



Welcome to this second part in the series “Engaging with the Truths of Suffering.” My name is Reverend Liên Shutt. I'm glad you're back. As you may remember, last week we talked about how we begin our practice with the first noble truth by investigating hurt and harm. We talked about how a supportive, uplifting way to be with and investigate *dukkha* (hurt and harm) is from the perspective of wholeness. It is our practice to notice disruptions in wholeness with the intention of returning to or restoring that wholeness.

This week, with the second noble truth, we're going to talk about letting go through unlearning and relearning. Traditionally, the second noble truth is stated as: “There are causes and conditions that bring about dukkha.” In the engaged noble truths we're exploring, it starts similarly, as “Understanding what brings about the causes and conditions for this harming or harmful experience or situation.” However, then we want to bring in a larger framing with these questions. How are we taught to be with experiences of harm or harming, and how did these teachings come to us? Did they come from our family, our culture, or systemic structures that promote, reinforce, or perpetuate harm and harming?

So this week, to talk about the sense of wholeness, I want to introduce another teaching about our interconnectedness called Indra's Net. So in the Avatamsaka Sutra, there's a description of a net of Indra. This is a net with jewels at each node of the strands. These jewels are sparkling and they reflect each other. So we impact each other, and we mirror each other. What I do affects you and what you do affects me. So this is usually how Indra's Net is described, and it's beautiful. So I would like us to see wholeness as the net of Indra. And the focus is not so much on the points where the strands connect—the nodes, the jewels—but much more on the net itself. How are the strands made up? What are the conditions that lead to, say, some jewels being overly heavy by taking up too many resources? Or where are there gaps or torn parts in the net?

I'd like to share this quote with you. “Life is not what you alone make it. Life is the input of everyone who touched your life and every experience that entered it.” These lines are from Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese American civil rights and social justice leader in the 1960s until her death in 2014 at the age of 93. So she lived a long, beautiful life. In this quote, she reminds us of the interconnectedness of the web as wholeness.

When we were young, we were taught what should be important to us, whose suffering is worthy of our attention, and sometimes that certain aspects of life are not worth paying attention to. Perhaps you as myself have had many inclusive, multicultural training sessions. I remember a story that came up in one of these training sessions that has stayed with me. The story is about a child around the age of eight or ten. He's watching the news with his father, and he sees black people crying because the news story was about Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and his



death. So he found himself starting to cry also as a compassionate response. He turns to his father and asks, "What's going on? Why are all these people crying?" and his father says, "That is a black people thing. You don't need to worry about it. It doesn't affect you." And when this man, now an adult, shared this story, he said that it was really confusing for him because his heart was quivering. And this is a way that you can translate karuna or compassion, as "the quivering heart." So his heart responded with quivering but he was taught that it wasn't something he needed to worry about or pay attention to. So I don't know what the situation was, because we didn't talk about that more at the time.

In so many of our experiences, especially around issues of oppression such as race, our parents do these kinds of things as a way to protect us. Perhaps that father wanted to care for his child and prevent him from feeling so overwhelmed by saying, "Don't worry about it so much." In this way, we're taught how and whose suffering we should pay attention to. The intention from our parents, the culture, or systems that taught us these lessons may have been good, but is it useful to us now? That's the question of the second noble truth, right? Not that that was wrong, because so much of what we're taught in—our parents are there to take care of us, and so are our government and systems of care, ideally. They harmonize us all together, and yet a sense of what harmonizes changes with conditions.

Therefore, the work of the engaged second noble truth is to realize here and now that our reactive ways, our patterns of meeting harm are also learned and conditioned. So the practice instruction of the second noble truth is to abandon. That is why you hear "letting go" so often. Abandoning is really difficult. Even letting go is difficult, right? This is why we keep practicing with it. However, if we're taught to be mindful of how our habitual ways and beliefs are no longer valid and what we learned no longer serves us, then letting them go becomes easier, right? Because it's not letting go of completely. And that's it seems hard, because if we're not able to see that, we feel that we have failed in some way. However, when we have a sense that, "I learned it like this and now I can unlearn it," or, "I can relearn what's important to me, or how to frame what's important to me," then, for me, it gives us much more sense of possibility and hope that this is possible, that letting go or that shifting our sense of what is a value to us now is possible.

I want to share the story about imprinting how our family and culture can show us and teach us what's important in terms of how to deal with suffering. While I'm from Vietnam, I was adopted, and my adoptive father grew up in Iowa. He had polio when he was young, so for a while he was in bed a lot and one of his legs was smaller than the other. So when he was young, he couldn't run or exercise a lot. He would tell this story in kind of a laughing way, and yet I think it's a throwback from that time. He said that he would run AA meetings, but for him, they were called Athletic Anonymous; if you wanted to exercise you just call him up and he would say, "I'll talk



you out of that, right?" Because that wasn't needed. Part of the funny part of the story is that my father was a doctor. He grew up during the Depression as one of three really poor children. He told a story about how they would get one pencil and his mother would break it up into three so that each of the kids could have a piece of pencil to take to school. So becoming a doctor was important to his family and it was also part of his identity.

So my father had COPD [Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease] from many years of smoking. I went to live with him the last three of the four months of the end of his life. He really wanted to have an experimental surgery. In your lungs, there are balloons that fill up when you inhale and then contract when you exhale. That's just their natural way. Now, when you have COPD, or the kind he had, when those balloons open up they no longer have the ability to collapse. So it's as if you took a deep breath and then you couldn't exhale. They don't collapse and open, giving you the exchange of air. So similarly, like if you took a deep breath now [breath] and then you exhale but you keep your chest up, you can't actually take as deep of a breath. So that's a very scary thing. So at the time in the late '90s, there was an experimental surgery where they would go in and pop the little balloons that were no longer working so that the ones that did work had space. When he applied for the surgery, they didn't want him because he wasn't that healthy because he didn't exercise much of his life. But he was a doctor, so he knew how to talk to doctors, and he talked his way into the surgery. I went with him to many of the appointments and they also said, "If we do this, then you will need to do exercises afterward to strengthen these working balloons, they need to be used." And so he said, yes, yes, he would. So he got the surgery. But he did not do the exercises afterward. So it was unsuccessful, and he eventually died.

Now I'm not telling you the story as a diss on my father. It's to show something. When I was in grad school for social work, a disability rights person came to do a workshop for us. They said the traditional Western sense of wellness is based on pathology, on what is wrong. What needs to be cut out, or what needs to be solved quickly, like take two pills in the morning, right? "Oh, you have a headache, take two pills and call me in the morning." We know that saying. And so this disability activist was saying, what if our system of wellness is much more about how we harmonize? And that when something is harmful, hurtful, or painful, where are things out of balance? Where are things not rolling smoothly, and how is it then that we put it back in balance? So it's much more from this sense of harmonizing or returning to wholeness versus this sense of a quick fix or cutting things out.

So the second noble truth calls on us to be patient and to be committed to working to see where what we have been taught no longer serves us and that anything worth caring for usually takes time, effort, and deep investigation. This is why vipassana practice as a class of practice isn't to make insight. It's to investigate and to be with and to let go of what isn't useful anymore. So



realizing that the hurt or harm done to each of us or that we've learned as individuals have systemic roots to it, and see it as that as a condition, that is useful.

For example, in the summer of 2020, we could see that that round of Black Lives Matter protests was very much more about that we all needed to see racism as a structural issue. I remember a story on the news that pointed to this to me, it was that a major dictionary company was going to put in a second definition of racism as a structural issue. Like racism, we have to be able to see what are the structural forces, right, and that causes and conditions are not just individual actions, they are part of a system.

So thank you for joining me today as we realize that what we've been taught may no longer be useful to us. How what was framed as truths was with an old context—perhaps from our individual family history, culture, or other systemic forces—and in being mindful and compassionately reflecting and practicing with these old habits we're able to unlearn and relearn, to live in the now from our own chosen values.

Next week, we'll look at what, where, when, and how we can connect to individual and collective agency to repair and heal the torn parts of Indra's Net. Thank you for your time and attention. May you return to wholeness with peace and ease this week.