Eight Worldly Conditions

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 58:49

I think Guy mentioned in a talk a little while ago about a trip we took to Italy a few years ago where he and Carol taught a retreat, and then afterwards we all took a bit of a vacation in Tuscany and also spent some time in Florence. It was my first visit to Italy, and it's as beautiful as they tell you it is. It's so classically Italian, I guess you would say—just beautiful fields of sunflowers and lavender and these old towns, and of course all the art that you can see there.

One of the predominant features of the area we were in were these walled villages set on top of hills. If you stood in a valley and looked around, you would see on many of the surrounding hills where the settlements were, and they were nearly always walled villages. Then in walking through the streets of Florence, there were these huge old stone palaces, but nearly all of them had these enormous wooden doors with huge bolts and hinges. It really looked like massive fortifications.

Being in a place with such history, it really evokes very clearly the condition of the human mind and also the features that have shaped the landscape, because so much of the landscape is built by human beings there. In Italy, and I presume in a lot of the old cities in Europe, the influence of humans on the landscape has actually in some ways improved it. Here we seem to go in the opposite direction; it doesn't seem much of an improvement a lot of the time. But there, it's actually quite beautiful. And it was really clear to me that the landscape was representing something about the arc of human history and the human condition.

Even in the little town where we did the retreat, which was quite out in the country where this monastery or convent was, there were some new buildings nearby, new houses, and even those new houses all had burglar alarm systems and wired security. We live in Woodacre—we don't even lock our doors or our cars. To see this out in the countryside in Italy, I was just curious about what was going on in the psyche there. And you could kind of see it represented in the architecture, really this movement of greed and fear throughout the landscape, if you looked at it in this way.

One of the places we went to that I remember was San Gimignano. It's quite a famous place because the landscape of the little town is dominated by these towers that were built—very tall, thin towers. I think there are fourteen or fifteen of them, quite high. You look at them and you wonder, what is the purpose of these towers? They're not really big enough to live in, and they're all together. It's not like they're needed for lookouts because they're all within this walled town. When you look a little bit more closely, you find out there was a competition as to who could build the tallest tower, and that's the reason they're there. So within the walled cities built out of fear, the towers are built out of greed—to be the person who builds the tallest tower. It was just fascinating to see this landscape reflecting the state of the mind and heart of the

people who were living there.

Another thing that struck me as we were walking through the various landscapes was that one part of a trail we were on was actually part of an old pilgrimage trail, probably a thousand years old, that wound all through that southern part of Europe. There was a map depicting how people would travel along this and walk. Obviously they'd be walking for hundreds and hundreds of miles. Many people along the way had built way stations for the pilgrims. But a way station, which was done out of a lot of care and offering and generosity, was usually just a simple stone room with hay on the ground. That's where they would sleep as they performed their pilgrimage. The faith was so strong that they endured all of these hardships to travel in this way to the place where they were going to pay homage.

Looking at that and seeing the reality for those people and what they were willing to do—these days we complain about cross-country air travel where we're five hours sitting in a seat and we're warm and dry and fed a minimal amount of food, if anything at all. Just contrasting what people did out of faith and how much we complain about our situation if we're in economy class at the back of the plane. It's like terrible.

When we were in Florence, one of the things you really notice is the presence of this clan called the Medicis. They really dominated the politics of the city for so long and became very powerful and wealthy. They ruled the city—in those days they were like city-states, not like a city you'd know now. They were complete little independent units. The Medicis built a huge number of palaces and mausoleums and things throughout the city, so they're quite predominant as you go to the different sites.

When I read the history of the Medicis, there was a similar kind of thing coming through, where you saw they would go through these periods of expansion where they were really rulers of everything. They would build all this stuff and spend money left and right, and then something would change, and they would be outcasts. They would be thrown out of the city, penniless. And somehow—and this is over the span of hundreds of years—they would find their way back in and then rebuild their empire. There really was this sense of this movement, this cycle.

changing conditions that people underwent, but always a striving to be back in power and wealthy again.

They built one of the—at the time—the most expensive buildings ever built, the Capella Medici, lined in marble with many times life-size statues of the family placed around it. And you could really get the sense of how there was actually a fear of death, and they needed somehow to have this memorial to themselves so that they wouldn't be forgotten, so that they felt in life that there was something that was going to outlast them.

And then another church we went to, Santa Croce. Again, a lot of memorials around people, their tombstones. And I remember very clearly seeing some that were actually laid into the floor of the church, built out of stone—life-size replicas of the persons buried underneath. You can imagine the mind state of the person who commissioned this. It's like, "This is going to be permanent. Here I'll lie." But the thing is,

after however many hundreds of years, these had almost worn smooth from all the people who had passed over them. And so all of these movements to try to hold on to some permanency, some place of "Here I am. I count. I matter"—it all gets worn away in time or with changing conditions.

The last place I'll talk about, because it was so amazing, was the Palazzo Pitti. It's this palace that's been turned into a museum, but in some ways it looks much like it must have when people lived there. You go through a sequence of rooms that are highly decorated, filled now with cabinets of all the stuff these people owned. I really felt it was like papañca made manifest—papañca on steroids. It was just stuff from all over the world, big and small, gold and ivory, intricate and large. It was overwhelming.

But finally you come into this big round room that was the reception chamber, where people came to speak to the Duke or whoever was in charge, to have an audience with him. Again, very fancy, but no furniture, because it was said that only the Duke sat—in the chair on the throne. Everyone else had to stand. And it was built in a trompe l'oeil style, with imagined staircases around it, really very elaborate. So in the midst of all this confusion and ostentation, right at the top of the ceiling there was a big fresco, and the words were written: "All fortune is illusory. It passes and does not last. Merit and virtue last and do not pass away."

Somehow there was a real disconnect between what was in this palace and this beautiful sentiment on the ceiling. I think they wanted to have their cake and eat it too. They wanted everything but also a semblance, I think, of virtue. But there's real truth in that saying, that fortune is illusory. As I reflected on this, you could just see how ephemeral were even all these things they owned, things they set so much store by—now museum pieces that tourists wander by. Yet for them, they were what they could hold on to.

The only church that we visited—and if you've been in Europe, you know what it's like: "Oh no, not another medieval church, or another Renaissance masterpiece. I've had enough already." But the one that really had the most impact, I think, on all of us was the Church of St. Francis of Assisi. It was just amazing to really feel his spirit in the buildings that he built, especially the place where he lived and spent a lot of his time practicing in retreat. You could feel the devotion people had for him.

One of the amazing things: down on the plains of Assisi, he had built his first original little church, a very simple structure—a third the size, a quarter of the size of this room—very simple stone. But St. Francis was such a threat to the Catholic Church because of his vows of poverty and simplicity. The church was very much into accumulating lands and building massive cathedrals, so he was really a danger to them. They had a very ambivalent relationship. But the way the church got around this was, after St. Francis died, they built this amazing cathedral around his little church. So you see this huge cathedral on the plains of Assisi, and when you go inside, right in the middle is this little structure—that's the original church. It's like they had to co-opt St. Francis to make him safe again for them.

But again, looking at this contrast between the Medicis and what they held on to, and St. Francis with his

vow of poverty—he gave everything up, he was such a man of the people, he helped everyone he could—who is having more influence today? Who do we respect? Who moves our heart? We can go through and see all these marvels that the Medicis created, but they're sterile. They're lifeless. They're just buildings. But St. Francis still moves people today.

And so again, this sense of what's really important for us. We get so entranced by the things of the world. We want to make a mark and think if it's there in marble or stone, that means something about us.

But it doesn't, really.

And what I saw as I reflected on these very apparent truths, the nature of the human condition, is this teaching that the Buddha gave on the eight worldly conditions, or eight worldly winds as they're often called. This is a set of four matching pairs: gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pain and pleasure, happiness and unhappiness. What the Buddha saw was how we all live our lives spinning around within these alternating pairs. And this is what you could see the Medicis were caught in—moments of great expansion and power and wealth. They had everything, and then they would lose everything, only to scramble their way back in. But of course, eventually, death alone will be an end to that accumulation, and they never quite had the wisdom to see that.

But even for us today, if we look at our lives, how much of the time we spend influenced by these changing conditions. How much we try to hold on to the positive ones and resist and judge and blame and are angry about the difficult ones. We get caught in this, and often can feel kind of trapped by this—that these are the polarities of our lives. This is what we live for and by, these changing conditions, trying to hold on to the pleasant ones and pushing away the unpleasant ones.

But if we're a dharma practitioner, we need to begin to look at these in a different way. This is what B. Alan Wallace says about them:

"It is easy when we meet with misfortune, poverty, loss of reputation or status in our job, or a calamity such as the loss of a loved one, to lose enthusiasm for dharma in the depths of our disillusionment. But instead of succumbing to despair in the face of adversity, we seek to cultivate that inner strength—which is really what patience is about—inner courage as ballast for the vessel of your life.

Related to this is a tendency to judge our dharma practice superficially on the basis of external circumstances. When life is treating us well, we feel that dharma is good. We might give it a half hour every day religiously and think that the job is done because the rest of our waking day is going well.

A dharma practitioner should view the pleasures of a good job, a healthy family situation, comfortable living circumstances, and a sound economy with suitable delight—as we would look at a very pleasant painting balanced upon a structure of matchsticks. This is happiness due to pleasant external stimuli, which by and large are beyond our control. A Buddhist response is not in any way to begrudge these mundane pleasures, but at the same time not to use them as a substitute for dharma practice. This is not

so obvious during the good times, but it becomes very apparent—maybe a little too late—during the bad times."

So we need to be aware of how much these worldly winds affect us. Are we being entranced, captivated by the positive ones and laying claim to them in some way? Are we blaming ourselves or judging if we're experiencing more difficulty? Because they will always be present. And this is really the theme I want to talk about tonight. They're always with us. The question is, how do we relate to them? What do we do with them?

You only have to read a newspaper or look at what's out there in the media to see this vacillation for people who become famous. And it's so interesting how there's an addiction towards being famous at the moment, yet it brings with it such penalties. For me, the biggest image of this is when Bill Clinton was president. There he was, leader of the free world, in some ways said to be the most powerful man on the planet. All of these accolades and the amazing things that he did. And then to have the most intimate, embarrassing details of his sexual liaisons broadcast to all the world. How could you hold that in your mind—to be president and then have this going on? I really don't know how he survived that. But you see how they just go hand in hand. If there's one, there's bound to be the other.

So we need to bring these into our awareness, to see that they are always with us, but we have a choice of how we respond to them. We have a choice of how we relate to them.

Ajahn Chah talks a lot about them in his little booklet, *A Taste of Freedom*. The Thai forest meditation master says:

"These activities of happiness, unhappiness, and so on are constantly arising because they are characteristics of the world. The Buddha was enlightened in the world. He contemplated the world. If he hadn't contemplated the world, if he hadn't seen the world, he couldn't have risen above it. The Buddha's enlightenment was simply enlightenment of this very world. The world was still there. Gain and loss, praise and criticism, fame and disrepute, happiness and unhappiness were still there. If there weren't these things there, there would be nothing to become enlightened to. What he knew was just the world, that which surrounds the hearts of people. If people follow these things, seeking praise and fame, gain and happiness, and trying to avoid their opposites, they sink under the weight of the world."

I like that. They sink under the weight of the world.

Gain and loss, praise and criticism, fame and disrepute, happiness and unhappiness—this is the world. The person who is lost in the world has no path of escape. The world overwhelms him. This world follows the law of Dhamma, so we call it worldly Dhamma. He who lives within the worldly Dhamma is called a worldly being. He lives surrounded by confusions.

Therefore, the Buddha taught us to develop the path. We can divide it up into morality, concentration, and wisdom—three baskets of the Eightfold Path. Develop them to completion. This is a path of practice which

destroys the world. And by that he means this world we get entranced by with conditions.

Where is this world? It is just in the minds of beings infatuated with it. The action of clinging to praise, gain, fame, happiness and unhappiness is called world. When it is there in the mind, then the world arises. The worldly being is born. The world is born of desire. Desire is the birthplace of all worlds. To put an end to desire is to put an end to this world—that world of confusion.

You can really get a sense from that how these forces, if we're not aware of them, can control us, can oppress us, can be the lens through which we look at our experience. We can just become lost in that. Getting the positive ones, pushing away the difficult ones—that's the only reason some people live their lives.

The first of these pairs is gain and loss. You only have to look at the stock market to see this writ large. From the early nineties there was this dot-com boom, and what comes along with a dot-com boom? A dot-com bust. Those stories of a three hundred dollar stock that became worth thirty cents, people who made millions on paper and a few days later it was worthless. It was such a clear seeing of how much investment people had, how much identity they had wrapped up in these gains.

Unfortunately, we're seeing the same thing around the housing market, where people who really can't afford these losses are being severely impacted. It's a tragedy going on throughout the nation. Apparently Worcester County, not far from here, is one of the largest areas of mortgage defaulting, for some unfortunate reason.

But if we put all our hope and faith in getting stuff, it's just inevitable that we're going to lose stuff. And if that's what's making us happy, we're going to be unhappy.

I saw this cartoon in our local paper around Christmas time. It was a girl in front of all the open presents under the tree, and she said, "I feel so empty. There's nothing left to want." It's like we want to want, because that's the only way we know how to be happy. And when that wanting is over for whatever reason, we don't have anything secure to replace it with.

The nineties was the decade of greed, where it really reached heights of these almost obscene amounts of money people made. Actually, it's happening again. It's not so much in the news, but recently I read just another little blip in the New York Times about how much money people were making. A lot of those people also work insanely hard for that money—not all, but a lot. And one guy said there came this moment where he stopped and looked around and said, "Am I really working this hard so I can buy a more expensive watch?" Because that's what it comes down to. Does my watch have diamonds on it? And if I work hard enough, I can get the next level of watch. It just becomes a ridiculous and ongoing cycle.

It becomes all about maintaining a lifestyle where it's not about what actually makes me happy. Once you get to a certain level, all you're concerned about is that you have the things that go with that lifestyle. And if someone else has more, then that's what you want too.

I mentioned the other day this tradition of "guru cartoons" that often capture a little bit of the human psyche in this movement of desire. This one is from Hägar the Horrible—you know, that little chubby Viking guy who's always going around supposedly marauding and raiding. In this one, he's on his own, climbing a very steep mountaintop, the classic quest, laboring away.

And Hagar says to him, "Oh, great sage, please teach me the secret of happiness."

And in the third frame, the sage says, "Simplicity, self-restraint, and renunciation—the secret of happiness."

Fourth frame: Hagar pausing and saying, "Is there anyone else up here I can talk to?"

We don't like to hear this message—that this is the answer for this duality of gain and loss, that actually giving up and giving away is the source of happiness. We're convinced that holding on is the way to go. It's the message society gives us.

That's why I think it's really helpful to travel abroad, especially in Asia, and get a sense of different conditions. Get a sense of how people live, and also to see how happy they often are in the midst of what we would consider nothing. There can be a real joy and generosity in people living in very difficult situations. It's just really balancing. We can get a little distorted living here in the West. We're really living in a way of luxury that hasn't been equaled before—the prevalence of material possessions that people have in this country and in most Western countries. So to really question the necessity of that by looking a little broader.

For us as practitioners, we begin to see that it's not about the new goodies or what's under the tree at Christmastime. How many of you are looking forward to going Christmas shopping? It's not that fun. Yet there's some obsession about needing to get and to give at this time of Christmas. And how quickly forgotten are all those things we put so much energy into. So we learn that actually renunciation and simplicity are far greater sources of happiness.

There's this great sutta in the Udana. The story is of a king who gives up his throne quite willingly and becomes a monk and goes to meditate, as they do in those days, under the root of a tree out in the forest. And he's heard by the other monks who pass him by as he's meditating. They hear him muttering, "Oh, what bliss! What bliss! What bliss!"

The monks hear this and they're a little concerned. What they think is, "Oh, he's remembering his days as a king and all the luxury he had then—the food and the women and the nice clothes. He's just sitting there and he's not meditating. He's basically having fantasies about his previous life."

So what do they do? They go off and tell the Buddha. If, as a yogi, you were ever worried about whether you should mention something to the teachers, don't worry—there's a lot of precedent for this in the suttas. There are always these stories of monks seeing such and such and going to tell the Buddha, like

tattletaling. And the Buddha usually responds.

So in this case, he calls this ex-king, this bhikkhu, to him and says, "Oh bhikkhu, I've heard this story. People have said this is what you say. Is this true?"

And he says, "Yes, it is true. It's what I say."

And the Buddha says, "Well, what are you thinking of when you say that?"

And he says, "When I was the king, I had everything I could need—food and possessions, luxury—but I lived in a walled city surrounded by guards, and I was always in fear of my life, threatened by enemies, worried about holding on to the throne and looking to get more and more and more. I lived in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Now that I've given everything away, I'm happier and freer than I could have ever imagined. And that is why I say, 'What bliss! What bliss!'"

It's a great story. In giving away, we actually get much more than we could ever hold on to through all our imaginings.

The next of these pairs is that of fame and disrepute, sometimes translated as success and failure, or status and disgrace. I actually saw, cruising around the web yesterday, that you can get insurance against ill fame and disrepute. So this is the way some people deal with this. It's like, don't worry about what you do—get insurance and then you're covered.

But there's nothing much we can do to guard against this. Conditions change and we get blamed for things. Whatever we were doing that was working doesn't work anymore. A friend of mine, who was a very successful investor, had a great company and was investing as a business.

And when the stock market went through all the readjustments that it's done these past years, her company and her investments got into a lot of problems. She lost a lot of money, and it was a real threat to her well-being and her sense of herself. She really had to use her practice to find some balance in that because it was such a source of identity for her.

Another friend who's a lawyer says that all law firms offer is material gain and status. That's what they promise you. All you have to do is sell your soul to get that. And that's what a lot of people do—to have that sense of the name on the door or the corner office. They'll do anything to get that.

But if your priorities are a little different, if you know that that's not really going to bring happiness, it can just seem crazy to look at from the outside—what people will do for fame. There is such an obsession with being famous these days, and I really don't understand it. People will do anything to be famous. Is anyone else waiting for the end of the reality show phase? I mean, what people will do to get on television these days is really very bizarre—show themselves off in the worst of lights, their most intimate moments revealed, shown to be greedy and divisive and jealous and bitter. And yet they're famous. Everything's okay because they're on Survivor or whatever it might be. It really doesn't make sense to me.

Also, the more famous one gets—and it's interesting how people crave fame—they'll do anything. When they're a B-list actor, it's like any news is good news. There's no such thing as bad publicity. But when you get to a certain level of fame, then it's, "Oh no, my privacy! Don't follow me." And you can't control it. Once that beast is unleashed and you reach a certain amount of fame, people get obsessed with you. It's really ridiculous how much people want to know about someone just because they're famous. Are they really that much more interesting? I don't think so. In fact, sometimes a little more vapid or inane. But people pore over the minutiae of these poor people's lives. And of course, eventually something embarrassing from their past or present is going to come up. It's inevitable. Or they'll just get so angry and frustrated with the hounding that they'll burst out in anger. It's what happens with people. And what they so wanted—to be famous—becomes one of their main sources of suffering.

Another huge example for me is Al Gore. As he introduces himself, "I was going to be your president," or "the once and future president." To be so close—to really have it, in essence, but to have it taken away from you—and to go from that to almost nothing. I'm sure he was very depressed for a long time after that. But then what's interesting to see is how he's reinvented himself as this almost savior of the world with his teaching on global warming. He is really making a huge difference now. If he'd been president, I don't know if he could have been so influential. He might have saved us all from a lot of grief, but in this area of global warming, he's doing amazing things.

And so this vacillation is just there. The question is, what do we do about it? As meditators, we can really see how we want to evaluate our practice. Was this retreat successful? Did I get what I wanted out of it? And I don't know about you, but for me, at the end of a retreat there's that thought of how am I going to present to the other? We've spent all these weeks divesting of a sense of self and being quite happy being a silent nobody. And yet when it comes up, that question—"How was your retreat?"—we have to have a good answer, don't we? "Oh, it was this and that, and I learned this and that." It's so hard to evaluate.

Please don't try. It's almost impossible in the middle or even close to the end—or even any time, actually—to really evaluate in terms of success or failure what a retreat has been. It's too mysterious. It's much more mysterious than that.

And even when the retreat ends, it's so hard to evaluate. We will only know as time unfolds and we see how we meet our experience as we go back into the world, when we're in relationship and connecting with other people, with our work and families. That's really the only way to tell, and it mightn't be very obvious or clear. So not to have some big judgment about success or failure.

So many people have said already, "It wasn't what I thought it was going to be." And yet we still hold on to these expectations of what it should be, of how it should measure up. I always say, even if I go into a retreat knowing to have no expectations, it's still always different. To really open to that—that we can't control this, that it's not helpful to judge.

The third of the pairs is praise and blame, or praise and criticism. Now this is one that gets many of us: the

judging, the elation and the pain—the elation from being praised and the pain from being judged or criticized. We see how much we fear or value the opinions of others, that we really only find our identity through that lens. We place a lot of emphasis on how others see us, how we're held in their view, and that can be really paralyzing.

You can see how we can often be given compliments or praise and kind of dismiss it. "Oh, that's okay. That wasn't anything. I didn't try too hard. Don't worry about that." But someone says one negative thing to us and it goes around and around, and that's what we identify with. It's really interesting to see that.

I actually read some research on why this is so, why we tend to remember the negative things while the positive things we kind of fluff off. It was interesting—who knows if it's true—but this is what some research has found. Remembering the negative things, and in some ways you could say the difficult things, is one way we survived. The analogy they gave was that we remembered which were the poisonous berries, and so we didn't eat them. That's how you and I and our genetic pool are all still here—that remembering of what was bitter, of what killed someone else, that what was bad or wrong actually was helpful to us. So they really are thinking that's part of this psychology of why those difficult things that people say to us stick so much more than the compliments.

I really see this in this role as a teacher. It's not something I ever set out to do or had an agenda about—actually almost the opposite. But anytime you sit in front of a bunch of people and start saying stuff, you're going to get this push and pull of one person coming in saying, "I loved what you said," and the next person about the exact same thing saying, "I really have to give you some feedback about what you said last night." And it can be the exact same thing. How many times do people come and say, "Do you mind if I give you some feedback?" It's like, "Well, actually..." But the opposite reactions about the same things. I'm sure you've had that experience. The old thing: you can't please everyone.

A yogi I was working with on another retreat came in and reported a really deep insight she had. She said she had a really difficult interaction with someone in her yogi job. And I mean, you know, really difficult—you know how it is. Just a little look or a glance can be a really difficult interaction in a yogi job. But she really worked with it. She said she saw it wasn't personal, that other person—she doesn't know what was going on for them. They might have been unhappy in some way already or had some trigger about what happened. So she said, "I really let it go. I was very pleased with myself for just not taking that on, not buying into it—they hate me, or I'm a bad person, or I did something wrong." She just really could let it go.

But then she said the kicker was later on someone gave her some praise in her yogi job. And she went, "Oh, thank you." But then the thought came—and who knows how much of this was just internal—"this too."

If you're going to let go of something difficult that someone said, you can't then with the same hand hold on to the praise. She had to gulp and swallow and let it go—not to dismiss it, but not to say, "Yes, that's me,

the good yogi. I did this thing." And so it goes both ways. The teaching is really about not getting identified with either of them.

We can really get lost in blaming the other. If we find that we're being criticized, our instinctive reaction is to turn it around and push that away. And in that, there's still an identification. It's interesting, actually—someone else, when I was teaching this in a class, talked about how they would use praise to get people to like them. So working with these worldly conditions isn't all about just how they're affecting me. We can really see how we use them in our evaluating of other people or in our relationships with other people—using praise to get people to like us, or being critical and feeling superior, or actually feeling separate from people who are going through some difficulty of pain or loss and judging them for that. There's a lot of places we need to wake up about in this.

The last of these conditions is that of pleasure and pain, or joy and sorrow, happiness and unhappiness. We can really see how so much of our experience is just going through these. On retreat, where we're paying attention to our mind states, it becomes very clear, this alternation. We wake up and it's a good day. A few hours later something happens and there's some dissatisfaction or depression. We have lasagna for lunch and we're happy again. It can be as simple as that.

It's interesting—we can try to evaluate in a bigger way and think that we have more of one than the other, that there's some tendency we have. But again, they've done research and it's really not so. We can't be very objective about this. There's also a lot of interesting research these days on psychology and the way the mind works. One of the ones I found particularly interesting about this area is that people are actually very bad at predicting what will make them happy. Have you read that research? It's fascinating. We have these ideas about what it should be, but they don't match up.

The interesting thing is we don't learn. We still think those things should make us happy, and we're just not doing it quite right. The researcher says that instead of asking other people what worked for them or how it is to have this experience, people tend to think, "Oh, I'm unique. Whatever happened to them is going to be different, and I'll figure it out, and it'll be okay for me. I'll like working sixty hours a week in this job just to make money. It'll work for me." And they don't see that it's actually going to cause a lot of suffering.

A classic example is traveling, going on the big trip. It can be great to go on some trips, but a lot of the time, have you noticed, we're actually in some degree or other of dukkha. All the preparation to get ready, and then a thirteen-hour plane trip, which is no piece of cake—just jammed in there, the food is terrible, and we're complaining about that. Then we get there and we're lost, and the hotel's lost our reservation, and there we are wandering around this city with a guidebook, not knowing where we are or where we're going to have lunch, and we're hungry and tired. Then we come back from the trip and people say, "Well, how was it?" And we go, "It was wonderful!" Because that's what people expect us to say. That's what we think we should have experienced. But a lot of the time, it was actually pretty unpleasant. We have this

idea we should be enjoying it, so we try to convince ourselves that we are enjoying it as we're seeing the thirteenth medieval palace and another Renaissance masterpiece. We don't get the message.

So we really need to begin to look at this. It's what we've been doing this whole retreat—really examining what the true sources of happiness are for us, where that can be found. We begin to see it's not in the external world. It's not in acquiring possessions or experiences. We see even that our own internal sense of pleasure and pain is subjective. If we look at something through the lens of mindfulness, what was painful, just through interest, can actually become pleasurable. So we see that they're not so fixed.

There's a saying: absence of pain is pleasure when you're old; absence of pleasure is pain when young. It's all relative. It's not that one thing is a certain way, or that we'll always relate to an experience in a certain way.

Christopher Titmus, one of our friends and teachers, talks about when he practiced in Thailand many years ago—about this monk who had secluded himself away in a cave and practiced very intensively. After a while, people noticed they hadn't seen him for some time, so they went up to see what had happened and discovered that he had died up in that cave practicing. But they found written on the wall of the cave: "Oh, what joy to know there is no happiness in the world."

Oh, what joy to know there is no happiness in the world. It only makes sense when you have a true understanding of what joy is in this definition, and what happiness is.

He's really talking about turning away from trying to find happiness out there in things, and the joy that can come from that turning.

As we've said again and again, the Buddha talked a lot about suffering, but he never talked about suffering without referring to it in the context of happiness, of freedom. By opening to suffering, by turning and facing it directly and knowing its nature, we can come to a place of far deeper happiness, far deeper freedom than we would ever have thought possible—through that willingness to actually connect with the difficulties in our lives.

So how do we work skillfully with these alternating conditions? Of course, the first thing is simply mindfulness of them—to be aware when they're happening, to see what our inclination is, what our way of relating to them is, to notice the grasping or the pushing away, to see all of the different strategies we use to hold on to the good ones and push away the bad ones. It can be fascinating to see the bending and contortions we'll do to try and accomplish that, and to really be willing to notice it. We'll modify our behavior. We'll change the things we say. Sometimes there are skillful ways of doing that, but this is when we're doing it unmindfully, when we're really just acting out of the sense that this is the only way I can find my happiness.

It's not to say that we should deny ourselves the pleasure of things when they're going well. This is not a teaching about that. It's simply recognizing the ephemeral nature of that kind of happiness and always

being pointed back to looking for deeper ways of contacting happiness.

Again, Ajahn Chah: "The Buddha said you should know the world. It dazzles like a king's royal carriage. Fools are entranced, but the wise are not deceived. It's not that he wanted us to go all over the world looking at everything, studying everything about it. He simply wanted us to watch this mind, which is attached to it. When the Buddha told us to look at the world, he didn't want us to get stuck in it. He wanted us to investigate it, because the world is born just in this mind. Sitting in the shade of a tree, you can look at the world. When there is desire, the world comes into being right there. Wanting is the birthplace of the world. To extinguish wanting is to extinguish the world."

We have plenty of opportunities to practice with this. The world is going to be constantly presenting us with these alternating pairs—it's the nature of things. So we don't have to go looking for them. We just have to notice which one is operating. On a relative level, we see their impermanent, ephemeral nature, their conditioned nature, born out of conditions—how they come and they go, how what one person praises us for another criticizes us for, how one day we can have something and the next day it's gone, whatever it might be. Whatever the time sequence, this is the truth of things.

We begin to see more clearly for ourselves: What is it in our mindfulness, in our relationship to our experience, in our wisdom, that increases happiness, increases the wholesome, is skillful? And what decreases the unwholesome, the unskillful? This is the source of true happiness.

It's a call for us to really know ourselves, to really be willing to stay present for these little movements of mind that try to convince us that getting something, holding on to something, is the answer. To see what we do in relationship to praise or to criticism, how much identification there is around those, and to see that actually letting go, disidentifying, is a truer source of well-being and contentment than any mode of grasping or holding on can ever be.

Because the question isn't so much whether these will affect us or whether we'll get out of balance with them. Of course we will. We're sensitive human beings who feel the impact of these things. The question about our practice and how to live in the world is: How quickly do we notice the push or pull of these conditions, and how relatively easily can we come back into balance and see them for what they are—these changing, conditioned experiences that it doesn't help to identify with or hold on to? That's the practice.

On the transcendent level, when we don't identify with them, when we don't see them as me or mine, there's a possibility of really being free of their impact. It's not that we don't enjoy them, but we see that clinging to them—in both the positive or the negative—ultimately brings us more suffering, is ultimately a source of dissatisfaction. They will change, and if we're caught in trying to hold on or in pushing away, we're bound to suffer.

Ajahn Chah says about this that the eight worldly conditions will always be with us. True success with

them is having them be of equal value. Praise or blame, gain or loss—they're just the conditions of the world. They don't need to be the conditions of our inner experience. We can leave them there, out in the world.

There's a great sutta that is the teaching on this, the Loka Vipatti Sutta. Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "The Failings of the World," and it talks about how, as an uneducated worldling, we get entranced by the comings and goings. Pain arises. We don't reflect that it's impermanent, conditioned, subject to change. And so we get consumed by it. But the same things happen to what he calls a well-instructed noble disciple.

But for that noble disciple, he reflects: these things have happened, but they are impermanent. They are subject to change. They're not me and mine. And so he doesn't get entranced with them. He doesn't welcome the arisen gain or rebel against arisen loss. She does not welcome arisen status or rebel against arisen disgrace.

And in this, as she thus abandons welcoming and rebelling, she is released from birth, aging, and death, from sorrows, lamentations, pain, distresses, and despairs. She is released, I tell you, from suffering and stress.

So just not getting caught in these is another doorway to the end of suffering, to liberation.

The sutta continues: "Knowing this, the wise person mindful ponders these changing conditions. Desirable things don't charm the mind. Undesirable ones bring no resistance. His welcoming and rebelling are scattered, gone to their end, do not exist. Knowing the dustless, sorrowless state, she discerns rightly, has gone beyond becoming to the further shore."

I'll end with Ajahn Chah once more. He said: "As wisdom matures and we begin to understand in accordance with the truth, we will no longer be dragged up and down. Usually, if we have a pleasant mood, we behave one way. And if we have an unpleasant mood, we are another way. We like something and we are up. We dislike something and we are down. In this way, we are still in conflict with enemies. When these things no longer oppose us, they become stabilized and balance out. There are no longer ups or downs or highs and lows. We understand these things of the world and know that's just the way it is. It's just worldly dhamma.

"Worldly dhamma changes to become the path. Worldly dhamma has eight ways. The path has eight ways. Wherever worldly dhamma exists, the path is to be found also. When we live with clarity, all of our worldly experiences become the practicing of the Eightfold Path. Without clarity, worldly dhammas predominate and we are turned away from the path. When right understanding arises, liberation from suffering lies right here before us. You will not find liberation by running around looking elsewhere."

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