

# The Third Noble Truth

February 22, 2015

Of the four noble truths, the third—the cessation of suffering and stress—is the one we talk about the least, the reason being that it's the result of the practice. Focus on the causes, and the results will take care of themselves.

So most of our emphasis is on the path. But it's good to reflect on where the path is going, because it turns out that the third noble truth is not just nibbana. In fact, as Ajaan Mun used to point out very clearly, the third noble truth is one thing, nibbana is something else. The third noble truth has a duty associated with it, whereas nibbana carries no duties. The duty with regard to the third noble truth is to realize it clearly. Once it's fully realized, nibbana is attained and there's nothing more to do.

When you compare this third truth to the others, it's basically the act of carrying out the duty with regard to the second noble truth. The duty with regard to the second noble truth is to abandon it. You want to abandon sensual craving, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. And the third noble truth is just that: the act of really abandoning these forms of craving, once and for all, with the added duty of realizing the act of abandoning while you're doing it, and appreciating that it does lead to the ending of stress.

The wording of the truth mentions six different aspects of abandoning. It gives a list of six words, and at first glance they look very similar to one another—a list of synonyms from which you can pick and choose. The Buddha does have this tendency sometimes. He'll string out some adjectives or verbs that are all pretty close in meaning, to make sure if you don't get the first verb, you'll get the second or the third.

But in the case of these six aspects of abandoning, three of them are mentioned as separate steps in breath meditation, the very last three steps: training yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to dispassion, to breathe in and out sensitive to cessation, or to breathe in and out sensitive to relinquishing. Because they're separate steps, there's a practical difference among the three. This implies that there are subtle differences among the different aspects of abandoning, so you can take the list as a guide to understanding and practicing in a nuanced way.

The six steps of abandoning are: viraga, nirodho, cago, patinissaggo, mutti, analayo.

Start with viraga, dispassion. The texts talk about two different ways to develop dispassion for craving. In some cases, you simply look at the craving, and your passion for it goes away. In others, you have to exert an effort for the passion to go.

But notice: The Buddha says that we're passionate for our craving. We may crave things, but we like our craving even more than we like things. We crave sensual pleasures, but we really feed off of the sensual craving. If we want to abandon it, we first have to learn how to not feed off it.

In a lot of the texts, viraga, or dispassion comes right after disenchantment: the sense that you're sick and tired of feeding off the issues the mind produces. To develop disenchantment, you try to practice in a way that helps you see that the things you've been feeding on really don't satisfy you that much. Their allure or attractions aren't worth the effort that goes into finding and preparing them. One of the ways the Buddha has you develop disenchantment is by focusing on the inconstancy of what you've been feeding on. But it's not enough just to say, "So, yeah, it arises and passes away and arises and passes away, or it arises because of causes and, well, what's next?" Instead of making a generalization, the Buddha wants you to actually look at things as they're coming and going, to see what actually causes you to go for them when they arise, and what you do that lets them go away.

This is why the emphasis on the third noble truth, or the duty with regard to the third noble truth, is to realize the abandoning of craving while it's happening. Ordinarily, we let go of our cravings throughout the day, but it's usually because we're interested in something else. We lose interest in one thing because we're suddenly fascinated by something else. So we let go of one craving to fasten onto another craving. We don't look carefully at the

process. We just jump to the new craving, and we're off. But what's involved in letting go of the first craving?

Basically, what it comes down to is this: You find something more worth your interest, more worthwhile, more worth your effort—i.e., it looks like it's worth the effort that goes into it. Then suddenly you see the old craving is not quite that interesting, not quite that rewarding, so you let it go.

What are the actual stages in realizing this while it's happening? First, you see it come and you see it go. You want to do this really consciously. When you see coming and going, you want to see what's coming and going along with it. When you can see that when the craving comes there's going to be stress and suffering, you want to see that connection directly. Then, when the craving goes, the stress and suffering go, too. You want to see that connection directly as well.

Then you think about the rewards and the drawbacks, and compare the two. Are the rewards worth the effort?

Now, some things that come and go are factors of the path. You want to develop the path, so you stick with those factors for the time being in spite of the effort they require. But a lot of other things that we crave and that come and go are not worth the effort. Our biases tend to get in the way of our seeing this, though, so you have to do your best to see through those biases. Like the billboards on the way to Vegas: The casinos boast that their slot machines give a 97% payback rate—which means that they're upfront about the fact that if you give them a dollar, they'll give you 97 cents in return. And yet people still play the slot machines. Their biases get in the way.

And this doesn't apply just to gamblers. We make deals like this all the time in everyday life. In cases like that, you have to be honest with yourself to see that the amount of effort going into the craving and the amount of pleasure coming in return don't really match up. The rewards are really meager compared to all the suffering they entail, both immediately and in the long term. That's when you'll want to start looking for the escape, which is dispassion.

So dispassion is something that you try to develop by weighing things. See what's worth your effort and what's not, what's really rewarding and what's really painful, entailing drawbacks and disadvantages. Or very simply, see where the price is not worth the object you get or the pleasure you get out of the object. All of our sensual pleasures carry a price. We tend to turn a blind eye to the price, which is why the Buddha wants us to rub our noses in it, for us to look at it very carefully. What is the price of your lust? What's the price of your greed? What's the price of your irritation over things that you don't get or that, when you do get them, are not satisfying?

Weigh things carefully: That's how you develop disenchantment.

From disenchantment comes viraga or dispassion. You begin to see that craving is something you're manufacturing all the time. As long as there's passion for it, you keep producing it. It's like a factory running on passion. When the passion is gone, it doesn't run anymore. It shuts down. We tend to think of the object of craving as something already there that we feed on, but actually we have to fashion it first in order to feed off it. When there's no passion for it, it stops because we've stopped putting effort into fashioning it.

That's why the contemplation of dispassion, in the steps of breath meditation, is followed by contemplation of cessation: When you don't have passion for these things, you stop producing them, and they simply stop. Now, there may be a little bit of momentum that keeps running on, powered by some of your past passion, but your present passion is not giving any more power to them. They run out, run out, run out. That's nirodho, cessation.

The next two steps are cago and patinissaggo: giving back, relinquishing. You realize that you've been holding onto things that weren't really yours to begin with. And so you give them back. Ultimately, this includes giving back the path as well.

Ajaan Lee has a nice image for this. He says you spit things out. You put something in your mouth and are ready to swallow it, but before you swallow it you say, “I don’t want this,” and you spit it out.

This is followed by *mutti*: You release it. This is one of the most interesting aspects of abandoning. You give freedom to the craving. You’ve been hanging onto it, you’ve been trying to milk it for what you want. It’s like an animal you’ve caught and kept in captivity so that you can milk it, and you suddenly realize, “I don’t need this milk anymore,” so you let it go. You give it its freedom. And when you give it its freedom, that’s when you’re free, too. You’re no longer burdened with looking after it.

A common image in the Canon is of a fire. A fire is trapped by its fuel, but why is it trapped by its fuel? Because it’s holding on. It’s clinging to the fuel. The fuel isn’t trapping the fire. The fire is the one that’s feeding, feeding, feeding off the fuel—and as a result of its feeding, it’s trapped. So when you see that you’re feeding and you don’t want to feed anymore—you don’t need to feed anymore—you let go. And both sides get their freedom.

The Thai *ajaa*ns talk about this quite a lot: The things you’ve been holding onto, things you’ve turned into defilement, are suddenly released and they’re suddenly no longer touched by defilement in any way at all.

Ajaan Maha Boowa’s analogy is of stolen goods. When the police catch a thief with stolen goods, the goods have to be kept by the court to become evidence in the trial. But once the case has been settled, and the authorities have figured out who the goods really belong to, they’re free. They can go back to where they belong.

We’re the ones that have deludedly gotten into these things and held onto them. They’re not holding onto us. Ajaan Lee’s image is of a plate of rice: If you don’t eat the rice, the plate of rice doesn’t cry. You’re the one who cries from hunger.

Think about your own body. Most of us assume subconsciously that we have a pact with our body. We take care of it, it seems happy, and it’ll take care of us. But the body knows nothing of this and wants nothing out of us. It would be perfectly content to die, to do whatever its material elements want to do—which they do by their nature whether they want to or not. But we’re the ones who have entered in and placed all sorts of conditions on things, saying that they have to be this way and that. We can make the body do those things to some extent, but after a while it’s going to go only so far. Then we feel betrayed. And, yes, we have been betrayed, but not by our bodies. We’ve been betrayed by our own craving. So when you let that go, when you stop producing it, both sides get free.

And finally, *anayo*, which in the Thai sense of the term means that you don’t have nostalgia. You’ve let your craving go and you don’t miss it.

This nostalgia is the big problem. Usually when we let go of a craving, part of us still misses it and is ready to pick it up the next time around. In the normal equation, you’ve let go of that craving because you’ve found something better. Well, maybe that “something better” doesn’t work out, so you go back to the old one. You still feel nostalgia. You’re ready to pick up the relationship again.

If you find that you’ve let go of something because you thought you should, yet there’s still some nostalgia for it, that’s something you have to look into, because that nostalgia is the seed for the next bout of craving again. Only when you’re totally free of the nostalgia for these things, when you’ve had enough, you never want to go back there, and you’ve let go to the point where there’s a freedom that allows you not to go back: Only then are the *dispassion* and the rest of these things gone without remainder—*asesa*, as they say in the Pali. Up until then, there’s always going to be something *sesa*, something left over: that little bit of nostalgia. So that’s what you’ve got to watch out for.

Many times you can let go, let go, but as one of Ajaan Lee’s lay students once said, you let go, but your hand is still on top of it, ready to grab it again. So if you see that you’ve got that tendency—that you’ve let go, you’ve spit out the craving, but something in the mind still wants to go back to feed again on what you’ve spit out—you’ve really got to look into that to figure out why. What is it that you still haven’t fully understood about the drawbacks of that kind of craving?

These are some of the lessons that come from looking at that string of words, viraga nirodho cago patinissaggo mutti analayo. They give us a sense of what it means to really abandon things. Of the six, the aspect the Buddha keeps focusing on most, though, is the freeing. Once you free the craving, then you get freed as well. Freedom comes from letting go, giving back, without holding anything back.

So learn to appreciate that kind of freedom: Even in the little glimpses you get when you let go of a little craving, even if it's not total yet, begin to see, "Oh, there's a little bit of freedom there." Try to widen that freedom by being really hard on whatever nostalgia you might feel for the old craving, because that's how you get rid of those last traces.

Only then are you totally free.