The Sources of Happiness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 58:01

The subject of this talk is the sources of happiness.

The whole point of the teachings of the Buddha was for us to find happiness. Although he often talked about it in terms of the end of suffering, the outcome is the same. The Buddha often used this kind of negative language in his teaching, so the end of suffering is consistent with his terminology. But he also used many very positive expressions for different kinds of happiness.

In the Pali, I'll mention a few words and their sense in English. One word he often used was *sukha*. I really like this word because it sounds a lot like "sugar," and it has that kind of sweetness. It means alternately happiness or pleasure. I think of it as a quiet kind of contentment. The word *pīti*, which many of you are familiar with, refers to a happiness specifically associated with meditation. There's a kind of delight when you really connect well with your meditation focus, whether it's the breath, the body, or a mood, and you're really present with it, meeting it with a fullness of attention. There's a delight, a meditative delight in that.

The word *ānanda* means bliss, and it's used in many names. The Buddha's attendant was named Ānanda. You see it often in monks' and nuns' names in Asia. My preceptor was the Venerable Paññānanda—the bliss of wisdom. The word *pāmojja* means joy; it's one of the factors in what's called transcendent dependent arising, the increase in joy. *Somanassa* means a gladness of mind. I believe it's mentioned in the Satipaṭṭhāna in a few places. One contemporary scholar and commentator, Venerable Anālayo, wrote a wonderful book called *Satipaṭṭhāna*, a book-length exposition of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. He put it this way: the entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy.

So really, that's what we're here to do. We're here to refine the sense of joy and happiness that we experience both in our retreat life and in our daily life. That's what the path is about.

This summer I was sitting with a Buddhist teacher who is a monk, and I've decided not to name him because I want to be able to speak freely about him based on my own suppositions. I may or may not be right, so I don't want to taint his name with my projections. I also don't want to create expectations in you. There's nothing worse than being told somebody's a fantastic teacher, and then you meet them and think, "What a disappointment." So I'm not going to share his name, which will enable me to speak more freely about him.

In spending time with him—listening to his teachings, being around him personally outside the formal teaching role—I was really struck by his happiness, his degree of contentment and joy. This wasn't a

purely subjective impression, because he'd been through those machines at Madison. The University of Wisconsin does MRI tests scanning people's brains, and his happiness quotient in the brain scan was kind of off the chart. He had been coined by some there as "the happiest person in the world." Though they haven't tested everybody yet, even at Madison, so we won't call him that for certain.

As I observed him through many different situations, I watched how this happiness had different facets. If he was not called on to do anything, it wasn't like he was always bubbling over with some kind of cheerful, smiling delight. Often, if he wasn't being interactive, he'd be very quiet, peaceful, very low-key. You could sort of overlook his presence. If he was in a room with people but wasn't called on to do anything, he was very simple and modest and humble. But when he taught, and often when he interacted, he was really playful. He'd break into smiles and laughter very easily, and it was contagious. Being around him for a while, one tended to soak up that happiness through his manifestation of it. He was quite charismatic.

As I spent time around him, I started to wonder: where did his happiness come from? Because I wanted some also. And I thought, if he developed it, that means any of us could develop it to that extent. That's one of the promises of the path. As I reflected on it, it seemed to me that in the teaching of the Buddha, there are basically five avenues or five means to developing happiness. I reflected on each of them in relation to him as I observed him and listened to him teach. So that's what I want to talk about tonight: these five sources of happiness in the teachings of the Buddha.

But first, why is this of interest to us? Because happiness is the destination of the path, it's something I think we're all interested in. Once we learn what the causes of it are, we know how to create it for ourselves. Happiness is a mental factor like any other. It's a conditioned state that arises based on prior causes and conditions and comes into being when those conditions are right. It's very scientific.

So if we go through the steps to prepare the mind for happiness, happiness is the inevitable result. This is not a whimsical thing. It's not a random thing. It's not an elusive thing.

As it often feels in Western literature, it's really hard to figure out in Western life why some people are happy and some are not. But in the Buddhist teachings, it's very predictable, you might say. Now, of course, we're all starting from a different point, and so it's not possible to predict the timing of the development of happiness in anyone's practice. But the eventual outcome, if we persist, is inevitable. And that's one of the things that I love about the Buddha's teachings. There are very predictable ways for us to get where we want to go. Happiness in its various gradations are points along this route. And if we know the causes, we know how to reach that destination.

So in my understanding of the Buddha's teachings, there are five avenues to happiness, each one a kind of set of practices. Again, it's not random. It's something that we can practice and develop. Four of them can be taken to a lot of depth—you could almost say unlimited depth of development. And one of them is always going to be shallow and superficial, so we don't worry as much about that one, but it's available

also.

The other thing I want to say is this is just in our tradition of Theravadan Buddhism and the Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the ways to happiness. I looked up the word happiness on Amazon just this evening, and the response came back with 18,000 books dealing with happiness. So there are a lot of other ideas out there. The Buddha's list is not exhaustive, but it is reliable.

Just to name some of the others that are common in our culture: psychotherapy, exercise. There's a new formulation of exercise that some of our friends are into called "the happy body"—I don't know if you've heard of that one. There's a whole system to make the body happy, which makes the mind happy too. Developing creativity. Spending time in nature. And I'm sure you all have your own lists as well.

The five that I'm going to talk about tonight from our tradition are sense pleasures, merit, concentration, insight, and awakening. I'll talk about each one a little bit as we go, in the order that I gave them. Each one is a progressively more refined, more reliable, and more satisfying form of happiness.

The other thing to say about all five of these avenues is that they rest on a common understanding in the Buddhist tradition of what constitutes genuine happiness. And that is that the forces in the mind of greed, aversion, and delusion are reduced and eventually absent. So this is the sense of when we say in our practice that the mind becomes more pure—we mean something pretty precise by this, which is that greed, aversion, and delusion decline over the course of our Dharma practice. I'll talk about how each one of these contributes to that sense of decline.

So the first one is sense pleasures. This is from the Buddha talking to his attendant: "Ananda, there are these five cords of sense pleasure. What five? Forms"—which is a synonym for sights; often when the Buddha says form he also means sights—"cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing." Isn't that nice to think of all the sights in the world that have that combination of qualities? "Sounds cognizable by the ear that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing. Odors cognizable by the nose. Tastes cognizable by the tongue. Sensations cognizable by the body. Similarly, the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on these—that is called sensual pleasure."

And what came to my mind when I read this was a trip that Sally and I took to the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. They were showing a quite wonderful exhibition of Impressionist paintings.

The Musée d'Orsay in Paris was undergoing renovation, and so they were lending out quite a large body of their works. They were doing it in two stages—the first was called "The Birth of Impressionism," featuring the early stages of the movement and leading into its more mature expression. As the exhibit progressed, it moved through time, and you could see Impressionism develop from the early paintings by Manet and

Degas, which were really more realistic, into the later paintings by Renoir and Monet that became much more plays of light and color.

As we walked through the exhibit, the further we got and the more impressionistic the paintings became, the smile on my face just kept growing and growing. I wasn't even thinking about it, but as I looked at the beauty of these Monets and Renoirs and Pissarros, I felt this sense of joy, and the smile just started to grow until I noticed it—then I became a little self-conscious. But it really is a delight to see beautiful things, to hear beautiful music like a symphony in concert. I've thought that if an alien came to this planet and wanted to see the greatest thing that Western culture had produced, I would take them to a symphony hall and let them hear a concert of something like Beethoven's Fifth. The interplay of all the instruments and the harmony is just magical.

So we can have very high degrees of pleasure and bliss and joy through exposure to the pleasures of the five senses. This is a natural part of life for laypeople. When you think rather longingly about your life outside, I bet it's the sense pleasures you're thinking of: having a good meal with friends, enjoying your favorite latte, making love, listening to your favorite music at home or driving in your car. These are the things that make our lay lives delightful in many small moments. They create moments of uplift through pleasurable experiences of the five physical senses.

When we come into this environment, as I mentioned in my previous talk, one of the sorrows of this life is the loss of those kinds of pleasures. We feel that for a while until we adjust, and then the joys of the renunciate life tend to make us not worry so much about that part.

Now, I'm sure you've heard that in the Buddha's teachings there are many warnings about the dangers of sense pleasures. Generally in Buddhism, sense pleasures get a bad rap—I'm sure you've tuned into that. Here's a classical statement from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, knowledge, which leads to peace, to enlightenment, to nibbāna."

But notice the preface: "for one who has gone forth into homelessness." The teachings warning about sense pleasures are mostly given to monastics—people whose whole lifestyle is giving up access to sense pleasures. That's the foundation of the renunciate life. It's also a foundation for our life here. We don't make the pursuit of sense pleasures a big part of your being here, and it's not highly recommended. It tends to distract the mind from our essential concern, which is observing the mind and its movements.

In other suttas, the Buddha compares sense pleasures to a dry bone, because ultimately there's no real meat or sustenance there; to a dream, because they're so fleeting they can almost seem illusory and not so worth pursuing. But it would be wrong to believe that the Buddha condemned sense pleasures for

laypeople. He didn't. In fact, in one sutta he said that one enjoying sense pleasures may be praised if the wealth they depend on has been acquired lawfully and is shared to make oneself and others happy. So there's this link between sense pleasures and wealth, which is logical if you think about it—a lot of sense pleasures cost money. The Buddha was making that connection: it's what we use as laypeople. We use money and we enjoy sense pleasures.

But of course we all know that sense pleasures are not the final word. They're a limited kind of happiness, temporary. They come and go, and their satisfaction is transient—good for a bit, but ending very quickly. I remember Sally and I were eating lunch one day this summer at our kitchen table. We had homemade chocolate chip cookies, and I was eating one of these fresh-out-of-the-oven chocolate chip cookies. I remember saying to her, "You know, it's really hard to be unhappy eating a fresh chocolate chip cookie." But then the problem is it ends so quickly—the cookie is gone.

And so the Buddha continued in this same statement where he talked about sense pleasures and the joy that arises based on them. He continued, telling Ānanda this.

Though some may say, "This is the supreme pleasure and joy that beings experience," speaking of sense pleasures, "I would not concede this to them. Why is that? Because there is another kind of happiness more excellent and sublime than that happiness."

So then we move on to this next kind of happiness, which exists at a higher level. I want to mention that when I reflected on the enjoyment of sense pleasures in relationship to this teacher I mentioned, as a monk, sense pleasures didn't make up a huge part of his life. All I really saw was that he enjoyed some meals, but he seemed to enjoy every meal equally. Whatever he was served, he ate it with an equal degree of happiness or equanimity. I didn't see any particular preference or craving—it simply wasn't a big deal for him. For him, sense pleasures were not a significant component. For us, they make up a bigger component of our daily life.

The second of the sources is a word that carries some ambivalence among Westerners. That word is *merit*. It's a translation of the Pali word *puñña*, and it basically means wholesome action or skillful action. But this term "merit"—I don't know—it's tied up with merit badges, and maybe with the idea of bringing an apple to put on your high school teacher's desk, and then you're a good kid or good student. There's something a little too goody-goody about the word, and many of us don't feel comfortable with it. Unfortunately, there's no other word in common use to translate the term, so I'm going to use it. You'll read it often in Buddhist teachings. If you simply think of it as skillful action, hopefully that will take some of the strange vibration away from it.

The understanding is that when we engage in skillful action, it brings positive results back into our life. Some of these results may be experienced on the physical level, some on the mental or emotional level. But at any rate, the results tend to lead to happiness. This is the basic law of karma.

One quotation that has been mentioned a couple of times is the opening of the Dhammapada: "All states come from mind, are preceded by mind, are ruled by mind. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable." This is the sense of merit—that when we act from a purity of mind, happiness and good results come back into our life.

I think it's really interesting to take in this understanding. If you understand karma in this way and have a degree of faith in it, you start to realize that this provides the lever, you could say, or the engine for us to build happiness into our lives. We can control, to some degree, the future outcome of our life by looking at the intention we act upon now. If we make an effort, if we make a regular practice out of doing things from a beautiful or wholesome intention, that lays the groundwork for happiness coming back into our life on both a physical or material level and an emotional or mental level. This understanding of karma gives us a certain degree of power around our life and takes away some of the seeming randomness of it.

This concept of merit is what most lay Buddhists in Asia practice for. Most lay people in countries like Thailand and Burma don't do a lot of the kind of meditation we're doing here. Some do, but the majority of Buddhists don't go into intensive retreat the way you're doing it. Rather, they feel that their happiness will be generated by an ongoing series of wholesome actions. That's what they structure their relationship to Buddhism around—offering food at the temple to the monks or nuns, making prayers, developing in loving-kindness, observing the five precepts or the eight precepts. This is considered in Asia, and the roots are in the Buddha's teachings, a good lay path. Someone following this course is considered to be carrying out a good path of lay practice.

Because we have a foot in both worlds, I think it's really wonderful if we undertake both the monastic practices, which I'll talk about later—those based on insight and concentration—and also the lay practices based upon carrying out wholesome action. This is a teaching we have not always stressed over the years of the Dharma being in the West, but I think it's truly important for us who live most of our lives in the lay world.

The Buddha said there are "streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishments of happiness, which are heavenly, ripening in happiness, and which lead to whatever is wished for, loved, and agreeable to one's welfare and happiness." Part of the understanding of merit is that the development of wholesome action leads to realizing your aspiration—it leads to whatever is wished for. Because different people have different aspirations, the outcome of wholesome action can vary depending on what the person's heartfelt aspiration is. If your heartfelt aspiration is liberation, this practice of merit will conduce to liberation. If your aspiration is simply to live more comfortably in the world with more prosperity, health, or ease, then the development of wholesome action can lead in that direction as well.

The Buddha talked about three particular practices that form the basis of this wholesome action, the basis of happiness for lay practitioners: generosity, virtue or integrity, and what's called *bhāvanā* or mental development. The Pali terms for these three are *dāna, sīla, bhāvanā*—generosity, virtue, mental

development.

Generosity is a huge part of the Buddha's teachings for lay people. It's the first of the ten *pāramīs*.

So in some ways it's considered the foundation for developing the qualities that bring one to awakening.

Generosity is a very powerful practice because it cuts across the assumed separation between ourselves and others. Generosity is about tuning into someone else as a being—like ourselves—who has happiness, unhappiness, wants and needs, and wanting to take care to satisfy the other person's needs the same way we take care of our own needs. The act of generosity is based on seeing through this assumed duality, through the force of empathy, feeling what another feels, and then acting in a way to share, which also breaks down the assumed division or separation.

When we have an understanding of non-separateness with one another and then act based on that, the action in a way plants that truth of non-separation in a deeper place in our heart, our mind, and also in our karmic stream. So it's a wonderful thing to carry out acts that bridge the divide between ourselves and other beings—human beings, animal beings, any other beings that you may encounter.

And we notice something of that in the joy we feel in giving. When you think about a time that you've given freely—not because you had to, not because your uncle's birthday was coming up or something, but simply a freely given gift—there's a lot of joy in thinking about making that gift, feeling into what would make the other person happy. Then when you find the right gift, there's a lot of joy in offering it. It just feels beautiful. And when you reflect on it afterwards, there's a lot of joy in thinking about the gift, the person receiving it, and the happiness that hopefully it brought to them. So you can feel how this happiness builds from the act of giving. And you also understand that it leaves a karmic imprint that will bear good fruit in the future.

One of the great things about being around the Dharma for a long time is that you meet people doing extraordinarily generous things. Of course, a lot of you are devoting your lives to serving others. And it's always inspiring to meet people on retreat who serve in this way—serve at Dharma centers, serve as nurses or therapists, serve as teachers in schools, caregivers to aging parents, parents to young children. So many people I meet in the Dharma have based their life around giving of their time and their energy and their skill. It's beautiful to be in the presence of that.

I was teaching a retreat in New Mexico one time, and I was driving in the car on the way home with a woman who had recently returned from Thailand. She had gone to Thailand a relatively wealthy person. She had worked as a management consultant for many years and built up savings, invested in some real estate and various properties. She went to Thailand with the intention to give it all away and to retire to live in a monastery or nunnery.

She got to Thailand and made connections with different places, both monasteries and nunneries. While there, she sold her properties in the States and channeled her money to these different places she'd visited

that she wanted to support. She sold all her properties except one and just gave the money away—hundreds of thousands of dollars that she gave away.

She moved into one of the monasteries or nunneries and got sick. She could no longer really practice and needed to return to the States to look after her health. She only had one property left. She came back, sold that, got enough money to live on for a while, looked after her health, and went back into her job as a management consultant.

The beautiful thing was she had no regrets. She'd given away almost everything she owned to support the Dharma, and she had no regrets about it. I just know that the fruit of that giving was going to enrich her for years to come. It was very inspiring.

That's dana. Sila—integrity or virtue—Skye talked about a lot in her talk earlier this week, so I won't go into that in great detail. I'll just mention one thing that Skye said and repeat it here.

When we observe our sila closely, keeping the spirit of non-harming and really being conscientious with that, we're also giving a gift in that observance. The Buddha said that what we give to countless beings is freedom from fear. And that's a wonderful thing. When you know somebody who has really good sila, there's a real feeling of trust in that person. It makes it very safe to be around them. And you can feel that atmosphere influencing the other people who come into their orbit, so that those people create a kind of zone of safety. The people who move in that zone are all receiving this gift of fearlessness. It makes a safe place for countless beings.

In terms of the benefit of observing this kind of integrity closely, the Buddha said that it brings a certain kind of happiness which he called the bliss of blamelessness. When we know that for a long time we really haven't harmed another being intentionally, there's a wonderful feeling of relief, a kind of lack of guilt or inner pressure or regret or uneasy conscience—a real feeling of purity and ease. The Buddha called it the bliss of blamelessness. That's a fruit of integrity.

And this third word—dana, sila, bhavana—is very interesting. Bhava means being or existence or becoming, so bhavana means bringing into being. It's sometimes a synonym for meditation.

A common translation is mental development. And I love this sense that we are bringing into being our own hearts and minds. That's really the sense of bhavana—that we learn how to shape our heart and mind in a beautiful direction.

The French poet Paul Valéry kept a series of notebooks that became his spiritual practice at a certain point. I don't think he published them during his life; they were published posthumously. But he wrote for one or two hours every morning in these personal notebooks, which were a kind of diary of his inner exploration. He'd write on many different themes. It wasn't poetry—it was simply reflecting on what he read and his own understanding of it. It was his spiritual practice. And he said of it: "Other people write books. I am making my mind."

That's what we're doing here. We're making our minds step by step, moment by moment. We're fashioning what's in here.

When the Buddha talked about bhavana as a form of merit or wholesome action, he tended to speak of it specifically in terms of developing the practice of loving-kindness. So in terms of merit, the sense is something that laypeople, people in daily life, can easily access and build—the sense of loving-kindness, compassion, connection. You could put gratitude in there as well. And the other quality he talked about often was the development of faith. So in this dana-sila-bhavana combination, I think of it as developing loving-kindness and faith. When faith is strong, life goes more easily, practice goes more easily.

This is not an exclusively Buddhist law, as you must know. Think about people in your life whom you feel are truly happy. Just run through your acquaintances, see who comes to mind among the people you know who seem genuinely happy, and take a look at their lives. See if they aren't characterized by generosity, integrity, and some degree of loving-kindness.

You could say that these are the requisites for normal human happiness—not happiness that even conceives of a spiritual path, but simply what it is to be a good person in the world, in human society, across cultures, across religions, across any part of the globe. You'll find these people everywhere. Generosity, integrity, loving-kindness. That's what makes for a normal, happy human life. As we develop these three in our lay life, we also will be generating the conditions for such a life.

I think it's interesting—just one final note—what all three of these have in common: they're all based on empathy and caring for others. It's so interesting to me that the basis of a happy human life is caring for others and then expressing that.

When I thought about this in relation to the teacher I was with, the connection was very apparent. His conduct was very, very blameless. I'd never seen him do anything that would in any way give offense to someone. A very gentle person, he spoke kindly when he spoke. Of course, he was practicing a lot of precepts, but you could feel there was a genuine intention of kindness and compassion behind them.

The next avenue to happiness is concentration—the third, after sense pleasures and merit. Now we're getting into the realm of what you're doing on this retreat. This is something special. This is not something that many people in normal daily life have access to or are able to develop strongly, but it's one of the key things we're doing here.

Concentration is the common translation of the Pali word samadhi. It really refers to a mind that has gathered itself into the present moment, that has become, as Carol said the other night, one-pointed in its awareness of the present moment. This gathering into the present moment brings a lot of strength to the mind. Normally in daily life, we're distracted by thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, by what we have to do next, by running here and there. In this situation, because our activities become so simple, it enables us more and more to gather our full attention and place it into just this moment.

When that happens, you'll feel it. You'll feel the mind really collect upon the breath or body or sound in a very wholehearted way. And then you'll find the mind has a lot of strength. When the mind collects in this way, it becomes still, and you can feel, in that place, that it's hard to shake. When the mind is distracted, any little sound might throw us off or start us down a path of thought and papañca. But when the mind really comes together in this way, it acquires a strength that lets it stay connected to the present moment. And that brings a sense of stillness, peace, and well-being.

This unification of mind, this strengthening of mind, brings with it automatically a sense of well-being. If you look back over some of your fondest memories in meditation, or what you might say are some of the happiest moments you've had, I bet they'll exhibit this factor of concentration.

This is one of the things that put the dharma hook in me and made me keep coming back—because I tasted some peace through meditation I'd never felt before. And I kept coming back because I wondered: if a little bit feels like that, what would a little more feel like?

So this cultivation of peace brought me back again and again.

One of the things that's so satisfying about this state of concentration is that when it's strong, the hindrances don't arise. This is one of the hallmarks of strong concentration. The hindrances are temporarily at bay—they haven't gone away for good, but these movements of liking and disliking and sleepiness and restlessness and doubt have temporarily subsided. The mind then feels a certain kind of freedom. It's a beautiful experience not to be assaulted by these crazy movements of our own mind.

So it's said that this state is a state of some seclusion. We're not only secluded from outer distraction, but we're secluded from the impact of our own kilesas to a large extent. And that's part of the beauty and delight.

The concentration can develop further into these states called jhana, which are described as absorption states of concentration. This is the Buddha's description of the first of the jhanas—there are seven states beyond this, but this is the first one: "The meditator enters and abides in the first jhana with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. She makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, fill, steep, and pervade her body so that there is no part of her whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure."

The development of this kind of joy and pleasure in meditation, of course, reinforces our ability to stay present, because now the present moment experience is satisfying in itself. This concentration enables the mind to just relax into its own experience of the moment. And so it can become a little bit self-supporting because the mind's not being drawn out through likes and dislikes, through wants.

One of the other things that happens as the mind comes to settle into itself more and more is that the body also starts to settle. I think for most of us in the West, we've grown up in a very busy culture and our body reflects that. When we come to meditation, often we've picked up the energy of the fast-paced society that we're in the middle of. I know I often felt in the early years of practice that that energy was vibrating my

body and was kind of rising up, coming into the head a lot. And it was hard for me to settle in a relaxed way lower into my body because I felt I was still reeling from all the busyness that my life had picked up. And especially if there's any injury, trauma, or deep hurt, that kind of buzzy energy gets even stronger.

So a lot of what happens as we calm the mind in meditation is that the body also calms, and lets go of that unnecessary, frantic energy that's so prevalent outside. Sometimes it can take a long time for that calming to happen, but it's part of the natural process. And when the body does start to calm, it's much simpler for the mind to rest because it's not meeting the jangly energy in the body.

The practices that you're doing, the practices that we've been instructing in the mornings, all develop this quality of concentration and samadhi. You don't need to do anything differently. Sometimes people want to develop concentration very strongly and go in a particular direction, and a few people on the retreat may end up doing that. But for most of you, the practices that you are doing through the Vipassana instructions will lead you to deeper and deeper concentration as you go through the retreat, and that will be sufficient.

The next of the avenues is insight. This is basically the growth of wisdom or understanding. This is what all our instructions are pointing to. This is what most of the evening talks will be pointing to. This is really what the retreat is structured around. I don't have to talk about this a lot tonight; I know you're very familiar with this ground. I'll just recap.

Insight is really around understanding what it is that we do with our minds that leads to suffering, and what we can do through our minds that leads to the end of suffering or to happiness. This is what we're here to understand.

The Buddhist formulation of this question came in two or three different main paradigms. The first, and probably most important, is the Four Noble Truths: to understand suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to its end. In this, we spend most of our time on the second and third noble truths—how do we understand the arising of craving, which is the source of suffering, and how do we release that craving to come to the at least temporary end of craving and to that place of freedom?

This is really the crux of our meditation practice. If we're caught in something, there's some kind of craving at work. How do we release that and return the mind to a place of freedom—relative freedom, ease, relaxation, well-being? There's a central investigation that goes on through the Four Noble Truths.

Another insight that's commonly talked about is the insight into the three characteristics: the understanding of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. But these insights are very closely related to the Four Noble Truths. As we understand that everything is in the process of change, we don't tend to hang on or grasp as much.

So we move through life more easily, letting things come as they come and letting things go as they go. As we learn this rhythm of allowing, there's less clinging and therefore less suffering. We learn not to hold

on, and then the craving and clinging don't arise so much in the first place.

The third area the Buddha speaks about is the direct investigation of clinging or grasping itself. We learn to notice when there's clinging in the mind through some form of contraction, either through liking or disliking, and how to release that. So all these insights orbit around the same core issue: How do we get caught? How do we release? How does the mind get stuck? How does the mind free itself?

The understanding of not-self is so helpful in this because we start to understand that all the different phenomena that come along are not really commentaries on me, myself, or I. Everything arises according to its own causes and conditions. Everything passes away according to its own causes and conditions. This kind of understanding seeps in gradually through our practice, but it has a deep and lasting impact.

I have a friend who's an old student of meditation. He was interested in coming to a longer retreat next year and emailed actually a few of us here with reports of a difficult health condition. He's about my age, and his body is starting to break down in different ways. He said, "You know, this may be the last long retreat that I may be able to come on." He's somebody who's come on long retreats for many, many years with us. And he said, "But you don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body." So even in the midst of that health crisis, even in the midst of seeing the end of his life kind of on the horizon—you don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body. There's so much freedom and lightness when we let those truths of not me, not mine, not I, let them in and let them grow slowly, slowly.

When I reflect on the teacher I was with this summer, one of the things that was most enjoyable about watching him was the kind of lightness with which he approached everything. I just didn't see stickiness or grabbiness in his mind. He was someone who really seemed to have understood the fleeting nature of everything in this world, and he wasn't getting too caught up in any of it that I could see.

The fifth and last avenue to happiness is awakening. You could say that this is another form of insight, but because it's an insight on a deeper level, I put it in its own category—awakening or enlightenment. This is a pointer to the realization that it's our human potential, through meditation practice, to discover a peace that's beyond time, beyond conditions, beyond change. There's a dimension within us that has this kind of absolute purity. It cannot be corrupted or made imperfect by anything, no matter what happens to us.

The discovery of this, whenever it happens in practice, is at least one stage of the awakening process. And this discovery gives us a truly unshakable faith in the end of suffering as a possibility for ourselves. We know it because we've experienced it directly. Nothing can take away that knowledge. Nothing can take away that faith.

In addition, that realization, when it happens, takes out some of what are called the fetters in the heart and mind—some of the very structural elements that lead the mind into suffering. They can be removed once and for all. This happens, it's said, in different stages, so different fetters come out at different points in the journey. But ultimately, the Buddha said, all the tendencies of mind that can possibly lead us into

suffering—that means all the forms of greed, aversion, and delusion—can be taken out of the mind so that there's no longer any potential for suffering to arise in the mind stream.

This, the Buddha said, was the highest happiness. He said that the happiness of sense pleasures was not one-sixteenth of the happiness of this kind of awakening. And it's hard to imagine what that would be like, because we're buffeted every day as we live, as we sit, as we practice. We're buffeted by these forces in our own hearts and minds—the forces of wanting, of not wanting, of not seeing clearly. This is our normal human life. To come to a place where we knew that those forces could not come again to harm us, to injure us—what a relief, what a blessing, what happiness.

So in closing, I just want to mention that this monk who seemed to know what he was talking about said that the main cause for this kind of freedom is happiness. That is, the development of sense pleasures in moderation, of merit, of generosity, of virtue, of cultivating the heart, of concentration and discovering an inner peace even if it is conditional, of the growth in wisdom through understanding clinging and its release. The happiness from all those sources then becomes the main cause for liberation.

So as we practice all the different avenues to happiness, if we practice them all, they all channel toward this possibility—a real human possibility of awakening and the final end of suffering.

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