty bleak. So sense pleasures in daily life bring a kind of happiness.

It's limited. It's temporary. But there is a kind of happiness. The Buddha called this carnal happiness, as opposed to spiritual happiness. But he acknowledged the pleasure in it.

He also said in another sutta—which I think someone mentioned earlier—the analogy of the two darts: how we get pierced by a painful feeling, that's the first dart, and then as our mind obsesses and worries about that pain, we inflict a second dart of mental agitation if we're not a careful practitioner. But further along in that same sutta, he says that sense pleasure is the only way that an untaught, ordinary person knows to escape from painful feeling. This is a really interesting comment.

The only way that most people in the world know to escape from painful feeling is by going off and finding a sense pleasure to supplant it, to overcome it. This is really the foundation for addiction. When we are in the world and there is unpleasant experience, either bodily or mental, we develop a habitual pleasure that we go to again and again, one that tends to mask or cover over or numb the painful feeling. And because it works once, when the painful feeling comes again, we're inclined to seek that same pleasure again. So it could be addiction to drugs, addiction to food, addiction to sex, addiction to social contact, addiction to television, alcohol. All these forces are very powerful in our world.

Now the essence of monastic life is that practitioners basically make a vow not to use sense pleasures as a routine outlet. Even in taking ten precepts—and I know many of you here are practicing with eight—the tenth precept adds not using money, so that takes away your online shopping as well. We've given up sexuality, drinking and drugs, eating after the midday meal, entertainment, movies, music, adornments to beautify the body. It's very interesting: as you practice in an extended way with the eight or the ten precepts, you really find that all the normal ways we go for comfort get shut off or closed off to us. And what that does is throw us on our own inner resources, our own qualities of heart and mind. That's what develops the deeper kinds of satisfaction and what channels our aspiration into the path.

But most of us are not monastics. In fact, I'd say about ninety-eight percent of us here are not monastics. So as laypeople, we do not take those vows in daily life. That means sense pleasures are an integral part of our life as laypeople. On retreat, it's different. On retreat, your lifestyles are much more like monastic life. Even if you've only taken five precepts, you've renounced an incredible amount of worldly activity to come here, so your life is much more like a monastic life.

Speaking from my own personal experience, spending three months in a retreat like this would be more difficult for me, more arduous—perhaps more appealing, but more arduous—than spending three months in a monastic environment as an ordained monk but not in a retreat setting. The requirement of not talking, of solitude, and the relentless practice of mindfulness that you undertake here is, in itself, a very rigorous challenge. There are two hundred and twenty-seven vows in being an ordained monk in our tradition. I've done that a couple of times in my life, and I find that an easier practice, just speaking personally, for a limited period of time than what you are engaged in. Now, people who take long-term monastic vows reach another whole level of challenge, so I don't want to make that comparison in any

way. But for short temporary ordinations, which happen a lot in Thailand and Burma, I think what you are doing is more challenging.

I want to read a quotation from the Buddha, but let me preface it with a little story. This is from a sutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, but it's also in the Jātaka tales. I'll flesh the Jātaka tale out toward the end.

The Buddha tells this story of a hawk and a quail. The quail is flying through the air when the hawk comes down from above, swoops down, and catches the quail in his claws, preparing to take the quail off to eat it. The quail starts moaning and saying, "Oh, I should never have left my home. I should never have left my home ground. Now I'm going to be killed and eaten. I should never have left my home."

And the hawk says, "Well, what do you mean? What's your home?"

The quail replies that the earth, where there are these clumps of dirt—that's my home. If I were there, I would be safe.

The hawk, in a rather proud way, says, "I could catch you there too." So he says, "I will return you to your home and I will show you that I can catch you there too."

He lets the quail go. The quail goes back on the ground, runs around until she's right beside a clump of soil, then hops up onto the top of this clump and says to the hawk, "Okay, now I'm home."

The hawk begins a dive from the sky, accelerating very fast, coming really quickly toward the quail, about to pounce. But just then, the quail slips underneath this clump of soil. The hawk cannot break his plunge, and he shatters his breast on that clump of soil.

In the Jātaka tale, it's said that this was one of the lifetimes of the Buddha. The Buddha was—guess what?—the quail. Wisdom, modesty. The hawk was said to be Devadatta, his cousin who at a later point in his career tried to kill him. In this story, the Buddha survives.

After he told this story, the Buddha said, "This is a lesson not to leave your own resort, your own home, what is meant for you and where you are comfortable." So he said, "Practitioners, do not stray outside your own resort into the domain of others. Mara will gain access to those who do so." Mara is the personification of the unwholesome forces of mind. Mara will get a hold on them. And what is not a practitioner's resort? The five cords of sense pleasure. And what is a practitioner's resort? It is the four foundations of mindfulness.

Here, the practitioner is to be understood in the monastic or retreat setting. The Buddha is basically saying that for people like you, for people who are living a monastic life, your home ground is not the pursuit of sense pleasures. Your home ground is the four foundations of mindfulness. But he said there are others whose home ground is the pursuit of sense pleasures. Those people are laypeople.

So this sutta made me reflect that we lead lives with feet in two worlds. When we come on a retreat like

this, we are living in many ways as monastics and spiritual contemplatives have lived over the centuries. When we go home, most of us who are not ordained are living as laypeople, and all the pursuits of sense pleasures are open and available to us. So how should we relate as laypeople, both here on retreat and at home? I think this is a very interesting exploration and quite a big question.

This is a passage from the Udana, a small book of the Buddha's sayings, from a sutta called "The Courtesan." It came about because some laypeople in a town nearby were actually quarreling over a courtesan, competing over who would be able to win her. And the Buddha was talking about two approaches to sense pleasure. This is what he said: "Those for whom precepts and practices are the essence of the teaching, for whom celibacy is the essence of practice—this is one extreme. Those who say there's no harm in sensual desire—this is the second extreme. Both of the extremes cause the growth of cemeteries."

Isn't that great? "Cause the growth of cemeteries." He's saying both lead to renewed existence. Both are not the way to liberation.

So one extreme holds to precepts, practices, and celibacy as the essence of spiritual life—not as a useful and supportive container, but the essence. This is too rigid a view. This does not give proper place to wisdom and samadhi. But the other extreme consists of those who say there's no harm in sensual desires. That's also an extreme view.

This is an ancient teaching, but I really see these two divergent attitudes in our community today. And perhaps you've experienced both of them in yourself, because I've felt both these attitudes ripple through my own mind.

One is the attitude that says any sense desire is wrong. The Buddha said sense desire was not conducive, so if I want something, that's bad. I shouldn't want anything. And even if I do want it, I shouldn't go for it because it's really not right. Don Juan was talking to Carlos Castaneda at one point in their relationship and said to Carlos, "You began by not wanting to get attached to anything, but it ended up that you couldn't enjoy anything." If we have this judgmental attitude that desire is wrong, the heart will shrivel up. It becomes very barren. So this is one extreme. I've seen it in myself. I've seen it in others.

But the other extreme is to say there's no problem with following sense desires. Sense desires are beautiful. It's so lovely. That's not a problem. This also is a problem, because—let me talk a little bit about what I've seen as some of the difficulties with the blind pursuit of sense desires.

Number one, obviously, if we can't get what we want right then, and the desire is strong, we suffer.

We suffer.

Number two, how many times have you wanted something so much that you've gone ahead and pursued it and caused harm to other people, or caused harm to yourself? And basically, causing harm to others

ends up causing harm to ourselves.

The third point is that the pursuit of sense desire as the relief from suffering does create that groove in the mind, which then conditions the mind to look for that same thing again. A lot of the sense desires that we experience on retreat are those old channels of the mind just playing out again and again. When I'm not feeling well, I need—or I want—social contact, or a drink, or a certain kind of food, or sex, or something like that. These are the grooves that we've worn through our own activity of looking to sense desire.

Another thing to look at with sense desire in outside life is how much time is spent in the cultivation, the refinement of taste, and the pursuit of those pleasures. As I look around—and this is not measured, I haven't done a survey, it's not a measured opinion—but as I look around, it's what most of the world does with what we call free time. When we don't have obligations to work or to family, what we do in free time generally is to find something that pleasures us in the five senses. So a lot of time of the world, as indicated by those restaurant and perfume figures, goes into this direction.

So, having a judgmental attitude doesn't work. Not questioning and blindly pursuing isn't in accord with the Buddha's teachings. What then are we to do as laypeople? And here's where I say I think each of us needs to make this investigation for ourselves and to really look into the question with our own freedom as the most important criterion. What is going to help the development of our own liberation in the most skillful way possible? Find out for yourself.

So the question comes up: a sense desire is present. It points me toward an object. Should I follow it? Should I not? What's the right thing to do? I don't want to do anything wrong. What would the Buddha tell me to do? What would Joseph tell me to do? I don't want to make a mistake. That's not the attitude we should have with our practice. We have to be free to investigate and explore and find for ourselves. The only way we can do that is to try. So let me try, but with my eyes really open. Let's see what happens if I follow. How does that lead? How does it feel? Maybe it will be fine. Maybe no one else will be harmed. Maybe I won't be harmed. But we go into it eyes open.

If we decide, this time, I'm not going to follow—I've followed it so many times in the past—this time, I'm curious. What will happen if I don't follow? And that's the practice of renunciation. In a way, you could say that the practice of renunciation is the practice of the Second Noble Truth, carrying out through our actions this abandoning of craving. And then what we find when we renounce is that the desire eventually passes. It seems so strong and so compelling for a while, but if we stay with it, eventually it passes. So we learn we have the capacity to just sit through its lifespan, not to have to act on it.

Joseph had a very nice line about this. He said, "Restraint of sense desire enables us to verify its empty nature." So we see it's just a cloud that arises, moves us, and then passes. And it's through practicing restraint or renunciation that we can verify that transitory nature.

The second of the kinds of craving the Buddha talked about is craving for existence. The Pali term here is *b*

hava-taṇhā. *Bhava* is a word that means existence, sometimes translated as being, sometimes translated as becoming. It's a very interesting term. The basic meaning of craving for existence means we want to be here in this body, alive in this realm, because it is this existence that allows access to the contact of the five realms of sense objects. So it's because of this deep-seated longing for existence that we have a fear of dying.

And the fear of dying, I think, is way out of proportion to the reality of dying. And that's what lets us know that there's this irrational longing at the base. Because think about dying. Suppose you went to bed tonight and you simply did not wake up in the morning.

I mean, would that really be a problem for you? And yet, if we knew that was going to happen, we'd be terrified—because of this craving for existence.

So, you know, the actual end, if it came to the end of this body and the end of this mind stream and the end of this flow of sense experience, what's the big deal? And yet we have a deep, deep dread of that, the greatest disaster imaginable in our life. That's the craving for existence.

The other aspect of it is a craving to become something. A psychological level of *bhava* is becoming something. In my early years of retreat, when I was younger, I'd spend a lot of time thinking about where I wanted to live and what work I wanted to do and what kind of community I wanted to connect to, and what kind of partner I might want to connect with. And I came to see that all of that was searching for some kind of identity that would give me a security that I didn't have. I was in the middle of meditation, seeing the groundless nature of everything that was arising and passing. And I was thinking that becoming somebody would give me a different kind of security, a solidity, a safe identity.

So take a look. A lot of the fantasies that we go through, future fantasies that we go through on retreat, are really driven by this *bhava taṇhā*, desire for becoming something. But of course, we need to keep in mind the advice of Lily Tomlin, who commented in one of her plays, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, something like that—she said, "I always knew I wanted to be someone, but I guess I should have been more specific."

The third aspect of craving is called the craving for non-existence. The Pali is *vibhava taṇhā*. And the basic meaning is that although we have this deep desire to exist, which got us here in the first place, we also have at times a desire not to exist at all. Basically a desire to turn off the impingement—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, moods, emotions, and so on. We have a desire to get away from it all. And sometimes the mere fact of living in phenomenal existence is experienced as a huge and oppressive burden, full of pain and darkness. It's out of this mood of *vibhava taṇhā* that people commit suicide, imagining that that is really going to solve the problem.

So there's a kind of aversion to life that's this manifestation of not wanting to exist, wanting not to exist. It also means wanting to get rid of what is unpleasant. When you find a painful sensation in the knee and

you find yourself thinking, "I wish I could get rid of this," that's also a manifestation of wanting it not to exist. So this is the aversion aspect of the tendency of mind.

That's a description of the second noble truth.

Then, as you know, each noble truth comes with a prescription, an advice for action. The Buddha said with the second noble truth: this noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned. So the instruction is that craving is to be abandoned. This means both momentarily—each time it arises, it needs to be abandoned—and finally, that as we walk the path to its very end, we are meant to abandon it once and for all.

I think most of us know that this is a good idea, but actually doing it is not that easy. How many times have you found yourself recognizing that there's some form of greed, aversion, or delusion going on and not being able to release it? Ajahn Chah said that seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing that we're clinging and not being able to let go. So if that's seventy to eighty percent of your experience, you're at an Ajahn Chah level.

We've talked about a lot of tools for how to let go—noting the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion, noting the feeling tone on which they're based, many ways of working with the various forms of hindrances. I'm not going to talk about that more. But what I would like to encourage you to do is, once you notice a movement of greed or aversion, to stay with it and watch its changing nature. None of them are permanent. And it's very interesting to be committed to follow one all the way through.

This is from the start of the *Xin Xin Ming*, the Verses on the Faith Mind, which I'm sure you've heard before: "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart."

That means even a slight bit of greed or aversion separates heaven from us. Notice this. There's a big difference in feeling when—let's just take aversion—when aversion is strong and aversion is weak. There's a big difference in that. Quantitatively, it's the same thing, but there's a big qualitative gap. But then watch what happens when aversion goes out of the picture altogether. That's not just a quantitative shift. That's a qualitative shift. When greed, aversion, and delusion are all absent, there are no preferences. Heaven and earth are no longer separated.

See what that feels like. Be willing to track the diminishment of greed or aversion until it goes completely away.

And see what that is like for it to pass altogether.

It's really in the abandoning of these forces that we are led directly into the third noble truth. It is in the understanding of unsatisfactoriness and the abandoning of craving that we shift our whole relationship to

pain and suffering in our life. As one teacher said, our practice is to change the conditions that lead to suffering. There is no other practice.

I want to close with two quotes from the Buddha—one showing the magnitude of the situation that we're in, the other pointing the way forward.

Saṃsāra means the round of birth and death that we have been on. "This saṃsāra is without a discernible beginning. A first point is not evident of beings roaming and wandering on, clouded by ignorance and driven by craving."

That is our situation. This has been our condition, the Buddha is saying here, since beginningless time.

And the only way out is this third noble truth: "This is 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, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

We'll talk about that in a later talk. So let's just sit together for a minute.

This saṃsāra is without a discernible beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on, clouded by ignorance and driven by craving.

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