

Sutta Class

View

PJ Teh 17 May 22

Before this talk to the pioneer batch of the Buddhist Mentorship programme, I had asked if attendees had any questions.

- a. We had two questions about fate, and how to change our fate.
- b. Another two questions about work and career: dealing with bosses who have different expectations, and to do well in career.
- c. Related one on stress and expectations.
- d. another one on how to interact with people, and stop being a topic of idle chatter.
- e. A deep question about the 4 aharas, especially what is volition & consciousness.

To cover these questions, I've decided to cover this three-part sutta class in the following 3 areas, with each separate session covering each area:

Part I - Views - this covers the basic concepts in the Dharma, which are critical for further undersatnding. This tends to be a rabbithole, so I will cover only what is important to cover to address the above challenges/questions. However, to cover the questions on volition & consciousness, we have to dive a bit into the five Aggregates that are frequently mistaken as a Self.

Part II - Motivation & Intentions - this covers the 2nd Factor of the Eightfold Path, and how we should approach it. This is the heart of the Eightfold Path, because this makes kamma. You don't need to fully perfect Right View to take on the Right Intentions & Motivations, but you need the Right Motivations & Intentions in order for Right Actions.

Part III - Right Actions - This covers the remainder of the Eightfold Path, just before Right Mindfulness & Right Samadhi, which is about acting out the motivation & intention formed in the 2nd Factor of the Eightfold Path.

Views

For today's session, our focus on covering the 3 key aspects of Right View:

Four Noble Truths

For the purpose of practicing the Eightfold Path, it's actually sufficient to understand the Four Truths and Cause & Effect. And since there was a question about volition/willpower, and also on consciousness, we will dive a bit into the nature of the Self/Non-Self, before going into Cause & Effect.

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering:

**birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering,
death is suffering;
union with what is displeasing is suffering;
separation from what is pleasing is suffering;
not to get what one wants is suffering;
in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are
suffering.**

SN 56.11 - Wheel of Dhamma <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi>

The first Noble Truth was spoken by the Buddha in his first sermon to the group of five monks.

Note: it's not the moment dying out, nor the birth of the moment, which is how some people have interpreted this truth of suffering.

These are life moments: these are specific moments. These are not just the birth and passing of a moment of a breath or of time.

The Buddha is quite specific that this first Noble Truth is really about having the five aggregates.

Having any of the five aggregates (which we will cover in a bit) is suffering. To be born is to suffer.

To be reborn indefinitely is to suffer indefinitely.

Note also that, "union with what is displeasing... separation from what is pleasing... not to get what one wants is (all) suffering."

These are in the First Truth, not the Second, but are intimately linked to the Second Truth.

**“Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering:
it is this craving which leads to renewed existence,
accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here
and there;
that is,
craving for sensual pleasures,
craving for existence,
craving for extermination.**

SN 56.11 - Wheel of Dhamma <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi>

The Second Noble Truth is about the origin, the CAUSE of suffering.
This cause is craving = wanting. The Pali term for this is taṇhā, which translates as THIRST.

This is a useful guiding question. Anytime you're suffering, what is it that you want?
That wanting is the cause of your suffering. "not to get what one wants is suffering" in the First Truth!

Then the follow-up question: what can you do to let go of your wanting? That's covered in the next Noble Truth.

“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.

***yo tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāganirodho
cāgo patinissaggo mutti analayo.***

SN 56.11 - Wheel of Dhamma <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/sujato>

The Third Noble Truth notes that, when the craving (in the Second Truth) disappears, suffering also disappears.

A good way to test this for yourself is to do this:

Bring yourself back to the happiest moment of your life.

Now, ask yourself, at that moment, did you want anything else or want to be anywhere else?

Quite commonly, the answer is “no”. And you can see for yourself the strong correlation between the absence of craving and happiness of mind.

What are the ways of the “remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving”?

These are the Four ways of Letting Go (also a talk by Ajahn Brahm), of not wanting:

1. Caga - giving, generosity.
2. Patinissaga - letting go.
3. Mutti - free, releasing
4. Analaya - Hima-laya, "resting place of the clouds". An = the opposite, so analaya is the non-reliance, not-resting, not-sticking. "Teflon mind"

**“Now this is the noble truth of the practice
that leads to the cessation of suffering.
It is simply this noble eightfold path, that is:**

**right view, right thought, right speech, right
action, right livelihood, right effort, right
mindfulness, and right *samadhi*...**

SN 56.11 - Wheel of Dhamma <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/sujato>

What is the way that leads to the stopping of all suffering? That is the Fourth Truth.

The Fourth Truth refers to Right View, which includes... the Four Truths!

Is this tautological?

No! Because of this loop repeats over time.

This is recursive: you progress through the Eightfold Path
loop back with more correct Right View...
progress again, all the way to Right Samadhi...
which then allows your mind to see even more clearly,
further correcting Right View... and so on.

This noble truth of suffering should be completely understood.'... 'This noble truth of the origin of suffering (tanha) should be given up.'... 'This noble truth of the cessation of suffering should be realized.'... 'This noble truth of the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering (Eightfold Path) should be developed.'

SN 56.11 - Wheel of Dhamma <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/sujato>

Besides stating the Four Truths, the Buddha also explained what you should do about each of these Truths.

This is what you should do about each of the Four Truths:
completely understand (suffering)
give up (craving)
realize (stopping of suffering)
develop (the path leading to the stopping of suffering)

When you have completed all four, congratulations, you're fully liberated!

... The pleasure and happiness that arise from these five kinds of sensual stimulation is called sensual pleasure—a filthy (*milha* = piss!), ordinary, ignoble pleasure. Such pleasure should not be cultivated or developed, but should be feared, I say.

Take a mendicant who, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters and remains in the first absorption ... second absorption ... third absorption ... fourth absorption.

MN 66 - Simile of the Quail <https://suttacentral.net/mn66/en/sujato>

The Four Truths might all sound miserable or meh. "Life is suffering enough! Why do I need to suffer further?"

But the Path is actually about increasing happiness and pleasure of the non-sensual type.
When suffering decreases, happiness increases.

And the Buddha spoke about the danger of sensual pleasures, even comparing it as a piss pleasure.
So even the finest sunsets & wines you taste and smell are all piss pleasures, according to the Buddha.

In contrast, the pleasures of the purely mind-sense (described here as the 'absorptions')..

This is called the pleasure of renunciation, the pleasure of seclusion, the pleasure of peace, the pleasure of awakening (sambodhasukham). Such pleasure should be cultivated and developed, and should not be feared, I say.

MN 66 - Simile of the Quail <https://suttacentral.net/mn66/en/sujato>

... are to be cultivated and developed, and not to be feared.

This is one direct piece of evidence that the Buddha didn't teach pure neutrality alone, but also taught about the cultivation of non-sensual pleasure as a necessary part of the Path.

Why, then, do we enjoy sensual pleasures so much?

“Master Gotama, that fire is now painful to touch, hot, and scorching, and previously too that fire was painful to touch, hot, and scorching. For when that man was a leper with sores and blisters on his limbs, being devoured by worms, scratching the scabs off the openings of his wounds with his nails, his faculties were impaired; thus, though the fire was actually painful to touch, he acquired a mistaken perception of it as pleasant.”

MN 75 - To Magandiya <https://suttacentral.net/mn75/en/bodhi>

The main reason we enjoy sensual pleasures is that our perceptions are distorted by our defilements.

The Buddha shared this simile of a leper who previously scorched his blisters over a fire, as a relief from the itch. This leper then gets cured.

Would this leper still put his limbs over a fire? the Buddha asked.

No, because previously “his faculties were impaired... he acquired a mistaken perception of (the fire) as pleasant.”

“So too, Māgandiya, in the past sensual pleasures were painful to touch, hot, and scorching; in the future sensual pleasures will be painful to touch, hot, and scorching; and now at present sensual pleasures are painful to touch, hot, and scorching. But these beings who are not free from lust for sensual pleasures, who are devoured by craving for sensual pleasures, who burn with fever for sensual pleasures, have faculties that are impaired; thus, though sensual pleasures are actually painful to touch, they acquire a mistaken perception of them as pleasant.

MN 75 - To Magandiya <https://suttacentral.net/mn75/en/bodhi>

Then the Buddha asserts that like the leper, beings who are still defiled by craving, acquire a wrong perception that sensual pleasures are pleasant, when in fact these sensual pleasures have and always will be “painful to touch, hot and scorching”.

So this path is about the increase of happiness and the removal of suffering as it is, about reality as it actually is.

But what exactly is suffering, and what or who suffers?

Non Self

... What exactly is suffering and what suffers?
Who is the "you" who suffers?

And why do you call it form? It's deformed; that's why it's called 'form'. Deformed by what? Deformed by cold, heat, hunger, and thirst, and deformed by the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and reptiles. It's deformed; that's why it's called 'form'.

And why do you call it feeling? It feels; that's why it's called 'feeling'. And what does it feel? It feels pleasure, pain, and neutral. It feels; that's why it's called 'feeling'.

And why do you call it perception? It perceives; that's why it's called 'perception'. And what does it perceive? It perceives blue, yellow, red, and white. It perceives; that's why it's called 'perception'.

SN 22.79 - Itchy <https://suttacentral.net/sn22.79/en/sujato>

Every sentient being, including you, can be categorized into five aggregates or categories or components.

The Buddha focused on these five aspects, as we tend to view a Self or Soul or permanent essence in each of these five components.

These Five Aggregates - the five "things" that we view as our Self! - are:

1. Form - physical body, and its aspects and components.

2. Feeling - good, bad, neutral. To note, this isn't really emotions, but is more about the six sense-feelings.

Each sense feeling has a different quality compared to the others: e.g. smelly, fragrant, neutral; yummy, yucky, meh; beautiful, ugly, bland; etc.

3. Perception - seeing the aspects of the object e.g. blue, pink, etc.

...

And why do you call them choices (sankhara)? Choices produce conditioned phenomena; that's why they're called 'choices'. And what are the conditioned phenomena that they produce? Form is a conditioned phenomenon; choices are what make it into form. Feeling is a conditioned phenomenon; choices are what make it into feeling. Perception is a conditioned phenomenon; choices are what make it into perception. Choices are conditioned phenomena; choices are what make them into choices. Consciousness is a conditioned phenomenon; choices are what make it into consciousness. Choices produce conditioned phenomena; that's why they're called 'choices'.

And why do you call it consciousness? It cognizes; that's why it's called 'consciousness'. And what does it cognize? It cognizes sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, hot, mild, salty, and bland. It cognizes; that's why it's called 'consciousness'.

SN 22.79 - Itchy <https://suttacentral.net/sn22.79/en/sujato>

4. Volitional formations - the biggest aspect of this aggregate is will, including choice, decisions. This category ALSO includes thought and thinking.

5. Consciousnesses - the turning on of each sense organ's counterpart in the mind e.g. taste consciousness is very different from sight consciousness.

(If you want to know what is taste consciousness, spit out your saliva on your hand, and slurp it back into your mouth: your taste of your own saliva will be quite prominent... then it disappears. That disappearance is the consciousness switching off.)

How do these five aggregates relate with each other?

...but what are name and form? What is their origin, their cessation, and the practice that leads to their cessation? Feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention—this is called name. The four primary elements, and form derived from the four primary elements—this is called form. Such is name and such is form. This is called name and form. Name and form originate from consciousness. Name and form cease when consciousness ceases. The practice that leads to the cessation of name and form is simply this noble eightfold path ...”

MN 9 - Right View <https://suttacentral.net/mn9/en/sujato>

... Collectively, the five aggregates are both name-and-form, and consciousness.

Form is the same in both the five aggregates and in name-and-form.

The other aspects of name are:

(sense) feeling, as in the five aggregates

perception, as in the five aggregates

intention, which is the same as the volitional formation in the five aggregates

contact, which is made up of form, consciousness connecting

and attention, which is about awareness underlying everything.

Name-and-form is separate from consciousness in the early Buddhist texts.

... and how name-and-form (aka feeling, perception, intention/sankhara, contact, attention, form) and consciousness interact with each other, is the famous simile of two sheaves of reeds:

...Just as two sheaves of reeds might stand leaning against each other, so too, with name-and-form as condition, consciousness comes to be; with consciousness as condition, name-and-form comes to be. With name-and-form as condition, the six sense bases come to be; with the six sense bases as condition, contact.... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

SN 12.67 - The Sheaves of Reeds <https://suttacentral.net/sn12.67/en/bodhi>

... they are mutual causes: each causes the other to come to be, like two sheaves of reeds leaning against each other.

So your form, sense-feeling, perception, intentions/will can cause consciousness to arise, and vice versa.

“Bhikkhus, form is nonself.... Feeling is nonself.... Perception is nonself.... Volitional formations are nonself.... Consciousness is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of consciousness: ‘Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.’ But because consciousness is nonself, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of consciousness: ‘Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus.’

SN 22.59 - The Characteristic of Non-Self <https://suttacentral.net/sn22.59/en/bodhi>

The most important thing about the five aggregates is this: none of them, nor all of them together, are truly your self.

This was explained very powerfully by the Buddha in his second sermon, the Characteristic of Non Self (Anattalakkhana sutta).

If form, feeling, perception, will or consciousnesses are truly your self, then you won't suffer, because you can fully control it by wishing! That is why...

“Any kind of feeling whatsoever ... Any kind of perception whatsoever ... Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever ... Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

SN 22.59 - The Characteristic of Non-Self <https://suttacentral.net/sn22.59/en/bodhi>

Any kind of form, feeling, perception, will/choice/decisions, consciousnesses whatsoever, should be truly seen as “not mine, not me, not my self/permanent essence.”

So the Buddha is saying life is suffering, because everything (EVERYTHING) is not in your control:
you are not in control,
the world is not in control.

Everything will change, and if you attach yourself and your projections to the world, you will suffer.

Cause & Effect

So is there no way out of suffering?

No, there IS a way: Four Noble Truths (including the Eightfold Path).

That is why Cause and Effect is critical. For if there was no cause and effect, then there is no point to doing anything at all!

...And how, householders, are there three kinds of mental conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, righteous conduct?

He has right view, undistorted vision, thus:

'There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed;

there is fruit and result of good and bad actions;

there is this world and the other world; there is mother and father;

there are beings who are reborn spontaneously;

there are good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world

who have themselves realised by direct knowledge and declare

this world and the other world.'

MN 41 - To the Brahmans of Sala <https://suttacentral.net/mn41/en/bodhi>

You can see the importance of cause-and-effect from this excerpt of the Brahmans of Sala sutta, where Right View is described partially in terms of cause and effect.

Note the underlined parts: how the first parts of Right View covers generosity! And then fruit (phala) and result of good and bad karma. Basically, karma is cause-and-effect.

We will cover the rest of cause-and-effect in the next two sutta sessions, but before I end, I will just say this: if you don't believe in karma, if you don't believe in cause-and-effect, then there is no point in being a Buddhist, and in doing good of any sort!

Because then, no matter what you do, your consequence is already pre-determined.

But thankfully, that isn't reality: you CAN shape your path forward, by shaping your motivations & intentions, and by taking the right actions of body, speech and mind. We will cover those in the next two classes.

Thank you.