The Buddha's Question

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:06:27

You're all so quiet.

The talk tonight is on the Four Noble Truths.

When Gertrude Stein, the poet and salon keeper, was in the process of dying, she was in a bedroom surrounded by people that she knew. And as she was fading, she said aloud, "What is the answer?" No one hazarded a guess, whereupon she rolled over, laughed, said, "Well then, what's the question?" and died.

This points to an important point: if we're going to have insight into this path that we're walking, it's very wise to know what the question is—what the question was that the Buddha was attempting to answer. Because in knowing the question, we know a lot about the framework of explanation.

We come to practice with so many different things that we're seeking. We may want stress reduction, or we might want psychological insight, or emotional healing, or physical healing, or an answer to a life question. These are certainly all understandable and worthy human interests and goals. But each of them, as a standalone or collective thing, is not really what the Buddha was trying to address, although they are certainly all part of what he did address. They're not really the higher level or the macro level question.

So if we were going to look at what the Buddha really was trying to answer, what his deepest question was, I think it can be useful to go back into his own personal biography and spend a little bit of time looking at his whole process of coming to be the Buddha, the teacher, the great teacher, the turner of the wheel of Dharma for the liberation of all beings.

The story goes that the Buddha was born in a place that is currently in part of Nepal, kind of close to the border with India. At the time of his birth into what was considered to be a royal family, there were many signs, apparently, that something unusual was going on, both in terms of the child himself and the circumstances of his birth. These are the kind of stories that you tend to hear about many different religious figures—something unusual about their circumstances of coming into the world that indicated something significant.

After the Buddha was born, a holy man, a seer, a wise man came to the palace. Looking at the totality of circumstances, he basically told the Buddha's family, "This boy can go one of two ways. Either he will be a world leader—the world leader—or he will be the Buddha, a great religious teacher."

The family, this royal family, existed in a world of a great deal of intra- and inter-clan and kingdom violence. They had a clear preference for which one of these two the child should be. And so the story goes

that they proceeded with keeping him as secluded from worldly distress as they possibly could.

Some of the later stories talk about this in terms of him having no idea about old age, sickness, and death, or any of the things that are part of the human and animal cycle of suffering. That seems a little bit unlikely because the Buddha himself was born into the warrior class, and so he must have had some idea about why you would need a warrior class. Nevertheless, it's clear that he was kept secluded and was given as many sense pleasures as possible in order to tip his interests away from compassionate activity and more towards worldly accomplishment.

This is his own description, in his own words, of what it was like for him growing up:

"Lily pools were made for me at my father's house solely for my benefit. Blue lilies flowered in one, white lilies in another, red lilies in a third. I used no sandalwood that was not from Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments, and cloak were all made of Benares cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night so that no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me. I had three palaces: one for the winter, one for the summer, and one for the rains. In the rains palace, I was entertained by minstrels with no men among them. For the four months of the rains, I never went down to the lower palace. Though meals of broken rice with lentil soup are given to the servants and retainers in other people's houses, in my father's house, white rice and meat was given to them."

This is the world of sense pleasure, sensory indulgence. I think we can safely assume that any kind of sensual pleasure that was available at the time—and seemingly many of them—were completely available to this young man as he was growing up. We can assume that he enjoyed and experienced all of them.

Nevertheless, if you take some of the later stories, there was a day when the Buddha-to-be left the palace accompanied by his driver and went out for a ride outside the secluded protection of the palace walls. When he came out of the palace, he saw in sequence four different sights. He saw an old person. He saw a sick person. He saw a person who had passed away and was left there in the street. And he saw a renunciate.

It had a very deep effect on him. It had the kind of effect that turned his mind in a completely different direction. This is what he says about it:

"Whilst I had such power and good fortune, yet I thought: When an untaught ordinary man who is subject to aging, not safe from aging, sees another who is aged, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to aging, not safe from aging, and so it cannot benefit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another who is aged."

When I considered this, the vanity of youth entirely left me.

And he goes on: "I thought, when an untaught ordinary man who is subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, sees another who is sick, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself

is no exception. But I too am subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, and so it cannot benefit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another who is sick. When I considered this, the vanity of health entirely left me.

I thought, when an untaught ordinary man who is subject to death, not safe from death, sees another who is dead, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to death, not safe from death, and so it cannot benefit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted upon seeing another who is dead. When I considered this, the vanity of life entirely left me."

So the party at the palace was no longer adequate. He saw through to the essential matter, the underlying fate of all beings who take birth. I find that particular quote very moving, because you get this sense of someone who has come face to face with the cold facts of existence and has let it in, has opened to it, and has sobered up.

The bodhisattva intention that arose in the Buddha many lifetimes previously is fully activated at this point. He takes his life in a totally different direction. He becomes a renunciate. He leaves the palace. He leaves the comforts. He goes out, determined to find the answer to the question of suffering.

He says: "Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva, being myself subject to birth, aging, ailing, death, sorrow, and defilement, I sought after what was also subject to these things. But then I thought, why, being myself subject to birth, aging, ailment, death, sorrow, and defilement, do I seek after what is also subject to these things? Suppose, being myself subject to these things, seeing danger in them, I sought after the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, supreme surcease of bondage—Nibbana."

So the search unfolded in this way. He sought out teachers. He found two different teachers who were masters of concentration practices, and he studied with each of them for a period of time, becoming a master of the non-material jhanas. With each of these teachers, once the Buddha-to-be attained mastery, the teacher asked him to stay and either share leadership of the school or take over leadership entirely.

But the Buddha, knowing what his goal was—the end of suffering in his mind stream, to understand the causes of suffering and to undo them—said he could not stay. "I thought, this teaching does not lead to dispassion, to fading of lust, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. I was not satisfied with that teaching, and I left to pursue my search."

Here we see a deep intellectual honesty. Knowing, as we do, that these concentration states—especially developed at the level he developed them—are intensely pleasurable in increasingly refined ways, yet he realized that was not enough, that it did not adequately address or resolve the primary problem of suffering.

So then he took another bent. This is where you really see that he did come from the warrior class, because he takes a swing toward renunciation, hardcore renunciation—extreme asceticism and a struggle

to subdue, to overcome the body and the mind.

During this period, he initially goes into seclusion by himself. He says he would go into seclusion in a remote jungle thicket that for the average person would be hard to endure, seclusion being hard to achieve, isolation hard to enjoy—a place that would rob a bhikkhu of his mind if he had no concentration. He went to such a place, and because he did have concentration, he wasn't spooked by it in the same way someone with less development would be.

But he said, "I'm not afraid of this place, but there are those especially holy nights of the half moons and the quarter moons. Maybe if I spent those nights in such awe-inspiring abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines, which make the hair stand up—perhaps I should encounter that fear and dread." It sounds a bit like haunted places.

And so he did go to these places that were especially frightening. Indeed, he had experiences there which made the hair stand up. He says: "While I dwelt there, a deer would approach me, or a peacock would knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves, and I thought, surely this is the fear and dread coming." He describes waiting for the fear and dread to come, then the fear and dread arriving, then being with it until, as he says, he subdued it—which we would understand as it passing away.

But that wasn't the whole of it. He undertook to meditate in ways where he would do things with his breath and breathing that created a great deal of bodily pain. He would sit with this pain that he himself was creating, and the effect would be that "although he would have tireless energy and unremitting mindfulness, yet his body was overwrought and uncalm because he was exhausted by the painful effort."

He was efforting in a very heroic way, in a very particular way, to bring this suffering mass of body and mind into submission.

And then he gets into the food deprivation.

And he's thinking, should I entirely cut off food? He experiments with cutting off food and eating very little, getting right to the point of death. He talks about what he looked like at that point.

At this stage, he was taking a very little bit of food because one of the deities came to him and said, "Please don't totally stop eating. If you totally stop eating, we're going to find a way to get you a little nutrient through unusual means just to keep you going. You really can't do this." So he was eating a very, very small amount of food—a handful of bean soup or lentil soup or pea soup.

And he talks about his body getting into a state of extreme emaciation. "My limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems because of eating so little. My backside like a camel's hoof, projections of my spine like corded beads, my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn." His hair was falling out. So he took it as far as it could go.

His conclusion was this: "I've taken this as far as it can go." He says, "I started to think: whenever a monk

or brahmin has felt in the past or will in the future or feels now painful, racking, piercing feelings due to striving, it can equal this but not exceed it. But by this grueling penance, I have attained no distinction higher than the human state, worthy of the noble one's knowledge and vision. Might there be another way to enlightenment?"

So he played it out to the very end. And then he had a memory, a key memory, of when he was a boy sitting under a rose apple tree in the shade while his father was doing some ceremonial plowing at the beginning of the planting season—probably some kind of fertility rite, with the king, the head male, out there doing the plowing. He talks about sitting there and being quite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unwholesome things, and that he had "entered upon then and abode in the first meditation, accompanied by thinking and exploring, with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion."

In other words, that's a description of the first jhāna that spontaneously arose in him at that point. And he says, "Might that be the way to enlightenment?" He realized that might be the way. And he thought, "Why am I so afraid of pleasure? This is pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome things." Then he thought, "I'm not afraid of such pleasure, for it has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome things. It is not possible to obtain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated." So he ate food.

With the eating of food, he began the process of being responsive in a non-aversive way to the actual needs of his body and mind. He let go of the polarity. Having let go of the polarity of sense desire and sense indulgence, he let go of the other polarity of extreme asceticism, of the rejection of pleasure in any form. At this point, he's in a position to push for it—to push for the awakening, having come back to the middle, the middle path.

He was also at this point abandoned in disgust by five other renunciates who had come around him, watching this whole process of this extremely strong yogi striving heroically. Then they see him decide to eat, and they're disgusted with him. "Gautama has gone bad. He's given in. He's given in to sense desire." But that's not exactly what was happening.

Having regained his strength, the Buddha then sits under the Bodhi tree. He moves through the four jhānas, coming to the fourth jhāna—his mind collected, bright, present, concentration very deep. As we said earlier, he was a master of concentration. With this very sharp tool, he directs his mind to certain things in sequence.

The first thing he directs his mind to is a recollection of his own past lives. He talks about remembering the particulars, the details of his manifold past lives. "I recollected my past lives: one birth, two, three, four, five, ten, twenty, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, many ages of world contraction, many ages of world expansion. I was there so named, of such a race, such an appearance, such food, such experience of pleasure and pain, such a life term and passing away. Thence I reappeared elsewhere, and then I was so named, of such a race," and so on.

He says, "This is the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one diligent, ardent, and self-controlled."

"Then when my concentrated mind was thus purified, I directed my mind to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings." So he starts turning it to the lives of others. "With the purified mind, I saw beings passing away and reappearing—inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, happy and unhappy in their destinations. And I understood how beings pass on according to their actions."

So in other words, he came to understand karma. This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the second watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens to one diligent, ardent, and self-controlled.

He had seen deeply into what actions in what lives lead to what future outcomes, both for himself and for others. He was picking up on the issue of causation.

Then in the third watch of the night, he inclined his mind to the knowledge of the exhaustion of taints. "I had direct knowledge as it actually is that this is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. And this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. I had direct knowledge as it actually is. These are the taints, meaning suffering. This is the origin of taints. This is the cessation of taints. And this is the way leading to the cessation of taints. Knowing thus and seeing thus, my heart was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When liberated, there came the knowledge: it is liberated. I had direct knowledge: birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come. This was the third true knowledge. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who is diligent, ardent, and self-controlled."

This is the key point. This is where he personally obtained liberation from direct seeing—direct insight into what led to what. He saw the linchpin, the thing that kept it all together, the machinery of suffering. He saw that linchpin, and the whole thing fell apart.

This is the basic underlying experience that is later expressed in the Four Noble Truths and which is later elaborated all throughout the Buddha Dharma. All the different practices, all the different lists, all the different ways of explaining—they are all subsets, details, different angles upon different facets of the same insights that arose in the Buddha the night of his awakening.

The Buddha came to understand causation at a very deep level. In fact, you could say that the Buddha was a student of suffering until he became a master of causation. He came to completely understand the structure of conditionality—in other words, dependent arising. And once he saw what caused what, what conditions produced what outcomes, he understood what caused suffering. Because he understood it so deeply, understood what went into it and how it was created, he could, in effect, see how to reverse

engineer the whole business.

Do people know that phrase, reverse engineering? You look at how something was put together, and then you know how to take it apart.

Interestingly enough, the Buddha did not immediately assume that he would teach. And you can kind of see why. Given all his gifts and the power of his intention and all his karmic backup and what he went through to make the breakthrough, you could see why initially he thought, "They're never going to get it."

He talks about it. He says, "Enough of teaching the Dharma that even I found hard to reach, for it will never be perceived by those who live in lust and hate. Men dyed in lust, in whom a cloud of darkness laps, will never see what goes against the stream. It's subtle, deep, and hard to see. Abstruse."

And then, as part of the mythological telling of this story, a Brahma saw this thought going through the Buddha's mind and said, "Oh, this world will be lost. The world will be utterly lost if he doesn't teach." And so he appeared in front of the Blessed One and said, "Please, Lord, teach the Dharma. Teach the Dharma."

There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are wasting through not hearing the Dharma. Some of them will gain final knowledge of the Dharma.

And then, with his eye of compassion, the Buddha surveyed the world and saw that this was indeed true—that there were people who could understand this, who would understand it, and who would practice it. And he agreed, out of compassion for the many, that he would teach.

So the question was: well, who would he teach? His first thought was the two teachers who had taught him the jhanas. But he found out, by unusual means, that they had both passed away. So that was... hmm. And then he thought: ah, the five renunciates—my former fans. Perhaps they would be the ones.

And he set out walking to where he knew they were. There was a very interesting episode on the road there, which I find rather amusing. He came across a monk who didn't know him. And the monk said to him, "Your faculties are serene, friend. The color of your skin is clear and bright. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose Dhamma do you confess?"

And the Buddha said—and this is a bit of a song of himself—"I am an all-transcender and all-knower, unsullied by all things, renouncing all, by craving's ceasing freed. And this I owe to my own wisdom. To whom should I concede it? I have no teacher, and my like exists nowhere in all the world. I am the teacher in the world without a peer, accomplished too, and I alone am quite enlightened—quenched, whose fires are all extinct. I go to Kasi City now to set the wheel of Dharma in motion. In a blindfold world, I go to beat the deathless drums."

So the monk looks at him and says, "By your claims, friend, you are a universal victor."

And the Buddha says, "The victors like me, Upaka, are those whose taints are quite exhausted. I have

vanquished all states of evil. It is for that I am a victor." He's claiming this because he has finished with the taints.

It would be a rather unusual position to be a Buddha, wouldn't it? I mean, if you're really going to say what your experience is, you can't really parse it. You have to claim it.

And so, interestingly enough, the monk then says, "May it be so, friend," shaking his head, and takes a side track and departs. Which I read as kind of like, "That's nice, okay, uh-huh." He had his moment.

Nevertheless, the Buddha went on and found the five who used to practice with him. When they saw him coming, they were not jumping up and down with happiness. In fact, they initially agreed among themselves: "Friends, here comes the monk Gautama, who became self-indulgent, gave up the struggle, and reverted to luxury. We ought not to pay homage to him or rise up for him or receive his bowl and outer robe. Still, a seat can be prepared. Let him sit down if he likes."

Nice warm reception.

And yet, as soon as he approached, they found themselves unable to remain seated. There was something about the field around him, we presume. And they showed him respect.

The Buddha then told them that he had attained complete awakening and said he would instruct them and teach them the Dhamma. If they practiced it as he instructed them, they would realize it themselves, here and now, through direct knowledge.

And they said, "Well, you know, even when you did the mortification practice, you didn't go any higher than the human state. And now you're self-indulgent. You've given up the struggle. So how have you achieved this distinction?"

And he says, "I'm not self-indulgent, and I haven't given up the struggle, and I haven't reverted to luxury. I am accomplished and fully enlightened. I'll instruct you. I'll teach you. And by practicing as I teach you, you yourselves will realize the truth."

And so eventually, he talked them into giving it a hear. This is interesting, isn't it? It kind of confirms, in a way, his first position—that this was going to be tough business trying to talk to these people. But he was able to convince them, and then he started.

And this is a very famous scene: setting rolling the wheel of the Dharma. You see the Dharma wheel with the eight spokes represented. This is the sermon where the Buddha set it spinning, set it in motion for the benefit of beings.

He talks first of all about the two extremes that shouldn't be cultivated by anyone who has gone forth. And what are they? Devotion to the pursuit of pleasure and sense desires—that's harmful. And then there's the devotion to self-mortification—that's harmful. But there is a middle way discovered by the perfect one,

avoiding these extremes. And what is the middle way? He says it's the Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This gives vision, knowledge, leads to peace, direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana.

And then he launches into the heart of the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. To start with this—imagine being the Buddha and now you're in the position of thinking, well, how do I explain it to them? Where do you start with the explanation of what you've learned in a way to try to make it accessible to people? He started with the question he had sought to answer: is there a way out of the cycle of suffering?

One way to look at the Four Noble Truths is that they're the Buddha's problem statement, his analysis of the cause of the problem, his conclusion about how it can be addressed and remedied, and his how-to or his means to implement the solution.

The first question is: what is suffering? The first noble truth is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness, death, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

The second noble truth answers the question: what's the cause of suffering? There is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is craving which produces renewal of being—craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being. That's what causes suffering.

And then, how can the causes be addressed or undone? The third noble truth: this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering—the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving.

And then the question about what's the path, how do you do it? The fourth noble truth: the way leading to the cessation of suffering—the Eightfold Path.

In regard to each of these four truths, these four fundamental truths that the Buddha explicates all through his teachings, there are different steps required of us as practitioners. When you hear the Four Noble Truths, you can hear it as a list that you can memorize and recollect. That's the first level—just knowing what they are, being able to remember what they are, having some basic idea about what their structure is.

But there's another part of this, which is the development of a clear understanding of the meaning and significance of these in our own lives on a conceptual level. For this, there's a need to learn, to study, to reflect. What's really being said with each one of these? What's the point? What's he saying and why?

But there's yet another level, which is the level of direct knowing. With direct knowing, you're starting to move into the process of opening, liberating insight. Many of these truths that are presented as part of the Buddha Dharma are just common sense. If you said to the average person, "Is it true that everything is

changing? Is it true that everything is impermanent?"—you probably wouldn't get too much argument. Most people would say, "Yeah, that's probably right." They might quibble a little about something they could imagine, but most people could go along with that.

But there's a difference between knowing something theoretically on the intellectual level and knowing it all the way through, deep down in your bones, through the process of direct observation.

And it's this second way of exploring and opening these truths that meditation fits. What we're doing with meditation is through the process of developing a concentrated mind—kind of along the lines of what Gautama did, but maybe not quite as good concentration. We're developing mindfulness and concentration so that we ourselves can directly observe ourselves and our own experience, over and over again. We're moving, we're starting to move out of the head-only understanding, the theoretical assent to "yeah, that sounds like it could be true," into seeing for ourselves whether it really is true. And if it is true, in what ways is it true? And if it is true, what are the inferences or intuitive understandings that are part of that deep level of penetration of the meaning of these four truths?

These truths fully open, are fully known, when the wisdom eye opens within us and we see directly. And in seeing directly at a deep enough level, these truths become the basis for our actual liberation through direct knowledge. To completely understand them happens at the end of the path, but it also happens incrementally in earlier stages of enlightenment.

So let's briefly talk about each one of them in sequence.

The first noble truth of suffering. The Buddha said many times, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." Don't go home and tell your family and friends that—they'll think you're having a masochistic exercise, spending three months studying suffering. Yet we intuitively know the truth of suffering, right? But the usual modality, of course, is to put up as many firewalls of delusion or anything else that would serve to keep us from this knowledge, because it's very painful. But despite our best efforts to run from it and to cover it over, it doesn't really work.

And it's one of the great paradoxes of the Buddha's path that it requires us to head right into contact with, and acknowledgment of, suffering in order to find liberation from it. To let go of it, we have to be conscious of it and come to an understanding of what it is. And in order to become conscious of it, we need to be willing to open to it.

There are three different kinds of suffering. There's the physical and mental suffering, *dukkha dukkha*—so unds a little like a train, dukkha dukkha. That's what is often thought of as suffering. But then there's the suffering of constant change, the unceasing change. And then the suffering due to life's conditional nature.

The Buddha says in relationship to the first noble truth: suffering is to be known. It has to be penetrated to be fully understood. So this is kind of a know-thy-enemy strategy. It's happening anyway—it's not that paying attention to it makes it happen. It's happening all on its own. And in fact, paying attention to it has

the paradoxical effect of beginning the process of reducing and ending it. But it takes courage and stability of mind and skill to be able to open to this and know this truth in depth while still holding some kind of balance. Learning how to do this really lays the foundation for practice skills and insight knowledge for the further unfolding of the path.

You might want to reflect at some point: when was it in your life that you really became aware of the fact that reality had issues? Because I would be willing to guess that for many of you, the point of realizing that reality has issues was the beginning of your spiritual search.

The second noble truth is the noble truth of the origin of suffering, which is craving. There's this family story about how when I was about three years old, my aunt and uncle took me to this pony ride at a kind of mini carnival place. And I liked the ponies. I did like the pony ride. So I had one pony ride, two pony rides, and then I wanted three. They gave me a lot of pony rides, but all pony rides must come to an end, right? But not as far as I was concerned. And so apparently it ended badly, with my uncle or my father or somebody picking me up and kind of stuffing me under his arm as I kicked and screamed and wailed, "I want what I want what I want what I want," over and over again.

And aren't we a little bit like that? Isn't that basically the posture? It's really tough being human because we have an ability to affect things sometimes, but we have a very confused idea about what we can affect and how we should affect it. So we have a generalized strategy of trying to affect everything in the direction of the pleasant and desired and away from the unpleasant and not desired. And this is a constant struggle, an ongoing battle. I'm sure you've found, as you sit in meditation and as your mind's gotten a little more collected, you start to see the many different levels at which this fight occurs.

So we have to be students of our craving, of this thirsting—which is desire gone wild, rooted in ignorance.

So ignorance is not just a matter of not understanding things or missing a few bits of information—it's more of an active misunderstanding of what's actually going on. It's not just that we don't quite get it; it's that the ideas we have, so bound up with our emotions and preferences, are really wildly at variance with what's actually happening. This plays out in a very dysfunctional attitude towards experience—an attitude of opposition and straining for control.

Letting go of craving is very difficult because it goes against our conditioning, and in some cases against our own instinctual drives—wanting things to be a certain way, being at war with reality as it presents itself in the moment, this presence of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind.

When we're practicing with this truth of craving as the cause of suffering, we're really in the laboratory, seeing how and when we get caught in opposition to reality, how we struggle against what's true in the moment, trying to manipulate what we do not control. And you start to see the automaticity of this reaction, how often it's going on. You see the pain and futility of it, the suffering it creates when desire moves into craving. Eventually we come to understand that it doesn't work.

Understanding our deluded reactions and the constant friction they create, we start to realize: this approach does not work. We don't get out of this what we're looking for. Even if we get the things we crave, they don't provide the payoff we thought they would.

Then there's the third noble truth—the cessation of craving, the letting go. In this, we begin to get the idea that it's possible to surrender to the truth of how things really are, to drop the painful and futile resistance to the way the moment is unfolding, to let go of clinging to preferences and rest with what's true without struggle.

When we start having periods where we can do this—moments where we can do this—we start to feel the arising of something else, some sort of peace. Perhaps it's only for a moment. But maybe another moment follows, and another after that. And like pointillism, we start to get a different picture of what's possible. We start to understand how we create suffering through our resistance and insistence, and that in letting go of craving, we can instead open and harmonize with things as they are. This is a very different position.

When we experience the end of suffering in this moment of letting go of clinging and craving, and we see that it brings peace, we do it more and more often. We start to know more of these moments. We start to learn how to restore that connection to non-resistant presence. As we accumulate more of these kinds of moments, our confidence and clarity of mind are strengthened. We start to see that this is really possible, that this might be workable.

We start to see for ourselves what is connected with what—what conditions, what causes result in what outcomes. And to the extent that we are creators of those causes and conditions through how we hold our experience, we move in the direction of skillful intersection with what is present.

This becomes a virtuous cycle where we're penetrating more and more deeply into the meaning of these Four Noble Truths, coming to deeper and deeper equanimity. All of the seven factors of enlightenment are strengthening. It happens because of how reality is constructed, how causation works, how causes and conditions operate together. We're getting on the wave and riding it, rather than standing in opposition and letting it smack us down.

From this state—this open, clear, present, non-resistant, mindful state—awakening to the unconditioned becomes possible. The mind is securely on the path to complete emancipation.

The fourth noble truth is the truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. The Eightfold Path is to be cultivated and developed, and everything you're doing here is part of this cultivation. When you think about it—cultivation of right view, which means understanding the Four Noble Truths intellectually and otherwise; right intention, the intention of renunciation, of harmlessness, of compassion; the work with the precepts; the four wise efforts to let go of what's unskillful and cultivate what is skillful; the development of mindfulness; the development of concentration—that's what you're doing all day long here. All these different dimensions are being practiced simultaneously. You've got a

twenty-four-hour-a-day thing going on here, and a great opportunity to understand this for yourself.

When the Buddha said he teaches only suffering and the end of suffering, it's not a pessimistic statement. It's not "rah rah for suffering"—let's really get into it and wallow, see how much of it we can have, rub our noses in it like we're toilet training a naughty puppy. It's nothing like that.

It's saying: Can we open to the truth of what we're actually experiencing, as it is? Can we intersect with what is there—including what is painful and difficult—in a way that uses it for our own development and liberation? Can we touch the places of suffering, the places of difficulty, the places of pain, and through creative understanding and intersection and greatness of heart, use that for our own liberation?

Can we touch the places of pleasure, what is pleasant, with a mind of renunciation and free of craving, and use that intersection creatively as fuel for our own liberation and emancipation?

That's really what we're doing here.

So I wish for you all the strength of heart and confidence to see for yourself the truth of your own direct experience—and the endurance and patience to come to the learning within your own body and mind, which will lead to your own liberation.

Thank you for listening.

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