

Four Noble Truths: *Samudaya* (2 of 5)

The Conditionality of Suffering

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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For this second talk on the Second Noble Truth, the truth of the arising of suffering, I'm going to talk about a variation of what I talked about yesterday – that the Second Noble Truth is about the cause of suffering. That's a common interpretation. A variation of that is that the Second Noble Truth, rather than looking for a cause, is pointing to the conditions, the conditionality of suffering. What we want to discover here are the conditions for the arising of suffering.

In the teachings of the Buddha, there is a strong tendency to avoid what could be called causal language – causal in the sense of a deterministic cause – that when X happens, Y will happen. This is because in

deterministic formulations, there is no movement for practice. We will just experience what happened in the past. It is implied that there's no point to practice, or to do anything different. Because of the continuity of past causes, this is just something we have to experience. The Buddha was quite explicit about this.

Another reason he was reluctant talk about cause seems to be that causal language lends itself to the idea that there's someone who is the agent of the cause. Over and over again, rather than talking about anything that suggests an agent, the Buddha chooses language or descriptions of reality that talk about how conditions come together. The flow of conditions, the process of conditionality are what give birth to the world we experience. In this regard, the Second Noble Truth is looking not at the deterministic cause of suffering, but rather at the condition that needs to be there – the necessary condition for suffering. If the necessary condition is present, it doesn't have to lead to suffering. However, if there's suffering, that necessary condition is in place.

So this is getting a little bit more complicated, maybe philosophical, but it also has something to do with how the process of looking at our lives changes as we continue doing meditation practice. In ordinary life, it's completely natural to look at cause. Causes may be seen over time. For example, if I was angry with my

friend yesterday, and now my friend doesn't want to see me, I suffer. The cause of that suffering is what happened yesterday. That's the ordinary way of seeing things. But that's a more complicated analysis than looking at conditions – it involves past, present, and future.

When we're looking at meditative experience, we're focusing on what the conditionality is in the present moment – what's happening in the present. When we are in the present, there is something about the present moment experience, which allows us to discover awakening, real freedom. We don't have to analyze, or consider, "What was I doing yesterday?" – and then figure out what the cause of that was. In meditation, we're looking at the moment-to-moment experience as it arises.

One of the remarkable things about quiet, deep mindfulness meditation is that we can watch things arise – without the arising of any reference to self: "I didn't plan that thought; I didn't will that thought." It's almost as if a particular thought is happening to me, within me, but the agent – me as the agent – doesn't seem to be operating. It just a thought. A thought arises, and we don't identify with it as, "That's me."

You can watch something arise without identifying with it, and it's possible to see how, with the arising of one

thing, something else arises – not as a necessary result, but in relationship to the first thing, with the first one as a condition. So for example, if I have a thought about what happened with my high school girlfriend, then the next thing is just a thought that could come and go. I might have those thoughts periodically over my adult life, without any charge to them.

But it might be that I get angry. The anger does not necessarily follow the thought about the girlfriend. But without the thought of the girlfriend, that anger about what happened doesn't occur. It is possible to have both of these arise in a certain way, and we just see them in the clarity of awareness. And in that clarity, we're not involved in them, picking them up, or reacting to them. They just seem to float up, appear, and then the next one appears based on the first one. And there starts to be a kind of freedom in relationship to it all – freedom from reactivity.

In the meditative mind, rather than looking for a cause, we're looking for conditions. Seeing conditionality also allows us to see a bigger picture than we would with a cause. Often when we look at cause, we're identifying a single cause. But there can be a range of conditions that add up to our suffering.

An example might be that as I'm driving down the freeway every day to work, I see a billboard for some

wonderful product for sale – and I salivate. I’m really wanting it, and it’s hard to not get off the freeway to go buy it. Every day I feel this tremendous desire to buy that thing, and I suffer because of it. I get to work frustrated and anxious. I can hardly pay attention at work, because I’m thinking about this thing I want. And then I remember that I don’t have the money to buy it. So I’m frustrated with myself, and the story goes on and on.

The cause of all that suffering may be my desire for this thing, but I can’t give up the desire. It’s very stuck and strong. But if I look at the conditions, one of the conditions for that strong desire, that obsession, is seeing that billboard. So then I decide, “Let’s just go on a different road, and not see the billboard.” And lo and behold, I don’t get triggered in the usual way. This is a silly example, but it points to how, when we start looking at conditions, we can see much more of the situation – and we see more areas where we can intervene.

One of the ways we can intervene in the world of conditionality is to allow something just to be. Craving arises; strong desire arises – and we see it. We know it’s a condition for further clinging, grasping, and all kinds of other things. But in the meditative mind, we just see it as a single event of craving, and we let it be. This is known as cutting the chain of conditionality at the point of craving.

It is also said that one of the conditions for craving is that we see or experience something pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. There's a direct experience of something. Sometimes it's possible to see just the pleasantness of the experience, and then maybe we see the desire arise. But because it is so clear how one condition exists and the next one follows, in a sense we can allow them to just be separate. We don't link them strongly together. It is said that the chain of conditionality, the sequence of conditions, is cut between feelings and desire – and it is there that we find some freedom.

The Buddha talked a lot about conditionality. And conditionality is one of the ways in which the Second Noble Truth has been understood. It can be quite helpful to see it this way. As I said, it really comes to fruit and is seen clearly in the meditative mind.

What we'll see in the next talk tomorrow, is how going further the meditative mind, going deeper into concentration, lends itself to the next interpretation – which is probably the most common interpretation of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

I want to thank you, and I look forward to our next time together.