

Four Noble Truths: *Dukkha* (4 of 5)

Lucid Inconstancy of Suffering

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Good day. Today we will continue with the fourth talk on the first noble truth, the truth of suffering.

It is especially nice that today is the day we commemorate the Buddha's awakening, when he became free from suffering. This great momentous experience was the beginning, where the Buddha first set in motion the practice and the teachings that have come down to us. That momentum has continued since that night in May when the Buddha sat under the full moon.

The myth of the Buddha is that he encountered sickness, old age, and death, and this inspired him to

go on a search. It is called “the noble search.” The idea is that sickness, old age, and death represent all human suffering. They epitomize the world of suffering that we are in. Rather than just letting the suffering continue forever, there is a search. There is a deep enquiry or search for freedom from suffering.

When people encounter and are troubled by suffering in all its many forms, there are two directions we can go. We can either move toward more suffering or less suffering. We can move towards freedom from suffering or we can suffer more by reacting to suffering. We react to our suffering, distress, sorrow, grief, and disappointments by either fighting against something, running away, or freezing. Those are the three categories often used to represent an unhealthy way of responding to challenges.

For someone who is a practitioner, there are other options. Instead of fighting, one response to suffering is compassion. We can approach and help. We do not approach to fight, but to support and help alleviate suffering wherever we can. Another healthy approach is called *samvega*. It is a Buddhist word that I think of as the urgency of practice, the inspiration to practice and to engage in the search for freedom from suffering. Instead of flight, or running away, *samvega* is turning backward into oneself. We do not run away from suffering, but we try to get to the bottom of it. We try to

resolve it, be honest about it, look at it directly, and become free of it. Then there is the idea of freezing. Instead of freezing, we become still and quiet. That is possible to do in a very healthy way – we are still and gaze upon everything kindly. We gaze upon everything with care.

Which of these directions do we take? The Dharma direction is towards the alleviation of suffering, towards compassion, and towards practice. In the Dharma we move towards looking upon all things in the moonlight of our kindness, goodness, and care. While being still, we rest in a certain equanimity and peace.

This noble search, this deep practice, is what Buddhism specializes in. The practice is to get to the bottom of our distress, attachments, and clinging. To do that, one of the first tasks that is emphasized is to truly understand suffering. We look at suffering deeply. We come to recognize it and be present and still. We look upon it kindly, non-reactively, with equanimity.

When we stop and look at suffering – when we learn to be mindful of it – we can see, and be aware without the filters of our stories, our interpretations, or our commentary. This is the value of learning mindfulness. We begin to see without adding some of the generalized concepts by which we live and see things.

Mindfulness takes us into the world of the present moment. Even more than the present moment, it takes us to the direct *experience* of the present moment. Direct experience means the experience that is right now without being filtered through our stories, commentaries, and preferences. It is free of all the layers of stuff we can add on top of it.

As we begin seeing our suffering, pain, sorrow, and grief, we allow it to be. We are not in conflict with it. We are not fighting, escaping, or freezing, but learning to gaze upon it deeply. We see that in the moment-to-moment experience of suffering, it is unfolding, flowing, and moving. It is inconstant. It is arising, and passing. It is shifting and changing all the time. The immediacy of experience does not create a feeling of permanency. The way the mind interprets, holds onto, or reacts to ideas is what creates a feeling that experiences are permanent and fixed.

That is one of the values of calming and settling the mind from its reactive mode. We can start being in the flow, in the stream of experience in a deeper way. It is phenomenally respectful to allow our distress, sorrow, grief, anger, fear, or rage to just be. Especially in meditation, we can let it course through us. We let it flow, or just be there. In a certain way, we just get out of its way.

We are not getting out of the way so we can act on experience or collapse into it. We get out of the way so that it just flows without our active involvement in it. This is one of the reasons why meditation is such a powerful arena for learning and being. There are very few places in our human life where it is safe and appropriate to let what is going on inside of us have full permission to be there. Meditation helps whatever is there to feel safe, be present, and flow.

We hold in a kind gaze and awareness whatever anger, fear, sorrow, pain, distress, or stress we have. We are still and look upon it kindly. This helps whatever is happening in our minds or our hearts to feel safe with us. We are not fixing, changing, interpreting, or commenting on experience. It is a process of just allowing it to be. As we settle down in this way, we can see how inconstant things are. We can see how things arise and pass.

In the English translations of the *suttas*, there is a statement quoting the Buddha, “Whatever is impermanent is suffering.” Here we are dropping down, quieting the mind, dwelling in the deepest wellsprings of the flow, or the stream of life. We are seeing the inconstant arising and passing of phenomena. The Buddha says that this is *anicca*. It is impermanent, and whatever is impermanent is suffering. In a sense, this

impermanent world that we live in, this changing, inconstant world has a nature of suffering.

Interestingly, the important point to appreciate here is that this deep connection to impermanence – the deep flow, the changing, inconstant nature of reality – is also the medicine. This is where we discover freedom from suffering. It is kind of like the illness is also the medicine.

Over and over again the Buddha says that the deep insight into impermanence is only possible if we are really present for it. Seeing impermanence is possible only if we are very still, looking upon it kindly, compassionately, and only seeing impermanence. We drop into the flow of things arising and passing. Only then can we appreciate how much that is suffering, *dukkha*, but also how liberating it is at the same time. If we only see the suffering, then we are standing back from it and not entering into the flow.

The word *anicca* is translated as “impermanent.” “Impermanent” might not be the best translation even though it is the most common one. Impermanence is very important to understand because of its connection to *dukkha* – suffering, distress, unsatisfactoriness, stress, or pain. The word in Pali is *a-nicca*. *Nicca* does not mean “permanent,” but rather, it means “constant.”

The "a" is the negative, and so it means “not constant,” or “inconstant.”

There is a difference between the English word "inconstant" and "impermanent". Some people see impermanence as something that is going to end. Sooner or later it won't be here. It is not permanent. Eventually, it will die, fade away, or be broken.

Inconstant means that it comes and goes. This is one of the deepest insights of Vipassana practice. It is not just recognizing that things will disappear once and for all, that they will die, and mountains will decay. Rather, it is to be aware of the inconstancy of moment-to-moment experience. We are aware of the flow, or the stream of moment-to-moment experience that comes and goes. Things are there and not there. Things appear and disappear.

Whether things actually disappear – like completely gone – they disappear in how we experience them. Experience itself is a magical, special location that is how we perceive the world around and within us. That perception, the way we take in experience and perceive is in flux and changing.

In Buddhism, the perception of how we experience the world is the fundamental fulcrum of our life. It is like the neck of the hourglass. Everything goes through our

experience, our perception of things. Buddhism sits right there at that door of experience or door of perception. We sit right there in the middle of that neck of the vast world outside of us and the vast world inside of us. We just watch what happens in that world of experience.

That is where the genesis of suffering and freedom is. It is not in the vast world out there, and not in the vast world inside. Rather, the beginning of suffering and freedom is right there in the moment-to-moment experience. If we can see suffering, stress, tension, *dukkha*, unsatisfactoriness, or painfulness of things there, that is what is liberating. Recognizing this in moment-to-moment experience is what is liberating.

When there is a very clear recognition, the recognition becomes lucid. That is one of the ways it is liberating. Awareness becomes lucid. Our awareness becomes spacious, lucid, and clear, and then we know we are aware. We know, “Wow, the amazement of being conscious.” What we are conscious of, what we are aware of in the flow of experience, becomes almost secondary to our capacity to be aware. We are not lost or sunk in, or preoccupied by what we know. We still know clearly and lucidly, but liberation is in the lucidity, the clarity in which we know. This is freedom.

That lucidity is just like the vast freedom of the full moon to float in a cloudless sky in the middle of the night. It just floats and is there. It is lucid and clear. So with a clear, lucid, full moon of mind, we can recognize freedom with great clarity and peace, gazing upon all things kindly. There we will find a degree of freedom. There is the path to full awakening.

Thank you for these reflections about *dukkha*, the first noble truth. We have one more talk tomorrow, and then we are done with this topic.