

Four Noble Truths: Nirodha (5 of 5)

Three Forms of Cessation

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This week, we've been talking about the third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering. And the most common way in which this formulation appears in the suttas of what's usually called the Four Noble Truths appears without the title Four Noble. It says, for example, someone understands, or one should understand: suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

And then, because in the so-called first sermon of the Buddha, he goes into some detail, and he calls it the

Four Noble Truths: the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the arising of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and the noble truth of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering. Because that's considered the first sermon, it's often given a lot of emphasis. And there's explanations there about what each of these are. And those explanations are treated as being definitive like this is the true definition of the Four Noble Truths. And the Four Noble Truths are held up as being the central teachings of the Buddha.

Paradoxically or oddly enough, the Buddha very rarely actually explained the Four Noble Truths in the suttas. For some reason, either he didn't talk about it much, or it wasn't preserved all that he talked about. There's only five places where he explicitly explains what these are. And people who do text critical work say most of these appear to be later interpretations, the product of later editors. And so it seems like the Buddha didn't teach much actually about the Four Noble Truths. And it's kind of shocking to hear - so much so that some scholars say that he actually didn't teach the Four Noble Truths. But what he did teach over and over again, is that there is suffering, there's the arising, the cessation, and the practice leading to the cessation. So in the so-called first sermon of the Buddha, that is taken, understood or interpreted to be one of the most common ways of understanding the Four Noble Truths. And I think it's fair to say it's the idea that suffering has a cause, and that

cause is craving, and with the cessation of craving is the cessation of suffering. It's a powerful teaching. It's a powerful interpretation. And in all kinds of areas in our everyday life, it's just useful to consider, "What's the cause or what's my contribution to the suffering I'm having?"

If I look deeply in to see my contribution, there's something probably that is a compulsion, a drivenness, a thirst for something, something we can't really stop, a drive that we can't stop. That's represented by this word craving. And, and it can be very useful to look at that and see where we're compulsive, see where we are addicted, where we're attached, and then to experience letting go of it, or having it come to an end, and feeling how wonderful that is. That's great. And in all kinds of areas in everyday life, in situations, this is a useful analysis.

As people meditate, the Four Noble Truths are interpreted different ways as the mind gets quieter. And one of the interpretations of the second Noble Truth is that it has to do with the conditions that come together to cause suffering. And there's lots of conditions that cause suffering. And some people who emphasize conditionality don't give necessarily pride of place to craving. Sometimes people give pride of place to ignorance. Ignorance is the primal condition for craving, for suffering itself. And as we meditate, we are relaxing

the conditioning faculties of the mind, the ways in which the mind is thinking and conceiving and constructing our world that we're doing.

Meditation is a process of stilling that and quieting that. And we can quiet it to a great degree. So we're not really thinking about the external world anymore. We're not really thinking much of anything. Just a lot of peace and settledness. A lot of suffering can disappear when all the constructive, conceiving aspects of the mind, the memory aspects of the mind, have quieted down. And it's kind of like taking a shower and becoming clean. It feels so good to go back in the world when you're clean. When meditation has been that inner shower, then we come back into the world cleaner, fresher, with fresher eyes, not carrying the burden of our preoccupations. And often that's when we see much more opening in life, and see much more freedom in life then.

And because we've relaxed the conditions, not necessarily the cause of our suffering, but sometimes the cause turns out to be only one factor that contributes to suffering, the so-called central cause. And just relaxing deeply doesn't give that cause enough strength to really be troublesome for us. So that's a second interpretation. And so here the cessation of suffering has to do with the cessation of these conditions.

And as I'm saying, the deeper the meditation goes, the deeper the stilling of these conditions is. It's quite wonderful. As the condition gets stiller and stiller, and quieter and quieter, that conceiving mind, the constructing mind that's interpreting things, telling stories, and labeling things kind of quiets down. And we start living in the flow of direct sensations, direct experience, the comings and goings of sounds, taste, smells, touch, body sensations, thoughts, and all that. And this coming and going of stuff is quite phenomenal.

I want to tell a little story from the suttas in my interpretation of the context for the story. It's not there in the suttas. A bunch of monks were sitting around the campfire and just telling one yarn after another about the great mythological miracles associated with Buddha's life. And they're outdoing each other with stories about, you know, when the Buddha was born, he came out and immediately walked seven steps. He was conceived immaculately. The gods received him and held him up so he wouldn't have touched the ground. And the stories, the cosmological mythological stories are just quite phantasmagoric, fantastic. And so they're going around and they're talking about this. Actually Ānanda, the Buddha's disciple, is saying all these wonderful miracles, and he's saying, "This is a wonderful miracle. This is miraculous." And then at the end of all these miracle stories, what the Buddha says is kind of like the climax of the story or the punch line.

All the earlier part is a setup for what the Buddha is going to say. And the Buddha says, "I'll tell you, what is a miracle. When I have a thought, I see the arising of the thought, the persistence of the thought, and the ceasing of the thought. When I have a feeling, I see the arising of feeling, the persistence of the feeling and the passing away of the feeling. When there are perceptions, I see the arising of the perception, the persistence of it, and the disappearance of it. That is a miracle."

So, all these miracles about the Buddha's miraculous so-called powers, that's not really that important. What's really important is the ability to really see or be present for the flow and the change of how things come and go, arise and pass, and all that. And what that does is to see, to really see, "This is where freedom is found." To let the flow unfold, the coming and going unfold, and release the holding onto it, the pushing, the resistance to it – to open up to the space at the end of the ceasing. Before there's an arising, where there's nothing to hold on to, nothing to cling to. In a sense, to kind of fall into that space and experience the freedom of the heart and the mind. The radical letting go.

And so here, this third interpretation of the cessation of suffering has to do with that. It's seeing two things: the arising and ceasing, the inconstant nature of things, to be in that flow. And to see that there's where freedom is

found. That there's profound liberation to be found in being in that flow and not stopping it, not resisting it, and just allowing it to move through us, without any movement of clinging or holding, or contracting, or craving itself.

The deepest liberation that the Buddha over and over emphasized, comes from this deep meditative experience of inconstancy. We see this in a particular chapter of the book called "The Connected Discourses of the Buddha," that's a chapter on the truths. And there's three different ways in which these so-called Four Noble Truths are presented.

The first presents it only as, "This is suffering; this is the arising; this is the ceasing; and this is the practice for the cessation of suffering." And those who really understand this, really penetrate this, become the first stage of awakening. Rather than having a four stage model of awakening, this text has a two stage model, and this person is called a trainee, because now they know what the practice is about. Someone who has let go deeply, and experiences deep freedom in the world of inconstancy, knows this freedom the Buddha was talking about. And they know they know how to train now. They know what it's all about. So they're a trainee. Someone who does a training, of really resting, and flowing, and repeatedly kind of letting go into this inconstant flow of experience.

At some point, they become fully awakened. At that point, this text says, "This is the noble truth of the arising of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, and the noble truth of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering. So two levels of this, one without the title "Noble Truths" and one with the title "Noble Truths." One for becoming the first experience of liberation, and the other for becoming fully liberated.

The Buddha was fully liberated. And they wanted to describe what it's like, someone who's fully liberated like a Buddha, that no longer meant that he became reborn. Because as the centuries went along in Buddhism, the idea of not being reborn became increasingly important in these texts. And that's where this first sermon of the Buddha was born, was to explain that issue, how the Buddha doesn't get reborn. And the text specifically says, as I said last week, it's the arising of suffering and craving that leads to rebirth. And the cessation of suffering is the cessation of that very craving that leads to rebirth. That first sermon of the Buddha then has become the primary reference point for what the Four Noble Truths are.

But in fact, there's something more profound, more important in these texts than that particular sermon. And that is, seeing a thought as it arises. Seeing it as it persists, and seeing when it passes away. Seeing a

feeling when it arises, persists and ceases. Seeing sensations. Seeing everything as a flow of inconstant phenomena. Easier said than done. But the result of this is liberation. And that is described.

The people who are liberated are the happy ones, the peaceful ones. There's a wonderful experience of happiness and peace and delight that can come from liberation. And that's the other side of suffering: to go through suffering to the other side, and come out and really taste and experience a profound form of joy and happiness that comes with a cessation of suffering. So that's *nirodha*, the cessation of the third noble truth.

And in the next week I'll do the practice leading to the cessation of suffering, the fourth of the Four Noble Truths. So, thank you so much.