

The Four Noble Truths: *Samudaya* (5 of 5) Becoming and Not-Becoming

May 15, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

four noble truths, second noble truth, craving, rebirth, suffering, pleasure, translate, arising, reborn, Buddha, impermanent, identity, *samudaya*, *taṇhā*, *bhava*, *abhava*, inconstancy, *vibhava*, extermination, non-becoming, dependent origination, inconstancy, first sermon

Gil Fronsdal

With this talk, we come to the fifth of the five talks on the Second Noble Truth, part of a four week series on the Four Noble Truths. The primary reference point for many of the interpretations of the Four Noble Truths, as they have come down to us through the ages, is what appears in what's called the Buddha's first sermon. Some of the popular interpretations don't really take in all that is said there about the Second Noble Truth. They often stop and say that craving, thirst – ***taṇhā*** in Pāli – is the cause, condition, source, or origin of suffering. That is a useful interpretation. Having that idea can help people investigate their lives effectively,

and see where craving or strong desire causes limitations, challenges, and distress.

This idea that craving is the cause is one way of making logical sense of: “The noble truth of the arising of suffering is that craving.” We just stop there, “Ok, craving.” but how is it that craving causes the arising of suffering? Well it must be the source. It must be the origin.

However, as I said yesterday, the full explanation is that it's that craving that leads to rebirth, or literally re-becoming. But what the text is explaining is not the source, the origin, or the cause of all suffering that humans have – but the *original* cause. In a previous lifetime, there was a craving for rebirth. You don't get born into the world of suffering unless you crave to be born again.

In this interpretation, the idea is to become free of rebirth by becoming free of that craving for rebirth. This idea of the Four Noble Truths almost certainly didn't come from the Buddha in the way it's been formulated. It probably was composed about 100 years after his life – perhaps at a time when the idea of rebirth became increasingly important in Buddhism in a way that doesn't really represent how important it was in the

earliest teachings. But still, it gives us this wonderful interpretation: that craving is the cause of suffering.

Sometimes that's very useful. At other times, that interpretation gets in the way. It leads to too much analysis and trying to figure things out. In some of the other interpretations – conditionality, and especially inconstancy, and seeing what's there – suggests that the noble truth of the arising of suffering is simply the *arising* – how it appears.

There's something about seeing something appear, where there's space, and a recognition that there can even be a sense of independence from it. It's there. I'm here. We're not the same thing. This is the beginning of a process of becoming freer of suffering. So in a sense, rather than solving suffering, and figuring it out, we learn to have a different relationship to suffering, by seeing it as arising and ceasing, coming and going.

The explanation that craving gives rise to rebirth actually continues. There's a second half of it, which I would like to refer to today, and offer an interpretation, which may be a nice segue into what we will do next week. As I said yesterday, reading Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, we see that he uses the word 'origin' for ***samudaya***, the Pali word that means 'arising.' He translates it as 'origin.' And now we understand why he

does that: because it's this *original* craving that gives rise to birth.

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight, here and there.

This craving is accompanied by delight and lust. I think the idea in the ancient world is that this original craving leads to rebirth. That fundamental drive to be reborn is a lusting or wanting of pleasure, or delighting in the world. We want more of it. That's one of the fundamental concerns of early Buddhism – not delighting and relishing in that desire for the world, which just keeps us going in the cycles of rebirth. It goes on and says:

That is craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.

Bhikkhu Bodhi has this big word 'extermination,' which sounds a bit dangerous or even violent. The Pali words for existence and extermination are ***bhava*** and ***abhava***. ***Bhava*** means becoming. This word is a bit difficult in English. Many people translate it as 'existence,' but it really means "becoming, coming into being." One reason this is important is that 'existence' can seem a bit static, whereas 'becoming' is a constantly dynamic process of coming into being. This is what we are

constantly doing – participating in a continuous process of coming into being.

Abhava is not-being, not-becoming – not having that process continue – this ending, the not-becoming, not exactly not existing, but no longer contributing to this becoming.

The idea of rebirth gives a framework for this interpretation, when it says that there's a craving for sensual pleasure. The desire for pleasure goes really deep in human beings – maybe deeper than most people realize. Some people are a bit put off by the emphasis in early Buddhism on being trapped or caught by sensual pleasures, and seeing the craving for sensual pleasures as a problem.

But sensual pleasure means any movement towards comfort, or towards any kind of pleasure – not just the more dramatic ones such as epicurean pleasures of enjoying food, or sex, or whatever it might be. Many of the small ways that many people live their lives are oriented around making themselves more comfortable – for example, how we sit in a chair or at a table. Or we might pay more for food than we absolutely have to because we want more pleasure from it. We might buy more clothes than we need, because we get pleasure from them.

The idea of receiving pleasure from experience is deeply ingrained in human nature. It's one of those things that people crave, and in craving, they can suffer. They feel frustrated, upset, or driven.

The next two ideas of becoming and not-becoming are sometimes translated as identity – forming an identity of who we are – creating an identity of, “I am this,” or creating a sense of, “I’m not that.” Not to be that is kind of a non-identification of something. This may be expressed in simple ways. The choice of clothes that people wear sometimes has to do with forming an identity, becoming something for other people. For example, some people are very happy to have logos of their college or high school on their sweatshirt. And they assume that identity. They become a person from that school, or their sports team, or their favorite company.

Other people have the opposite tendency, and I fall in this camp. They don't want to become. They have a tendency towards ***abhava***, non-becoming. I really don't want to wear anything that has a logo on it, and it's very rare that you'll ever see me do this. I'm not particularly proud of this, but it's a bit like, “I don't want to be. I don't want to be.” So that's my thing.

The idea of wanting to be reborn can be the desire for becoming – to exist again. The paradox here is that the craving for non-becoming, non-existing – because it is craving – is also a cause to being reborn. In other words, a person doesn't want to be reborn so strongly that it becomes a *craving* not to be reborn. And that very craving is what gets them reborn, because craving is such a strong drive and push.

In my teachings and in my practice, it's very rare that I make much reference to rebirth. It is not an important part of what I want to teach or of my own practice. But here I offer you what is in the traditional texts, so that you understand the full range of these Four Noble Truths and all the different interpretations of them.

I am partial to the interpretation of rebirth, or of becoming and non-becoming, as not about being reborn one lifetime after another – but about being reborn moment-by-moment. We have a constant movement of craving for pleasure or avoiding displeasure – a movement of becoming something, identifying as something, assuming an identity, being someone, or asserting ourselves as being someone. Or it may be the opposite: not wanting to be, hiding, shutting down, or avoiding something. For human beings, this constant becoming and non-becoming, identifying and then dis-identifying, can be an incessant

form of suffering – of ongoing manufacturing, constructing, concern, preoccupation.

This doesn't have to be. We don't have to live with incessant preoccupation, craving, or for some people even addiction to pleasure – or an addiction to identity, to self, to being someone, to having a clearly constructed sense of self that we present to the world, or a clearly constructed sense or idea of what we don't want to present to the world, and that we hide from.

When we learn to sit still in meditation – and that's why I did this meditation today on the stillness of the mind – we see that when the mind moves, it's often because it wants and doesn't want. It wants becoming or doesn't want becoming. Even not wanting or non-becoming is to be trapped in the cycles of becoming, of craving, of suffering. An interesting question, which I'll leave you with today, is: "If becoming is a source of suffering, and the opposite, non-becoming, is a source of suffering, what's the solution?"

If non-becoming just creates more becoming, more ongoing creation, what is the third option? That's why I think Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of existence and extermination is a little bit difficult to work with. But anyway, what is the alternative to existing and exterminating, or ending? Is there a third option? That

will be the topic for the third of the Four Noble Truths next week.

[Announcement]

I'm very much appreciating all of you who are joining in and saying hello. I think some of you are starting to feel a sense of community, just from the chat box here. I thought that perhaps next week at the end of our Friday session, for those of you who would like to, we could switch to a zoom meeting. I'll post the zoom account, maybe in the chat box, so it's not discoverable by the rest of the world. We'll have a little global town meeting to talk about things, or ask questions. We can also do some breakout groups, where in some random way, you have a chance to meet some of the other participants, and see the value is of coming together a little bit more fully as a community.

[Q & A]

And now if any of you would like to stay on, I'll try to take maybe 15 minutes or so if you have any questions.

Q: Could you please clarify if there's a difference between ***abhava*** and ***vibhava***?

A: Oh yeah, **vibhava**! You know, it's possible I was wrong about the Pali. It could be that it's **bhava** and **vibhava** in this particular text. I don't really know if there's a difference. **Vi** may be a more emphatic kind of **a**. Maybe **vi** has more to do with craving for not existing. So maybe that's why Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as 'extermination.' I'll look into it. I think many years ago, I researched this. So thank you for bringing it up.

Q: Have you written about the Four Noble Truths, as you discussed them today, in any of your books?

A: No, not in any of my books. I've written some drafts of scholarly articles on this topic. Some of what you heard from me this week is a relatively new idea that I've come up with over the last ten years, doing some in-depth research into the *suttas*. I've done drafts of what I hope to be serious scholarly articles clearly laying out how this is the case in the *suttas*.

It seems that this interpretation about the Four Noble Truths as insight into inconstancy has been overlooked. But now that I see it, it's like this open secret in the texts. Hundreds and hundreds of times they talk about the importance of seeing X, the arising of X, the ceasing of X, and the practice leading to the cessation of X. And, it's clearly synonymous with seeing appearance

and disappearance, the rising and passing of things – seeing inconstancy. This is really held out to be the liberating insight.

And because the Four Noble Truths had been the predominant way of understanding the central teachings of Buddhism, this has been projected back on the earliest texts and – because of this projection back of later interpretations – we’ve actually missed seeing the real liberating insight emphasized in those early texts. I’ve laid this out very carefully, but it’s not really ready to share because I need to work on it more. And a Dharma teacher doesn’t have much time for that. When I have some more time, I’ll do it.

Q: The idea that craving for non-becoming creates becoming makes me giggle. I struggle not to move because I’m more used to moving meditation with yoga. This is helpful.

A: I’m so glad.

Q: I like the lighting.

A: I figured out how to create a little barrier for it. If you noticed earlier, I was almost blinded by it.

Q: I hear aspects of dependent origination in this talk of the Second Noble Truth, specifically links eight and eleven. Can you comment on the relationship of these two teachings?

A: Yes, this is one of the reasons why some people have the conditionality interpretation of the Second Noble Truth, because it's very similar to what goes on in the twelvefold sequence of the dependent arising of suffering. In this, there has to be sense contact first. That sense contact is a condition for there being either pleasure or pain, comfort or discomfort. That pleasure or pain is the condition for the arising of craving – what we're talking about in the Second Noble Truth. So without some kind of pleasure, pain, or discomfort, there won't be craving. That craving is a condition for clinging. Craving is one thing, and then when it gets translated into doing something about it, it becomes clinging, holding on. And that leads to becoming (**bhava**), and **bhava** leads to birth. Then birth leads to sickness, old age, grief, lamentation, pain, distress, and so forth.

So they are very closely connected. In fact, I said the Buddha has only five different interpretations of the Four Noble Truths, in basically three different categories. One of them defines the Second Noble Truth as the twelvefold sequence of dependent arising.

The whole thing – all twelve links, not just the end of it – is the arising of suffering. And then the Third Noble Truth is the reverse of dependent arising. It's what I call the twelvefold sequence of dependent cessation. So the Second and Third Noble Truths are clearly connected to the teachings of dependent arising.

Q: Inconstancy is also translated as impermanence. Question mark?

A: Yes, the most common translation in English of ***anicca***, is 'impermanence.' The issue around translating it as impermanence, is that many people will interpret that to mean that something exists now, but it's not going to always exist. It's impermanent, so sooner or later, it's no longer going to exist. The day is impermanent because by night it'll be gone. Mountains are impermanent, because in a few hundred million years, some of these mountains will have washed away. The sun is impermanent, because in a few billion years, it will disappear.

But what the Buddha is talking about is how things appear and disappear. And he uses a lot of different Pali words, which are synonyms of appearing and disappearing, coming and going, arising and passing. So it's really clear that this is what he means – the

ongoing inconstancy of things. This means that things don't have to disappear and end once and for all. So, days are inconstant. They come and go. And they'll come and go as long as the sun is in the sky. The fundamental, liberating insight is this arising and passing, so probably 'inconstancy' works better. And **nicca** – what's being negated with the **a** in **anicca** – actually means 'constancy.' So it makes sense to translate it that way.

Q: Yesterday, did you say that craving refers more to rebirth than to worldly craving?

A: Yes, I said that yesterday in relationship to a very particular teaching about the Four Noble Truths – it's one of the interpretations. And that interpretation is solidified, in a sense, in a text usually referred to as the Buddha's first sermon. I'm certain the Buddha had a first teaching, but that this particular text is his first teaching is very unlikely.

One of the reasons it's unlikely is that this text teaches parts of the teachings about the Four Noble Truths that are quite inspiring. I'll talk about later this in the series. Some people see it that was very important. If the Buddha said it in his very first teaching, and if it was important, you'd think that he would say it again later.

In fact, the teachings in the *suttas* are very repetitive. The Buddha teaches things over and over again, exactly the same way, or uses the same words in different ways, or in the same ways. And so if this teaching was really his first, and important, you'd expect it would reappear. But it hardly ever appears again in the *suttas* – maybe in one or two other places, in passing. So chances are this represents a later interpolation into the *suttas*. Not everything attributed to the Buddha is likely to have been his teachings.

This idea that the Second Noble Truth involves the craving that leads to rebirth is not exactly an interpretation, although that's what it has become. For the early texts, it's an application or an elaboration, that when someone becomes fully awakened as a Buddha, the traditional idea is that then they will not be reborn. And the reason they're not being reborn is because this specific craving that leads to rebirth has ended.

This idea is not really referring to ordinary, worldly craving. For those of us interested in how we suffer day-to-day, these other interpretations of the Four Noble Truths are much more useful – rather than being fixated on this idea of the rebirth, and the craving leads to rebirth.

So my friends, thank you. I appreciate all these questions.

Is it impossible to not be becoming? The question is, “How are we becoming?” Isn’t it impossible to not be becoming? Well, that’s the cliffhanger that is ending this talk today. Next week, we’ll talk about the alternative to becoming and not-becoming as we talk about the Third Noble Truth.

So thank you so much, everyone. I look forward to our time next week, and to setting up the zoom for Friday.