

Four Noble Truths: *Nirodha* (1 of 5) Cessation

May 18, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

cessation, endings, freedom, absence, craving, suffering, obstacle, deeper, third noble truth, opens, relinquishing, path, Buddhism, attached, arise, hold, inspiring, cease, sukho, practice, happiness, good news, relinquishing, fully enlightened

Gil Fronsdal

So here we are beginning the first of five talks on the third noble truth. In a sense, we're halfway through the Four Noble Truths. And we're beginning the second half. We're beginning now with what can be considered the good news of Buddhism. And even though the third noble truth involves the cessation of suffering, that cessation is the good news. It's good to know that it's not necessary to suffer all the time, that suffering could come to an end. But also the cessation of suffering, allows for new possibilities, and new expressions of ourselves in that freedom that comes with the ending, the cessation of certain things.

The word *nirodha* is what we translate usually as cessation. I find it very interesting that the root of the word is *rodha*, which means obstacle. And the *ni* means something like no obstacle, or without obstacle. The English word cessation implies the end of something, and therefore some people might feel like, "That can't be that inspiring or such good news. Just the ending of things is kind of depressing." But the idea of the absence of obstacles can seem much more inspiring or meaningful, because that implies a certain freedom to move ahead to do what we want to do. So this combination – the really deep ending of something and then the possibility of freedom – is the good news of Buddhism.

There are a lot of endings, cessations, in Buddhist practice, and it's useful to recognize them as they come along, because endings can give birth to a lot of inspiration, joy, and encouragement in the practice. The cessation, the ending of things – when we really see them, we see the opening that comes there – almost like they're the guide or the door that opens into going deeper and deeper into the Dharma.

Just to mention some of these endings, which really can be dharmic endings – endings that are the end of being lost can be a relief. Endings that end

misunderstandings can be enlightening. Endings that begin the path to freedom can be a refuge. Endings that end suffering are liberating. These are all endings that characterize Dharma practice. Learning to recognize these endings can engender tremendous faith in the practice.

So, the simplest formulation of the third noble truth is “the noble truth of the cessation of suffering.” As I've been saying these previous weeks, there are a number of different interpretations of what this means. The one that's usually held up as the primary reference point for this is the Buddha's teaching in what's called his first sermon, the "Turning the Wheel of the Dharma" discourse. And I want to read you that passage, and how it's discussed there. The reason to read it to you, one of the primary reasons, is so you can hear how thoroughgoing this sensation is as an ending. It's an absence of something.

Now, this bhikkhus is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it.

These are very strong words: remainderless, fading away, cessation, giving up, relinquishing, freedom from

it, and nonreliance on it. This is how Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it.¹

In particular, it's the cessation, the relinquishing, the giving up, the freedom from: craving. This passage is part of the source of what we're giving up in the third noble truth, and this is the cessation of suffering. To end suffering is to give up craving. That craving is the cause of suffering is one of the most common modern interpretations. However, there's a preposition here. It says, "that same craving." It's here in this text, it's really concerned with a particular kind of cessation, the cessation of someone who's fully enlightened, who's already experienced degrees of enlightenment. And to become fully enlightened when it can no longer is reborn. Here, they're talking about what it takes to no longer be reborn. It's the craving for rebirth, for re-becoming. And it's that craving that is totally let go of.

We talked about that a little bit last week, and I'll talk more about this particular idea. It's one particular elaboration, amplification, of a much deeper experience of cessation – a more thoroughgoing, foundational experience of cessation – which these ancient texts repeat over and over again.

But now, I want to say how thoroughgoing this ending is, this cessation that we find in early Buddhism – a lot

of emphasis on not attaining something, like some *thing* – but rather, releasing something, letting go of something. The freedom of being without, the freedom of not being caught, of not being attached. The freedom of not building up and creating a sense of self.

Over and over again, the discussion of the goal of practice is described mostly in negative terms, mostly in what's absent. And because of that – and part of the delight of this, and the benefit of this – is that the absence is not something we can cling to very well. We can't hold on to it or make a self out of it. There's nothing there.

If I open my fist, and I love the absence of the fist, but if I want to be attached to it, then I close down around it, because I want to hold on to it. I mean, I'm attached to the openness. I can't really grab on to it because then, as soon as there's something that we think is the goal, which is a thing, people can so easily get attached to it, or live in expectation of it, or want it. But it's the absence.

Like the metaphor of a path, which we'll talk about next week, is that the path is a clearing where it's easy to walk, like a clearing in the woods or the jungle. Everything's clear and open, so you can pass through. As soon as there's an obstacle or it's overgrown, it's no

longer a path. So it's this idea of what's absent that opens up for us the world, opens up a sense of newness, possibility. Freedom is part of this.

The idea that things cease and end. Their inconstancy and change is celebrated in a particular poem in the ancient world, which is called the saying of the arahants, the fully enlightened ones. Some of you I'm sure know this. It's often chanted in Pali:

*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā.
Uppāda vā dhammino.
Uppajjivā nirujjhanti.
Tesam vūpasamo sukho.*²

Impermanent are all mental formations. Their nature is to arise and vanish. Having arisen, they cease. Their stilling is blissful, is happy, *sukho*.

So this insight into the *nirodha*, the cessation, cessation of suffering, is built on a deep insight into inconstancy, the arising and passing, the appearing and disappearing of things. This cessation brings happiness, the happiness of the arahats, the happiness of practice.

So, this is what we'll be looking at this week: this *nirodha*, cessation – the freedom from obstacles. We'll go through it in a number of different ways. And Friday

we'll culminate in looking a bit more at the happiness of arhats, the happiness at the end of the path of cessation, the full cessation.

So, thank you, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.

¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya; Translated from the Pāli*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p 1844 (SN 56.11).

² DN 16.37 - *Mahāparinibbāna sutta*, and repeated in nine other places in the Pāli Canon.