

# The Four Noble Truths: Samudaya (1 of 5) The Cause of Suffering

May 11, 2020

## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

four noble truths, suffering, desire, buddhism, teachings, noble truth, second noble truth, thirst, compulsion, buddha, freedom, deeper, require, modern, distress, buddhist practice, framework, experience, beautiful, compulsive

**Gil Fronsdal**

This Monday, we begin the second week on the topic of the Four Noble Truths. This topic for this week is the Second Noble Truth, the noble truth of the arising of suffering. So there's 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.

These Four Noble Truths are often considered to be central teachings of Buddhism – maybe even the central teachings of the Buddha. The myth or the lore Buddhism is that the first sermon, the first teachings the Buddha gave, were on the Four Noble Truths. There's a long history in all the different schools of Buddhism, to make a claim about what the first teachings of the

Buddha were, and this probably reflects what's very important for that school of Buddhism.

In Theravada Buddhism, these Four Noble Truths are really at the center of it all. I take, with tremendous appreciation and respect, that there's this Buddhist tradition, the Theravada tradition, which has a wonderful, dynamic teaching on the Four Noble Truths, which we can use as a framework to better understand our lives.

One of the advantages of this framework, especially as a foundation of a whole religious tradition, is that it doesn't assume, posit, or require one to believe in something that cannot be proven, or seen and experienced for oneself. This is not a supernatural belief. It's not an abstract, metaphysical belief that we have to believe in, or a tenet that comes down from the Buddha, which can't be proven, but that you have to believe.

This is something that we can really discover for ourselves in our experience. The Four Noble Truths are eminently a practical framework, through which we can look at our lives, and this is done at the place the Theravada tradition says is most essential, most simple. It's pared down to where the heart of it is, and the heart of it really has to do with the third noble truth, the topic

for next week: the possibility of the cessation of suffering, the *nirodha* of suffering.

One of the meanings of *nirodha* is ‘non-obstruction’ – to come to a place where we’re no longer obstructed by suffering. We are no longer obstructed by all the different aspects and ecology of suffering that might exist, so that who we are and how we are, can unfold, move, develop, and grow on the path to greater and greater freedom. That’s the core aspect of Buddhism.

It’s like the good news of Buddhism. It does it by a very simple framework, which doesn’t require a lot of study, and doesn’t require metaphysics or supernatural things. It’s just: “This is the essence of it.” And if you stay close to that essence, all of Buddhism will unfold. One ancient teaching is that all the footprints of all the animals in the forest can be placed inside the footprint of an elephant. And all the teachings of Buddhism can be put inside the Four Noble Truths. Everything else follows from this.

The Four Noble Truths, being such a very important central teaching, has been interpreted in many, many ways. It’s changed now, but 10 years ago I looked up the Four Noble Truths on Wikipedia. There were some eight different modern definitions of what the Four Noble Truths are – and they were wildly different from each other. Some of them I would never even recognize as being part of Buddhism. They’re all modern

explications. I was surprised by this, and then a little bit surprised again that they didn't attribute any of them to anyone. One of them was mine. I thought that was interesting, that something I had said in some little paper would end up in Wikipedia.

So it's been interpreted in many different ways. And probably all the different interpretations have value for the people who have come up with them. In Asia, down through the centuries, there have been many interpretations.

I'll talk over the next few days about some of the interpretations, or some of the applications of the Second Noble Truth: the truth of the arising of suffering. The literal meaning is 'arising,' but one of the most common understandings, especially in the modern world (but maybe also in much of Theravada Buddhism) is that the Second Noble Truth has to do with the cause of suffering. We want to understand what's causing it, what's bringing it about, what the source of it is. Some translators have called this truth the 'origination' of suffering.

Often modern books will say, "There's suffering, and there's the cause of suffering." This can be a very practical and useful teaching. In some ways, it's applicable to so many different areas of our lives,

available to us in everyday experience. It doesn't require meditation or the mind getting still.

Some of the other, deeper interpretations of the Second Noble Truth do require a depth of meditative experience. But here, looking at the cause in everyday life, you can see that we get impatient. You can ask, "What's the cause of that impatience? Oh, I'm in a hurry to get somewhere. Maybe I don't have to be in a hurry. That desire to get somewhere quickly is making tension in the system."

The question, "What's the cause of this distress I'm feeling with regard to what is going on?" – this simple question opens the field, and can reveal something we can do about it – sometimes. We can have a different relationship with the cause; we can let go of it; we can let it be; we could not pick it up. We could put it aside, so that whatever the cause is, it no longer becomes a cause. It just becomes something that is happening.

In modern interpretations, it's very popular to say that the cause of suffering is desire, but that makes all desire seem like a problem. It could be that we understand that not all desires are a problem. But if there's going to be suffering, there is some desire behind it. And there can be desire without any suffering. That may be more interesting than making all desire a problem.

In the teachings of the Buddha, the word used to characterize the kind of desire that is the emphasis here is a metaphor. As I said last week, a lot of Buddhist teachings are metaphoric. And the metaphor for the Second Noble Truth literally means 'thirst' in English. It's a kind of desire that occurs with the characteristics of being thirsty. Imagine someone who is parched, really thirsty, and desperate for water. The compulsion that drives the preoccupation with getting something to drink can be quite strong – it could be all that the person thinks about.

This thirst is the cause of suffering. So 'thirst' means that the suffering has a compulsive quality. There's a drivenness. It is not, "I'll take it or leave it. It doesn't really matter to me." When desires are really strong, it's like there's an addictive force, which sometimes is impossible not to give into. It's an addictive, compulsive force – and that's part of the reason why there's suffering involved – because the desire has tension. There is a loss of freedom in this compulsive desire. Anytime we lose our freedom, we suffer. We feel less; we're limited; we have a burden. There's a challenge, an inner burning, which is not pleasant at all. We feel a painful burning sensation that we have to have this suffering.

In mindfulness practice, we learn to look at the nature of desire, and at the nature of our suffering. We look at what the cause is. Can I identify anything that's conventionally called the cause? And if it's desire, or whatever it might be, we learn to look at it more carefully. This is where the meditation this morning of letting things be is so useful – because when you learn to let it be, you learn to see it more clearly. You let it evolve, and show itself.

Not all cravings are problematic only. Sometimes what we crave and are addicted to represents a deeper need we might have – perhaps a deeper desire for something good, but which is directed in the wrong way. The deep need we have gives it compulsion. We have to have this! If we let go of the unwholesome desire without taking our time to let it be, to study and see it, and to let it relax, then we might not discover the deeper things going on – the deeper, maybe wholesome desire that's there – not always, but sometimes.

So stop and take a good look. Ask the question, "What is the cause of my distress, my sorrow, my grief?" Appreciate that there might be multiple causes. The cause of the Four Noble Truths that we are interested in is our contribution to our suffering – how we thirst, how we have compulsion, how we have very strong desires for something to exist, how we want something, or want to push something away, to get rid of it. That deep drive

of desire that human beings have takes many forms. Some of them are quite beautiful, necessary, and profound.

In the freedom, the cessation, the non-obstruction of suffering, Buddhist practice reveals something beautiful, as it releases more and more of the wholesome desires within us. The Four Noble truths are not an abandonment or a release of all suffering. But as we go through our lives, and live our lives, it does purify our desires so that anything that is compulsive or addictive – or any desire we have in which we lose our freedom – is shed. This is such a beautiful thing.

So the first task with the Four Noble Truths is to just carry with us the question, "What am I contributing to this suffering?" As we recognize our suffering, our stress, our distress, we ask ourselves, "What is my contribution?" There might be other people, who conventionally can be said are the cause of our suffering. Not to ignore that, but the place where we can have the most impact, the place of Buddhist practice, is to ask, "What is my contribution to this?" And then we take a good look at it, and hold it in awareness, and understand it deeply. And in so doing, we find our freedom.

Tomorrow we'll continue with other meanings of the second noble truth. Thank you.