Four Noble Truths: *Nirodha* (4 of 5) The End of the World

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

Today is the fourth talk on the third noble truth. I think the talk is going to be primarily about inconstancy, an alternative translation of the word "*anicca*."

Anicca is often translated into English as “impermanence.” But “impermanence” can imply that, sooner or later, things end. Inconstancy implies that things are not constant, but that they still have some kind of existence. They arise and they pass away. They come and they go, come and go. They don't quite exist in a permanent way, but they also do not “not exist.”

They have a quality of dynamic process. They appear and they disappear.

In the ancient discourses, there was a person who came to the Buddha and asked, "Is it possible by traveling to know, see, or reach the end of the world, where one is not born, does not age, does not die, does not pass away, and is not reborn?" Most likely this person was pointing to a transcendent state in which the self – some core aspect of the self – is unchanging and immortal in a certain way. It doesn't come and go, doesn't die, but exists somehow beyond the edges of the world. One can travel there and be safe from birth and death.

In answering the question, the Buddha, in his typical way, redefines the terms. He redefines what the end of the world means. The Buddha treats the end of the world as a metaphor. He says, "Without reaching the end of the world there is no end of suffering." He also redefines the goal. While the person asks about "a place where there is no birth and death," the Buddha points to something much simpler, more immediate, and identifiable – here, in our experience. It's not dependent on ideas of rebirth or no rebirth, or of getting to some transcendent place. The end of suffering is just here in this lived experience.

Then he says, "You won't reach the end of suffering without reaching the end of the world." But he defines what he means by “the world.” He says, "The world is this two-arm-long (fathom-long) body, its perceptions, and its mind." In a footnote, Bhikkhu Bodhi, who translated this passage, explains that “the world” here means the world of our experience – the world of personal experience.

It doesn't take a lot of consideration to realize that the world can be defined, not by the earth and the real objects out there, but rather, by how our minds construct the world – how the mind makes much of the world we live in.

This doesn’t mean the entire world. If you're meditating or listening to this indoors, look around the room. Just about anything your eyes fall on – unless it's a plant or an animal – has, somehow, been constructed by human design, made by human hands or by machines. If you brought that object to a human being living ten, twenty, or fifty thousand years ago, they probably would have no idea what the object is. They wouldn't have a clue about what to do with it.

If you took a door from your house and put it outside next to a tree, fifty thousand years ago, would they

know it as a door? Would they recognize a chair or a computer? Would they know? There would probably be nothing they would understand. They would be scratching their heads and wondering what these things were.

But for us, it’s obvious what they are. In that obviousness, maybe we don't realize how much these objects are a product of human thought, ideas, and constructs. We don’t recognize our overlaid ideas of what an object is, the ideas we associate with it so we can find our way in this world.

There is nothing wrong with these associated concepts, but they're part of the human world we have constructed. We move about in a world that, in some senses, is for the most part a manifestation of what some human beings have thought about in the past, invented, made, and put in place.

The world of our direct experience is a constructed world. In a sense, it is our mental formations and ideas. Much of our suffering has to do with how we participate in and relate to this inner world of mental constructions and concepts, how they are projected, and how we associate them with the world around us.

We don't think we're responsible for seeing a chair as a chair. But, in fact, we are participating in the huge

enterprise of agreeing that a chair is a chair, and a door is a door. Again, there's nothing wrong with that. It's actually wise and appropriate. But our mind constructs it.

When the Buddha says, "We can't end suffering without coming to the end of the world," he means that to really get down to the heart and the root of our clinging and craving – the source of our suffering – we have to somehow step away from the stickiness, the involvement, the incessantness of living in the world of concepts and ideas. We're swimming in that world so much that we don't see it – like fish supposedly don't see the water they swim in.

The idea of the end of the world, the way it's been stated, is a frightening idea. Tomorrow I'll talk about the happiness of it. It's not simply depressing. The Buddha wrote a poem at the end of his teaching on this topic:

> *Whoever has reached the end of the world has fulfilled the spiritual life. The peaceful one, having known the end of the world, has no wishes for this world or another world.*

He says, "The peaceful one." The idea of not clinging to anything. Part of what we cling to unconsciously is the stickiness of our concepts and our thoughts of experience. Our resistance and our clinging to these

thoughts, ideas, and experiences – whatever they might be – is like coming up to the edge of a river, watching the river flow by, dipping a bucket into the river, and then carrying around the bucket of water and saying, "Here's the river." The river is no longer the water in the bucket. That is just water. The river is the flow. There's no river without the flowing and moving.

Over and over and over again, the Buddha emphasized that in order to really release, relax, and thaw the fist of clinging, our holding, our resistance, and the stickiness of all these concepts and ideas, the idea is to settle back in meditation in a very deep, peaceful, calm, and contented place.

We don't have to live our lives this way. It's silly to try to live without our concepts of the world. But in meditation, we can trust in such a deep way that we put down the burden of all these thoughts, ideas, concepts, reactivities, and wanting and not wanting. We can just settle in a very, very peaceful place where concepts no longer operate, but where direct experience of the world and of life is still happening.

What we see is that things arise and pass. They come and they go. We see that what gives a sense of continuity is often our idea of things. But in direct experience, things flash in and out of existence, appearing and disappearing incessantly.

In the Buddha's teaching, this is the primary insight, the liberating insight. Over and over and over again in the *suttas*, the Buddha points to this insight into inconstancy that comes from a very deep, peaceful, settled, and focused mind. He uses many different synonyms: arising and passing, appearing and vanishing, appearing and disappearing, arising and ceasing. Cessation is *nirodha*: the third noble truth.

One of the meanings of the third noble truth is not that it's about the cessation of craving that leads to suffering. Rather, it's about seeing the cessation of whatever is happening. Seeing that it comes and goes. It arises and passes. It's not constant.

Certainly, we can see that craving itself comes and goes. But the Buddha lists many other things that come and go. These arise and pass – the core insight. He talked about the factors of dependent origination which include craving and clinging, but also feelings, sensations, birth and death, consciousness, and mental formations.

We can see all these things come and go. He talked about The Five Aggregates coming and going. Sense perceptions come and go. Views come and go. The list just goes on and on.

But he talks about inconstancy most often in a formulaic way. He lays it out in four statements. These four statements can be understood (using ‘x’ to fill in the blank) as:

> This is x.
> This is the arising of x,
> This is the cessation of x,
> This is the practice leading to the cessation of x.

Here, the way the second noble truth is formulated and understood is as a core insight of just seeing things come and go, and noticing that they're gone – they've ceased. It is a phenomenal thing to see, even for a moment, that something is not there, and to appreciate that. Often, the mind latches onto ideas, and we flash in and out of preoccupation with our thoughts. But it feels to us as if experience is continuous.

What we're asked to do in mindfulness practice is to notice the discontinuity. We might be thinking about something important, like what we're going to have for a meal. We're hungry and we really want a meal. It seems as if we're only thinking about food. But then there's a sound outside. And, for a moment, we wonder, “What was that sound?” Then we're back to thinking about food. Then we notice our bladder is full. And we think, "Well, where's the bathroom?" All these things flash in briefly. Then we're back to thinking about food. It seems

like we're thinking about food all the time. But, in fact, it comes and goes.

Our emotions come and go as well. We might feel like our emotions are continuous. But, in fact, our attention – our awareness – is probably flitting in and out of different topics, arising and passing.

This is one of the key insights the Buddha taught. Really appreciate how profound and meaningful it is. It is really not something to work with and live with in daily life so much – although it can be very helpful in daily life. The deepest experience of this happens in deep, concentrated meditation, where it can feel like one of the best things going.

The mind is concentrated and peaceful, and we feel as if we can really be in the flow of experience, the flow of arising and passing – a flow of arising and passing that's so thoroughgoing that any idea or sense of “me, myself, and mine” disappears into that flow, into that arising and passing of phenomena.

Being in this arising and passing, inconstant experience is not so valuable in and of itself. It's not as if we're supposed to live there. But rather, it's a powerful medicine that helps us to relax any clinging and let go. Nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to.

We realize that nothing can be clung to because things are flowing and moving. It's like putting a fist into the river. We really want to take the river home, and we grab a fist full of water. But our hand can't hold the water. It just fades away. After a while, we realize that's not the way to hold onto water.

We can't hold onto the flow of experience, so we begin to relax and settle back. In the deepest situations, the mind lets go of itself – a very deep release. With that release, a person is never again the same. When they come back into the world of experience, they really have embodied, a deep sense, a deep understanding and connection to the idea that nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to. They might still cling somewhat, but they know that it’s not the way forward.

I hope this makes sense. We'll finish this discussion of *nirodha* tomorrow.