

# The Four Noble Truths: *Samudaya* (4 of 5) The Origin of Suffering

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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Today we continue with the fourth talk on the Second Noble Truth. I'm offering different interpretations of the Second Noble Truth, and of the Four Noble Truths in general. The value of these different interpretations is that each of them is a different pragmatic or practical way of exploring and freeing ourselves from our suffering.

Rather than seeing the Four Noble Truths as a fixed doctrine that has a fixed interpretation or fixed understanding, it's possible to see them as a framework, which can be applied to understand our

lives in different ways – all for the purpose of becoming freer and freer of suffering.

Sometimes the first interpretation (Monday's) is useful – the causal interpretation that there's a cause of suffering. And if you can understand that cause, maybe you can do something about that suffering by letting go of the cause.

Sometimes it's useful to look at the conditionality of suffering – the conditions through which suffering has arisen – all the different pieces that come together, add up, and build up together to create suffering. Sometimes we don't address the cause, but we change the conditions.

A third interpretation (yesterday's) is that of inconstancy – looking at how thoroughly and completely things are constantly shifting and changing, appearing and disappearing. Somehow, in the inconstancy of experience, it's clear that the grip of clinging begins to release. We start seeing freedom because of inconstancy. As we go through these three interpretations, it's like going deeper and deeper into the mind – into a stiller, quieter, more attentive mind – one that is not overlaying a lot of ideas on top of things.

And when we start seeing the fundamental, inconstant flow of experience in deep meditation, it's really clear that there's freedom in that flow – freedom in between the things that exist. And that flow helps to release some of the deepest kinds of holding we have. This is the liberating insight, the liberating interpretation.

Today, for the fourth interpretation, I'm going to offer one that talks about the origin of suffering. Some translators actually translate this word, *samudaya*, which in the Second Noble Truth means 'arising,' as the noble truth of the 'origin' of suffering. So why do they translate it as 'origin?' I believe this has a lot to do with the Buddha's so called first discourse.

After the Buddha was enlightened, he went to find his six previous companions in the ascetic life, because he thought they were ready to hear these deeper teachings about liberation, enlightenment. It is said that when he found them, he taught them the Four Noble Truths.

The simple Dharma teaching (I don't know if 'simple' is the right word) will often say that the Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering, is craving. The condition leading to the arising of suffering is craving. That idea comes from this first sermon of the Buddha, and it begins this way (this is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation):

*Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is this craving.*

So, there it is: “It is this craving.” I think many times when Dharma teachers and even scholars are writing about the Second Noble Truth, they stop there. It’s craving. It’s useful to look at craving – the thirst, the clinging, this strong, compulsive desire.

But the passage goes on, and often the rest of it is not discussed as much. “It is this craving, which...” So here we go: “the craving which...” We’re talking about a particular kind of craving now. So, what is the origin of suffering in this translation? The origin is the craving which... Which what? It’s the craving which leads – so it’s going to go somewhere. It’s kind of like a cause – it leads someplace. So, where does it lead?

It is a particular kind of craving that leads someplace. It is the craving that leads to renewed existence – to being reborn – accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is craving. Or to say it in different words:

*That is what this craving is: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for extermination, for non-existence.*

This is an intense passage. Some people, trying to understand what the Four Noble Truths are about, are surprised to come across this particular explanation of the Second Noble Truth, because it focuses on rebirth. It's *this* particular craving that leads to rebirth. The craving that human beings have in a previous life – the craving to be reborn – is the origin of the person's next life. And it's also the origin of all the suffering that person has in their next life.

So in this interpretation, with the understanding of rebirth across multiple lives, all the suffering that you have in this lifetime has its origin in craving to be reborn. This is the solution to not being reborn again and again into this world of suffering. It is to let go of a particular kind of craving – the craving for rebirth. That's where we get this idea that the Second Noble Truth has to do with the origin of suffering – even though, as I keep saying, the word *samudaya* means 'arising.'

Yesterday I talked about these four liberating insights into:

- *This is suffering.*
- *This is the arising of suffering.*
- *This is the cessation of suffering.*
- *This is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.*

And I offered the interpretation, which I think represents what the Buddha was teaching over and over again. This little formula, without the words “noble truth,” appears hundreds of times in the *suttas*. People often think the Buddha is talking about the Four Noble Truths, because the wording is so similar, but he’s talking about inconstancy – the immediacy of experience here and now.

The explanation in the first discourse of the Buddha is much more abstract. It’s not about the immediacy of present moment experience. It’s about a story, an idea, a belief in rebirth, and an idea of how rebirth happens. It’s a theory about rebirth. We’ve left the world of direct experience – at least in terms of the reader and what’s being pointed to – to kind of a belief, a tenet, a creed that the problem of suffering is the fact that we want to be reborn. And then we do get reborn.

Some people may be reeling to hear this. “What? This is getting complicated. I thought practice and mindfulness were just about present moment experience – seeing it here now, deep insight into how things are here and now. And now we’re talking about this fundamental Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths, and that in order to understand it, you have to

understand rebirth, and believe that craving is the cause of rebirth? How do I get to this root craving – this origin of suffering?”

For some of us, it's not so satisfying. For others, it's inspiring to hear this: “Ah, people who believe in rebirth really want to see how to get off the wheel of life and death.” But for people who don't believe in it so much, it's like, “What?” It's a little bit confusing, or maybe even off-putting, to have this wonderful teaching of the Four Noble Truths interpreted in this way.

One way of understanding this – and I received this from one of the great scholar monks – is the idea is that this discourse of the Buddha's first sermon is not meant to be the definitive teaching on the Four Noble Truths. Rather, it is a very particular elaboration of how someone, when they become fully awakened (like becoming a Buddha), no longer get reborn. How does that happen? How does one no longer get reborn?

The explanation is that for this person, that particular craving for rebirth has been uprooted. It has been stopped. So, rather than the Buddha's first sermon being the universal teachings on the Four Noble Truths through which we can understand our lives – it's rather a very particular application of a framework to look at

and explain how someone who becomes fully awakened has been changed – a particular mechanism for that.

It's irrelevant for someone who's fully awakened, but not necessarily for someone who's just trying to become free in this lifetime as they go through their lives. This idea is a little more complicated. But I think it's important to those of us who are engaged in Buddhism, and trying to reflect on the Four Noble Truths. We're trying to go back and see the teachings of the Buddha, trying to make sense of the teachings of the first sermon of the Buddha. We want to contextualize it, and to really understand the particularity of what the focus is on, so that we're not confused – or we think we have to adopt a tenet, a belief, or apply this particular teaching to our practice.

So in the origin of suffering, here the origin means the original place in the past life that gives birth to the suffering. Some translators translate the word *samudaya*, meaning 'arising,' as 'origination.' Some of you reading the different translators will see this.

I'm not sure what 'origination' means. I know the dictionary definition. I think it may just mean 'origin.' Or maybe it's a hybrid, or a vague way of talking about



conditionality – talking about origin – not the fundamental, original origin – but rather where suffering originates, any place you can see it originating in the conditions for it – the more immediate cause today, or in current times.

So, these interpretations are all material to swim in, to work with, and to apply to our lives. And the test, the purpose, of all this is to be able to be present with clear eyes, looking clearly into our life, understanding what we're doing, how we're living, where the clinging, and where the craving is.

And then we want to understand how it's useful to work through that to come to the other side of suffering. Sometimes it's useful to see cause, sometimes the condition(s), sometimes inconstancy. And sometimes it may be that seeing the origin is useful or important in order to understand that this is part of it.

We'll review all this again in a (hopefully) practical way next week, when we talk about *nirodha*, the cessation of suffering. But for now, we're still looking at this Second Noble Truth. And we have one more talk tomorrow.

I look forward to making efforts again to explain this to you, and hopefully you're finding it practical. Thank you.

