

The Brightness of Life

January 29, 2019

Those first four reflections that we chanted just now—we're subject to aging, illness, death, these things are unavoidable, we haven't gone beyond these things; we're subject to separation from all the things that we love: These reflections seem to confirm the statement that you often hear about the four noble truths, especially the first noble truth "The truth of suffering is that life is suffering." But the Buddha never said that, and those reflections don't stop at the first four. They include the fifth, which is that we're the owners of our actions.

In the same way, there's more to life than just suffering. If life were suffering, how would you put an end to suffering? You'd have to put an end to your life. That wouldn't be a very useful teaching. And there's no place where the Buddha ever said that. When he talks about his own memories of his past lives, they included not only memories of the pains of those lives but also memories of the pleasures. Life has its pleasures as well as its pains.

Even the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness: The Buddha says that they do have their pleasant side. They're not all suffering. So his understanding of life, his understanding of the world, had a lot more nuance—and was a lot more useful.

He didn't say life is suffering. When he made his shortest explanation of suffering, he says it's clinging to the five aggregates. The five aggregates themselves are not suffering. They may have pain in the fact that they're inconstant and stressful and not-self, but that pain doesn't have to weigh down the mind. It weighs the mind down only because we cling to these things. The clinging is the real suffering.

And when the Buddha gives us that analysis, it's helpful, because he not only identifies suffering as clinging but he also how to put an end to it: You try to comprehend it. That means to understand: Why is it that you cling to things that are stressful? Why are you doing this? Suffering is something you do. It's not something where you're simply on the receiving end. It's an activity you're engaged in.

The word for clinging, *upadana*, can also mean to feed. We feed off of these aggregates. And keep in mind that the aggregates are not things, they're activities. We find delight in doing these activities. After all, how do we define ourselves? We define ourselves usually around what we feed off of, both physically and emotionally. And we need these aggregates to engage in the feeding.

There's form: the form of the body that needs to be fed and also the form of things outside that can feed the body. There's the feeling of pain that comes with hunger, and the feeling of pleasure that comes when we've been able to satisfy the hunger. There's our perception of what kind of hunger we have and also what kind of objects out there we can feed on that would satisfy that hunger. And there's fabrication: our plans for how to find the food we want and then, once we've found it, what we can do with it so that we can eat it. And then there's consciousness, which is aware of all these things. These activities are very intimately bound up in our act of feeding, both physically and emotionally. So it's in the way we cling to the way we feed that we suffer.

Now, the Buddha's not saying, "Well, just stop feeding." He says to learn how to feed in a more skillful way, to train the mind to feed off of the path—as we're doing right now, trying to feed off of our practice of concentration. This will ultimately lead to a place where you don't need to feed anymore, not because you've told yourself to stop feeding, but simply because you've found something that doesn't require feeding. That there covers all four noble truths. Life isn't just the suffering in the first noble truth. There are four noble truths about life. We always have to keep this in mind.

The Buddha was not a pessimist. After all, here he is, teaching a path to the end of suffering. He teaches us how to comprehend our suffering, how to understand its cause, how to let go of its cause so that we can solve the problem and be done with suffering. There's nothing pessimistic there at all. When he talks about suffering, he's like a doctor who asks you about your illness when you come into his office: "Where does it hurt? What are the symptoms?" The doctor wants to know the symptoms so that he can find a cure. He's not being negative, saying everybody's got to be sick. But the fact that you're going to see the doctor means you realize that you've got an illness and he's there to help you. He's not afraid of talking about the symptoms because he's got a cure. In the same way, the Buddha's not afraid of talking about all the many aspects of suffering in life, and seeing suffering in areas where we often try to deny it. The reason he's not afraid is because he's got a cure. And the fact of the cure is something very positive.

Early on in my time with Ajaan Fuang, he mentioned that he was in debt to Ajaan Lee because Ajaan Lee had shown him the brightness of the world or the brightness of life. One of the obvious meanings of that brightness, of course, is the fact that there is an end to suffering. But in fact, all four noble truths are bright, a bright part of life.

Because after all, when we suffer, what happens? We're confused, we're bewildered, and we're looking for a way out. And here the Buddha's offering us

that way out, offering us an end to our confusion, an end to our bewilderment. He doesn't say anything general and unhelpful like, "Life is suffering." He says, "Suffering is the clinging." It's something you're doing, and you're doing it because of your craving and ignorance. And craving is something that can be brought to an end, so that means there can be an end to suffering. The explanation of suffering—the explanation of craving, the cause of suffering: that, too, is part of the brightness of the world. It ends our confusion. It ends the darkness we have around these things.

The same with the path: It *is* possible through our efforts to put an end to suffering. That's a very bright teaching. It gives us hope that we're not doomed to keep on suffering or to resigning ourselves to say, "Well, whatever the pleasure there is in life, there's going to be some suffering, so I might as well learn how to accept it, because, after all, what's the alternative?" That's a very pessimistic teaching. The Buddha's saying there *is* an alternative that's not death or annihilation. There is an alternative that is the total end of suffering, and it's within our abilities. The fact that there is this teaching in the world: That's part of the brightness of the world.

So make yourself confident. As the Buddha said, other people have done this, you can do it, too. That type of thinking, he says, counts as a kind of conceit, but it's a useful conceit on the path.

Conceit is one of the causes of suffering. In fact, we practice for the end of conceit. But what is conceit? It's the fact that you're comparing yourself with other people. Altogether there are nine kinds of conceit: You're equal to someone else and you say either that you're equal, that you're worse, or that you're better; or you may be worse than someone else, and you say that you're equal or worse or better; or you're better than they are, and you say that you're equal or worse or better. In other words, the problem with conceit is not whether it's an accurate comparison, it's the fact that you're comparing.

Actually, the problem of suffering is something that you can't really compare. How do you know how much someone else is suffering? You begin to realize when you really tackle the problem of suffering and take the Buddha's teachings on the four noble truths seriously, that we're not here to compete with others. We feel our own suffering. We can't feel anyone else's.

So comparing yourself is a useless exercise, except for that one comparison: "Other people can do this, they're human beings. I'm a human being, why can't I do it?" That kind of conceit is something you actually want to actively cultivate. And that, too, is part of the brightness of the world. We live in a world not only

where other people have done this, but they've shown that it's something that anybody can do. That means we can do it, too.

So look at the parts of your mind that get in the way, and realize that they are the darkness of the world. They're either the cause of suffering or the suffering itself. Learn how to see them that way, as something to be abandoned and something to be comprehended.

So here we are. We have a path that sets out very clearly what the problem is, what the cause of the problem is, and what we can do to put an end to it. That ends our confusion. And not only does the Buddha analyze the problem, but he also points out the duties with regard to each of these truths. The truths carry responsibilities; they carry paths of action in them. You might say that they're performative truths. They don't simply sit there. They're meant to have an impact on your mind, an impact on your actions. And they give you clear guidance. Remember the Buddha's statement about how any teacher's duty with regard to a student is to give the student a clear idea of how to figure out what is skillful and what is not skillful, and give the student a teaching that allows the idea of what should be done and what should not be done to make sense.

After all, if you believed that suffering was inevitable, that there was nothing you could do about it, then saying, "What should I do?": Even the question wouldn't make sense. Or if you believed that you're suffering because of some past action that you cannot change—that wouldn't give you any guidance as to what to do. It would mean that all you had to do was just accept, but even that doesn't make sense: Would you have the freedom to choose to accept things or not? And at any rate, that was not what the Buddha said anyhow. The reason we're suffering, he said, is not only because of past actions but more importantly it's because of present actions, and the present actions make all the difference. So in that case it does make sense to ask, "What should I do?" and then from there to look for the Buddha's guidance.

So the fact that we have these teachings means that there is brightness in the world. Life isn't just suffering. Life has suffering in it, but the problem isn't life, the problem is the activities of the mind. Knowing that fact gives you focus. This is why we focus on the breath as we meditate, because the breath is very close to the mind. As you get to know your breath better, you get to know your mind better, in a way that allows you to see: This is where you're adding that unnecessary suffering and this is how you can stop.

So all of these teachings are part of the brightness of the world: not only the fact that there is an end to suffering, but that we can understand it for ourselves,

act on that understanding, and find the brightness that the Buddha and all the noble disciples have found.

That's the brightest teaching there is.