
title: "The Way Out of Pain"

The Origin of Suffering

Prior to his awakening, the Buddha was looking for something that was not subject to birth, aging, and death. He realized while he was still young, that nothing that would die could possibly offer an enduring peace or freedom. As he looked around himself, everything he could see, his wealth and possessions, his friends and family, even his body and sense experiences were subject to the same process. He couldn't justify pursuing anything in the world because they were all subject to this same quality of arising and passing away. He was looking for a way out. Leaving behind everything that was subject to this quality was the only way he saw to begin this search. He had to stop pursuing the things subject to birth, aging, and death, to have any hope of finding freedom from it.

He eventually came to the realization that anything subject to birth was subject to aging, death, as well as all the sadness, grief, pain, suffering, and tension that went along with it. To come to an end of aging and death, he needed to find something that was not subject to birth. As he looked at birth, he found there was no way to get out of birth when the flow of existence was already in motion. As he searched for the cause of the flow of existence, he saw that the process of taking things on, picking them up, and identifying with them drove the flow of existence. With that understanding he sought the cause of taking things on, the reason why beings took on and identified with various things like sense experiences, views, morality and practices, or the position of self. He found that the cause of that was sensation. This was the underlying reason why people took things on. When he sought the cause of sensation, he found that contact between the percept, the sense doors, and the sense objects caused sensation and feeling. The cause of that contact was the six sense fields. The cause of the six sense fields was the development of naming, designating as well as the material elements taking on form and shape. The cause of this naming and forming was the bare percept of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind.

At this point, he looked deeper for what was allowing perception to find someplace to land and grow. When he searched through his own psyche and tried to identify the cause for this perception to land and grow, he saw that the cause for that infrastructure which allowed perception to take root was creation, attachment, merging itself. Once the merging of body, speech, and psyche had taken place, perception had somewhere to take root and begin the flow of existence. The only way out was to come out of the process of fusing to the entire world of body, speech, and will.

As he continued to look deeper, for the cause of creation, eventually he saw that the root of that merging was ignorance of the four noble truths. It was these four noble truths that offered the direction of freedom, the direction of liberation, the way to stop creating, stop fueling the flow of existence, stop seeking out that which is subject to death and grief and loss and pain and suffering and anguish.

The Four Noble Truths and Right View

When one understands deeply the pain inherent in all that is created—whether it is one's own pain, suffering, and death, or the pain, suffering, and death of one's loved ones, whether it is being stuck with those unloved or being separated from those loved, whether it is the disappointment of not attaining one's desires, or the pain inherent in the arising and passing away of the body, sensation, recognition, mergings, and percept which are taken on and identified with—when one understands all that at a deep and penetrating level, the most natural direction to go is to seek a way out, to seek out the cause.

The more deeply one understands that pain objectively, the more it becomes clear that it is our own craving driving that pain—craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. It is our own attachment, our own identification that drives that pain. The craving and identification is what drives both creation and the pain inherent in the death of those things we have attached to.

The way out becomes just as clear. It is only through abandoning that craving, abandoning that impulse to get sense experiences, to be, to exist, to become, or to not exist. In abandoning that craving, one watches the process of all kinds of perceived phenomena fading away, and as each one arises, comes into existence, and fades away, one by one, one lets them go, one at a time, whether it is a bodily experience, a sensation, a conception, an old creation, or a bare sense percept, one establishes awareness, observation, and neutrality and watches them each arise and fade away.

The wisdom that allows this to happen is the understanding that death is painful, and attachment is what fuels that death. One's intuition, will, and wisdom become ever more clear as it sees each part of this process—the arising and fading away, the pain inherent in arising and fading away, the impulse which drives the picking up of that which is impermanent, the delusion of that impulse to believe that that which is actually arising and fading away will not arise and fade away, the experience of letting go of that impulse and letting it subside, the freedom that comes on the other side of that letting go.

Once one tastes the experience of freedom, once one knows intuitively what it feels like to let go, it becomes clear that the peace and happiness of letting go and the peace and happiness of getting something have different qualities. The peace and happiness of letting go is a stable and balanced experience, whereas the peace and happiness of sense objects are an agitated, imbalanced peace. The peace and happiness of letting go is sustainable because it doesn't depend on anything. The peace and happiness of sense experiences or a sense of self is by its nature vulnerable because it only lasts as long as the object or experience which is created.

The dichotomy of the way towards ultimate freedom and the way towards endless suffering becomes ever more clear. The way towards ultimate freedom is through letting go and abandoning the entire realm of the created. The way towards endless work and disappointment involves pursuing that which is created. They have nothing in common. The only way out is abandoning everything.

But the reality which the Buddha knew is that it doesn't work to abandon everything all at once, when the preparations haven't yet been made. There are many prerequisites to make that happen. This is the fourth noble truth. Understanding all these essential preconditions is the only thing that makes liberation possible. It is in eight parts. There is no part of that path which is dispensable. Each component is essential. Without all these preconditions there is no liberation.

The first is at least an intellectual clarity of the first three noble truths. Without that clarity, the direction is always ambiguous. If one is not clear on the tenets inherent in these truths—the nature of impermanence, the pain inherent in death and passing away of those objects which have been taken on and identified with, as well as the role of identification and the belief in the self in taking on these things that are impermanent—then the rest of the path cannot and will not be liberating. It is essential that the purpose of the prerequisites are clear. The ultimate goal is to let go of everything that has been created and to stop the process of creation. Without that clarity, then whether the prerequisites are in place or not, the path will not lead to liberation.

When that understanding is solid and every step of the path is accompanied by an understanding of the first three noble truths, then all the rest of the pieces fall into place and make sense. Without that understanding, all the prerequisites may provide some mundane benefit and may eventually become useful tools, but they cannot be called the path to liberation.

Right Resolution

When one really comes to terms with the impermanence of things, when one really comes to terms with the understanding that it is our own craving for the things which are impermanent which drives the cycle of birth and aging and death, the second part of the noble eightfold path becomes very clear and obvious. The way towards freedom is through walking away, going without, renouncing sense experiences. They are quite clearly not within our control and offer only a fleeting and agitated form of relief. They cannot offer true safety or security. It is our addiction to them which drives our suffering. The only way towards freedom is leaving

them behind. But, essentially, it is just as important to not let ourselves fall to the other extreme. The extreme of malice and cruelty whether directed at ourselves or to others is not the way. It is painful and serves no purpose other than to inflict needless suffering. Malice and cruelty are just the other extreme of pursuing sense pleasures, it is trying to fight with and destroy sense experiences instead of letting them go.

Once one starts abandoning sense comforts and distractions and indulgences, the baseline level of discomfort of one's life increases and dealing with the tendency towards malice and cruelty is a very salient battle. Keeping constantly vigilant of whether one is veering towards craving or fighting with sense experiences is a central starting point for maintaining clarity on whether one is on the path or not.

The nature of pursuing sense pleasures is that we set ourselves up for the disappointment that comes when we lose that which is not within our control. The more we invest in sense experiences, the more pain and grief we are setting ourselves up for. And even more immediately, the pursuit of sense experiences is allowing the mind to go out and attach to external experiences. So, it is inherently a very agitated experience that pulls one outside oneself and leads to a tension each time one attaches to something external. The more attachments, the more tension and agitation arise. The nature of malice and cruelty is that they are painful states at the moment we generate them. They are painful to others around us, and they lead to painful consequences.

Abandoning these two pursuits is the beginning of the path, but renunciation has many more benefits than that. With walking away from the pursuit of sense pleasure, one doesn't have to spend endless time working to earn money. One doesn't have to try to manipulate others to get what one wants. One isn't led into conflict trying to protect one's possessions. And just as importantly one has a tremendous amount of time and space to pursue that which does offer a sustainable happiness and peace to ourselves and others.

The Buddha emphasized understanding and limiting ourselves to this realm of the wholesome, the good, the rewarding. He saw how terrible of an investment sense pleasures were and how tremendous of an investment actions based in goodness were and so he emphasized to monks and lay people constantly that they should be clear on what is good and what is not good, what is wholesome, and what is not wholesome, what is rewarding and what is not rewarding.

On several occasions he even exhorted monks not to disparage that which offers even mundane rewards—the conditioned states of kindness, compassion, contentment, and observation. These are tremendously balanced and pleasurable or peaceful states which can even be used as a basis for liberation if infused with the wisdom of impermanence and the noble truths.

Generosity has both the quality of generating tremendously positive karma leading to life, strength, beauty, intellect, and pleasure, as well as the transcendent quality of letting go of some aspect of the material world which has come into one's possession.

Even belief in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, can offer one basis for immeasurable rewards. When one understands that each of these three offer the hope and possibility of liberation, they offer not just inspiration, but also the spiritual power which allow for further steps on the path to be taken.

The nature of these types of actions, which all have the quality of true goodness, the direction of liberation of both, is the direction of at the very least tremendous rewards. For one who can tune in to the nature of experience the spiritual power of these types of actions is palpable, but regardless of whether one can immediately experience them or not, these offer a firm basis and support for going further on the path.

Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood

The next three pieces of the noble eightfold path are all of a piece. When one understands the nature of one's internal experience, the consequences violating right action, right speech and right livelihood are clear. Violating right action involves killing, stealing, or sexual misconduct. Violating right speech involves lying, speaking divisively, speaking coarsely, and speaking frivolous chatter. Violating right livelihood involves

earning one's living in ways that violate even those first seven forms of right action and right speech. For when one gets to a status of a renunciate, living on the offerings of the faithful the standard for right livelihood gets even higher, it involves things like fortune telling, predictions about worldly things, black magic, or performing lay services which have nothing to do with liberation.

The consequences of these types of actions are painful states that drive a painful fissure down to the core of one's internal experience. When that fissure is formed, one cannot sustain spiritual growth. It is like for one who aspires to climb a mountain to break one's own legs. The basis for spiritual progress is one's will. If one has a fissure driven through one's will, one cannot sustain any attempt at spiritual growth. When one refrains from any of these actions, it is only a matter of time before one's will becomes ever more pure and solid. The more solid the more it can sustain, the more it can sustain, the more sharp, consistent, and fruitful the progress on the path will be. It is the difference between trying to fill a leaky bucket and trying to fill a watertight bucket—the more watertight the bucket, the more fruitful the work of filling it will be.

Another way to see these three components of the path is that these are actions of body and speech which have the nature to result in painful consequences. The more clean one's actions of body and speech are, the more untarnished our internal pleasure is. The native language of one's will is the language of sensation and recognition. When one's internal experience is painful, the will is always looking for relief through sense objects. When one's internal experience is based in a wholesome pleasure, it doesn't need the happiness of sense objects. It already has a more pure, more peaceful, more sustainable, more tranquil form of happiness.

When one has no internal peace, one is desperate for any type of happiness, wholesome or unwholesome and one can't bear to look at the pain inherent in sense pleasure. But when one has an internal sense of peace and happiness, there is no problem seeing the downside of sense pleasures as one has somewhere else to go. One has an internal sense of peace and happiness. It becomes the most obvious thing in the world to give them up, because one has a better alternative. The thought of violating sila or pursuing sense pleasures seems like a needlessly self-destructive act. The inclination towards developing further on the path towards letting go or helping others develop further on that path is the only thing that makes sense.

Right Effort

Right effort is the first part of the eightfold path which involves meditation, though it can start even before that and ideally should be all the time. Right effort involves abandoning unwholesome qualities and developing wholesome qualities. It is important to understand each of these qualities and their progression.

The coarsest forms of unwholesome phenomena involve the five blocks, obstructions, blockages, barriers, coverings, defense mechanisms. These are sense desire, malice, lethargy and sleepiness, agitation and worry, and indecisiveness. Each has its own way of throwing us off balance, or disconnecting us from the nature of our internal experience. Often they arise as attempts to find pleasure or fix a problem, but they do so in ultimately self-destructive ways.

Each has their own antidote as each throws one off balance in a unique way. The antidote for sense desire is to look at the not shiny, not beautiful, not glistening nature of things, to see the nature of flesh and blood for what it is, to see the nature of the material world in its true nature—to break down, disintegrate, and fall apart. In deconstructing the shiny image we fall in love with, one's will eventually starts to accept that one has fallen in love with something that isn't that beautiful or satisfying.

The antidote for malice is kindness and well wishing. These can't coexist. One cannot wish another harm and wish it well at the same time. When one adds kindness and compassion to malice it neutralizes it and brings one back into balance.

The antidote for lethargy and sleepiness is remembering and being fully conscious as well as putting forth energy, recognizing light. The key is to do everything possible to stay present. The tendency towards lethargy and depression is to disconnect, the antidote is to strive to stay present and aware.

The antidote for agitation and worry is calm, calm, calm. There is no shortcut that I know of. It just takes time to let the agitation settle. It is like sitting with a very worried and agitated child or animal or like watching the dust settle after a strong wind. It just takes a calm presence to let the agitation die down naturally. Even a single moment can offer the direction towards peace.

The antidote for indecision is clarity on what is wholesome or unwholesome. Pursuing Sense objects is unwholesome. Breaking one's moral precepts is unwholesome. Malice and Cruelty are unwholesome. Not believing that there are results to one's actions in this world and in another world are unwholesome. Kindness is wholesome. Compassion is wholesome. Contentment is wholesome. Observation is wholesome. Giving is Wholesome. Morality is Wholesome. Renunciation and walking away from sense pleasures is wholesome. The wisdom of the four noble truths—the understanding of the impermanence of conditioned experience, the understanding that following our craving is the driver of our pain, understanding that letting go, abandoning, relinquishing, release, freedom, non-clinging is the way to freedom, understanding the prerequisites for being able to abandon craving at a moment to moment level—all these are the highest form of the wholesome.

When one develops skill in abandoning those five hindrances as well as an intuition for the sense of balance and steadiness that comes in the absence of those five hindrances, it sets the stage for the next two phases of the path to really take off.

Right Remembrance

In reality Right Remembrance began at the same time as Right Effort. The moment one takes an object of the breath, one already starts observing the body. The four establishments of remembrance are the bases, the ground on which an understanding of the nature of one's experience is built. They are tuning into the four aspects of reality which compose our experience and eventually are all meant to be experienced moment-to-moment, as they are happening.

The body is one aspect of experience. It starts with observing the breath, as well as all the physical experience which is happening at the level of the body. The experience of weight, or cohesion, or heat, or movement, what the nerves are feeling at the level of the body, all the tension that might be held in the body. However, the nature of right remembrance is that it is not only experiencing the body in the body, moment-to-moment arising and passing away, but also letting go of them—releasing the creation of the body, coming out of the craving for the sense pleasures and the suffering associated with the world.

The experiential aspect of the body is why it is a basis, but what we are remembering about the body is its nature to be constructed of four elements, to be formed of various not shiny parts, to be subject to falling apart, and deterioration and decay. It is those two aspects combined, the basis of the body, and the remembering of its nature of something that is composed, subject to disintegration and dissolution.

The second establishment of remembrance is experiencing sensations in sensations, the subtle sensations which normally overlays the body tinged with pleasure or pain or neither pleasure nor pain. It is a passionate striving to a constant, full and complete remembering of this experience, arising and passing away, and a letting go of any identification, craving, and suffering over this experience.

What is being remembered about sensations is that there are certain pleasurable, painful, or neutral sensations that arise from worldly things, and others which arise away from worldly things. The quality of the path is that initially in the process of renunciation, we abandon the world and also the sensations that arise from the world. Initially, the pain of going without worldly pleasures arises. Then, we develop the internal spiritual pleasure which comes from the wholesome. Finally from the spiritual pleasure one moves towards the more subtle neutral sensation, before letting go of even that as well.

The third establishment of remembrance is experiencing the will in the will. It is that aspect of our consciousness that precedes thought, the base level excitement, or hatred, or delusion, which gets scattered or collapses, or experiences the absence of those states. It is that aspect of our consciousness that has the

capacity to expand or contract, the ability to concentrate, and has the potential for ultimate freedom. It becomes the most apparent when the thoughts settle. When the thoughts still, one can experience more clearly that aspect of the will which moves and intends, and intuitively. It is that which experiences kindness, or compassion, or contentment, or observation. The third establishment of remembrance is the direct experience of the will, watching it move and be still, watching it arise and pass away, watching it concentrate or expand. The more clearly that aspect of the consciousness is experienced, the more clear it is where the work of abandoning craving needs to happen. If it is perceived directly, it becomes clear what craving feels like, what the passing away of craving feels like, what the freedom from craving feels like. It is the aspect of the consciousness that is most connected to the sensation and recognition, the knowledge that happens before any conscious thought arises.

Once that aspect of consciousness understands those experiences, and connects that the experience of craving leads to the experience of grief, one has moved into the fourth establishment of remembrance. The remembering of qualities in qualities. Qualities are anything that is perceived by the mind or states taken on by the will. It includes mental states, sensations and recognitions, contact with all the sense doors, qualities happening in the mind such as thought and mental movement. When the consciousness gets sharp and consistent enough it can perceive these qualities arising as they are happening. It can see the tendency to move out toward and identify with these phenomena. It can see the pain that arises from grabbing those phenomena. It can see the freedom that lies on the other side of abandoning those impulses and letting go of those phenomena. Examining qualities in qualities includes both the aspects of conditioned reality we interact with, as well as our mental states with respect to them, as well as awareness that allows us to release those qualities.

Right Convergence

Right Convergence is also intertwined with Right Effort and Right Remembrance. It is the natural progression that begins when a settled sense of balance from abandoning the five blocks left off. There is a crucial transition between that settled balance that arises from abandoning the blocks and the beginning of Right Convergence.

When one develops a little consistency with the state of being free of those blocks, the will settles. As that peace gets established, an internal sense of relaxation becomes a refuge, a respite from the emotional winds being driven by those blocks. When being plagued by the blocks there was no peace. Having left those blocks behind there is an internal relief that settles in, more and more deeply. That relief turns into a deep sense of contentment and happiness, the same warm and fuzzy feeling that can be sparked by true kindness, true goodness, reflection on the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and true inspiration at the possibility that goodness and freedom exist in the world.

This relief, this contentment, this deep and peaceful happiness will often naturally spark a wholesome, balanced joy. It is in some ways similar to the joy that arises from worldly things, but completely different in that despite being a very energetic state, is a very balanced state.

That joy triggers a sense of relaxation of the body and an almost simultaneous sense of relaxed pleasure. With all those wholesome, balanced experiences, it becomes much easier for the will to withdraw from the sense doors and concentrate.

From there the four stages of right convergence are relatively intuitive, each one shedding the grossest layer of agitation—first the thoughts and mental movements settle, then the joy settles, then the subtle sensation of pleasure settles and one is left with just the unified still experience of observation and awareness along with neither pleasant nor unpleasant sensation.

Right Knowledge

At all of these stages, recognition is still fully active. While thought has settled down after the first stage the intuitive recognition of experience is still in full effect. While there are no thoughts of “This is impermanent” there is still the recognition of the burning, painful quality of arising and passing away. There is still the

recognition of the pain that arises from grabbing hold of sense objects. There is still the recognition that the release is the way toward a sense of freedom. These recognitions are not automatic. They only come if they have been cultivated. But if they have been cultivated all the way through the process, they are able to become more and more consistent and automatic before, during, or after the will concentrates.

With a concentrated will examining the body, , recognition, attachments, the sense percepts arise and pass away becomes much sharper and more immediate. The will is much further removed from the objects it had the tendency to identify with. It has space from them. They can simply be watched arising and passing away.

Right Freedom

The last and final step is the extinguishing of that burning. Without one's will adding more fuel to the fire by grabbing hold of any of the aspects of one's experience, it is only a matter of time before the fire extinguishes. The Buddha has promised us that there is an end.

Though even before arriving at that point, the logic of it is irrefutable. One can see the way to stop grabbing hold of anything, stop creating anything, stop identifying from anything. One can see that the things which are arising and passing away are not really ourselves, they are not really ours, they are not really a sound source for hope and peace. One can see the impact of abandoning the craving for them. One can feel the calm and coolness and peace that arises from letting them go. One can understand that it is a peace that is far more sustainable than any source of peace that is dependent on a temporary phenomena. It is simply a matter of letting it extinguish, watching the impulses wear away, watching them cease, and letting the will let go until it is completely released, completely freed.

The Buddha's Legacy

This is the hope that the Buddha left us. This is the path that he worked so tirelessly to discover. This is what he sacrificed everything for. He could have attained this ultimate freedom much earlier, but he decided to stick around and probe the corners of the universe and plumb the depths of the conscious experience so that he could offer a complete path to anyone, anywhere from where they were to complete liberation. He understood every corner of human consciousness and laid out the details of how to proceed from where people were at.

He showed tremendous restraint and consistency in not veering from that which was most essential to extracting ourselves from the pain of the experience of birth and aging and death. He wouldn't veer into speculation. He knew which lines of thinking led out, and which lines of thinking led to an endless cycle of the tangled mess of birth and aging and death. He constantly encouraged us to see the world through the lens of principles as opposed to the lens of the self. He saw that the deepest roots of our delusion was the investment in the concept of the self, once we could see that everything that we tend to identify with was impermanent and painful, we could begin to let go. Through letting go, the deepest layer of our awareness can be free.

Initially, he thought that there was no way that people could understand it. It was too subtle. People who delight in clinging will never understand it. But the god Sahampati encouraged him that there were people who could understand. It is miraculous he discovered the path, and just as miraculous that he had the ability to teach others to realize it. That it still exists is his tremendous legacy. Even 2500 years later the ripples are still reverberating. The inheritance we have received is immeasurable. It points in a direction that many have never conceived before. It offers a hope that transcends all other hope. It is the hope of ultimate freedom, an ultimate peace.