

The First Noble Truth

November 5, 2015

The passage we chanted now starts with a very strange phrase: “those who don’t discern suffering.” You would think that everybody would discern suffering. But in this passage the Buddha’s talking about understanding suffering on a deeper level.

When he explains the truth of suffering—he uses the word *dukkha*, which can cover everything from really heavy suffering down to very subtle burdens on the heart—he first lists different kinds of suffering: aging, illness, death, being separated from what we like, having to live with what we don’t like, not getting what we want. Those are all forms of suffering we’re familiar with. But in Ajaan Lee’s words, they’re just the shadows of suffering. They’re not the real thing. The real thing is the clinging. That’s the heart of the suffering.

We latch onto things like form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness as being us or ours. Or we latch onto the idea that they have to be this way or that way. And not only do we latch on. We feed on these things. That’s actually one of the meanings of the word for clinging, *upadana*: feeding. We try to get our nourishment from them, which is why we find it so hard to let go. We’re afraid that we couldn’t survive without clinging to something. We’re afraid we’ll starve—that’s why we keep coming back to suffering.

There are lots of different types of clinging. For instance, we like to cling to our sensual fantasies, which include everything from lust down to the idea of a good piece of chocolate cake tomorrow. We hold onto those sorts of things and go over and over them in our minds. And there’s suffering there, if only on the level of a nagging stress. We might not recognize that there’s suffering or even stress in what we’re doing. We actually like what we’re doing. But this is one of the strange things about suffering: A lot of the things we like to do bring suffering in their wake—and entail stress while we’re doing them. Then we wonder why we feel so worn down at the end of the day; worn down as life goes along. It’s because we keep running toward and gathering up the things that create suffering, and then we try to run away from the suffering that results. We’re blind to what we’re doing.

That’s what the Buddha means when he says that you don’t discern suffering. He’s advising you to focus on this issue: to figure out what it is that weighs the mind down, what puts a squeeze on the mind, and why. In fact, by centering his four noble truths on the issue of suffering, he’s saying that this is the most important issue you’ve got to understand and resolve. And the first step lies in actually seeing what suffering is.

When you really see suffering, when you understand it for what it is, then the energy to practice has to come. You won’t want to stay wallowing around in suffering or being trapped in suffering. You’ll want to find a way out. The question came up today about how to put more energy into the practice. A lot of it’s right here: reflecting on how much suffering you’ve been through and how much more there’s going to be if you don’t do something about it—and really letting that realization go to your heart.

Most people push it away. Years back, I was on a plane coming back from Texas with Ajaan Suwat. The man sitting next to us noticed that we were Buddhist monks and he had probably heard something about how Buddhists say that life is suffering. So he turned to us and even before saying, “Hi,” he said, “My life doesn’t have any suffering.” Then he went on to describe his life. From my point of view, it was full of suffering. He had a son in prison; he had daughter who had gotten involved with a junkie, given birth to a cocaine baby that she couldn’t raise, so the grandparents had to raise it. And on top of that the man lived in Blythe—which, if you know California geography, is about as bleak a place as can be, out in the hottest part of the desert. But he kept insisting that he wasn’t suffering. Still, the more he insisted, the more you began to realize that he was suffering quite a lot. The only way he could live with it was to deny it, to push it away.

Well, you can push it away only for so long. Your mental arms and hands get tired after a while, and then it comes rushing in. The best course is to put the mind in shape so that it can actually look at the suffering or, in the Buddha’s terms, comprehend suffering and

stress. Only when you comprehend it can you do something about it. Otherwise, you deal with it blindly, and that simply creates more of what you're trying to run away from.

Part of comprehending suffering and stress means seeing how much of it there really is in life; another part is seeing precisely what it is. The Buddha didn't say that life is suffering. He said something much more useful and much more precise. He said that suffering is the four forms of clinging: the four ways the mind feeds on things. The clinging comes from craving—literally, thirst, or *tanha*—and the craving comes from ignorance. To counteract the ignorance, we have to bring more awareness to what we're doing, how we're feeding on things, so that we can see where in the feeding we're creating unnecessary suffering for ourselves. After all, as the Buddha points out, this is the suffering that weighs the mind down. Everyday events don't have to weigh the mind down. It's when we grab onto them with our clinging: That's what turns them into the suffering that burdens us, that leaves us feeling ragged at the end of the day.

To look at suffering with the aim of comprehending it, you can't just plow right into it; you've got to have a good foundation to stand on—a sense of well-being in the mind, a part of the mind that can step back and not get swamped by the suffering. Now, stepping back doesn't mean running away from the suffering. It simply means having a separate place to stand and watch, slightly off to the side. Otherwise, you'll feel surrounded and threatened by the suffering and won't be able to look at it objectively. You won't be able to comprehend it because you'll be too busy trying to fix it or to push it away.

This is why we work on concentration to give rise to a solid basis of inner ease. From that basis we can look and see: "What am I doing that's causing stress? What am I doing that's causing suffering? Do I have to do it?" It's when you see it and realize that you don't have to do it: That's when you can let it go. In other words, you can simply stop engaging in those activities.

So you look at your life. See what part of life is weighing you down and ask yourself, "What am I doing to contribute to that weight? What am I trying to hold? What am I trying to cling to? How am I clinging?"

Of the four kinds of clinging, sensuality comes first. By "sensuality," the Buddha means the fascination we have for our planned sensual pleasures. We cling not so much to sensual objects or sensual pleasures as to our fascination with the way we can plan them and build narratives around them. We like to fantasize, "What would this pleasure be like? What would that pleasure be like? How about tweaking it this way? How about that?" The mind gets really fascinated with its stories. But in the Buddha's image, it's like a dog chewing on bones. You don't get any meat. You don't get anything at all, just the taste of your own saliva. The result is that the mind gets bent in a certain direction and starts looking for the pleasures it fantasizes about. It'll start doing all kinds of things, often very unskillful, to get those pleasures, and it ends up suffering.

That's one kind of clinging. Another kind is clinging to views about certain issues and identifying yourself around those views, or taking the view as an end in itself. You think, "I've arrived because I understand things in this way. I'm right. Everybody else who doesn't agree with me is wrong." Now, there is such a thing as right view, but you don't hold onto it to make yourself right and other people wrong. You hold onto it because it's helpful in putting an end to suffering. It's true, it's right for that purpose, but if you grab onto it in the wrong way, for purposes other than following the path, then it immediately becomes a burden. The view may be right, but you're wrong. So you have to learn how to use right view about issues around suffering as a tool for the right purpose.

The same with the third type of clinging, clinging to habits and practices, which means doing certain things because you feel that by doing them, by obeying certain rules, you make yourself better than other people. Or the idea that somehow all you have to do is obey those rules and you'll come out clean, and nobody can criticize you. Well, a lot of people hold to the rules, but then develop pride around that fact. The unskillful attitudes they have toward other people who don't hold to those rules aren't clean at all. There's a lot of suffering there.

Notice that this doesn't mean we don't hold to the precepts. We do, but again, it's not to make ourselves better than other people. It's because we realize that if we don't hold to the precepts, we're going to create suffering for ourselves and for others.

Finally, there's clinging around ideas of who you are: that you have this kind of self or that kind of self; a separate self; an infinite, connected self—or maybe you don't have any self at all. There's a lot of clinging in each of these cases. Clinging to the idea of no self, in fact, can be especially strong. It's happened that when I explain to people that the Buddha never said that there was a self or there wasn't a self, someone gets upset and accuses me of depriving him of the solace he found in thinking he had no self. By having no self, he didn't have to be responsible for anything. So whether the idea is "I have a self" or "I have no self," the clinging and suffering can go very deep.

You'll notice with the clinging to views and clinging to habits and practices that a lot of the problem lies in this sense of I, I, I that develops around them; especially the "I'm better than somebody else because of my views or my practices."

As the Buddha says, instead of focusing on who you are, focus on what you're doing. It's not that you have to erase your sense of self. It's simply that you realize that you have to put the question of your singular "self" aside for the time being and realize that there are lots of selves in the mind. There's the self that's a parent, the self that's a child, the self that's someone at work, the self of someone at home, the self of someone out trying to have a good time. We have lots of different selves. What you've got to do is to notice that each of those selves is the result of certain activities. The Buddha calls these activities "I-making" and "my-making." Some of the activities are skillful; some are not. So you sort through your collection of selves by focusing on the activities that create them, and the activities they give rise to in turn. Foster the selves that will be helpful on the path and learn to look askance at the selves in the stable that create trouble.

This is where you have to develop an identity as a meditator. This is very helpful, the identity of a meditator. "I'm a meditator," is a good provisional self to have. For instance, you can start getting lazy in the mornings after you wake up. Well, is this what a meditator does? No, meditators get up early in the morning. They meditate; they make time for the practice.

That kind of self is useful. It gets you up to meditate, because you need a certain amount of self in order to be a self-starter. We can't all stay at the monastery all the time. Even at the monastery, you've got to be a self-starter; even more so when you're out there in the land of wrong view. You've got to see: You do experience suffering and if you don't do anything about it now, when are you going to do something about it? As life goes on, it gets harder and harder to deal with these things. The issues of suffering don't go away. It's not that you have to work on this until age 65 and then you can retire. The problems get heavier and heavier as you get older. And for most people, their minds get weaker and weaker if they haven't had any training.

So you've got to discern suffering and foster a sense that "I don't want to suffer any more." That I is a useful one. Nourish that sense of self. Keep it going. In Ajaan Mun's terms, it's the I who doesn't want to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again.

In other words, you've been driven around by greed, aversion, and delusion for who knows how long, and there's a part of you that says, "Enough!" Nourish that part. Keep it strong. Make it a larger voice in your decisions as to when to meditate, when to read the Dhamma, when to turn off the TV, when to turn off the Internet—in other words, when to do the things that you know are actually good for you. Try to develop that sense of self as much as you can. There will come a point further down the path where you let it go, again, because you see that self as an activity that has served its purpose.

As the path picks up more and more momentum, you can focus more and more exactly on, "What action right now is creating suffering?" Because as the Buddha said, eventually you get to the point where you see that whatever's arising and passing away, it's just suffering arising and suffering passing away. You don't think in terms of who you are or who's feeling the suffering. It's just a matter of, "These are the activities that constitute

suffering. These are the ones that cause the suffering and these are the activities that are suffering.”

The question of who’s suffering doesn’t enter into it. The “who,” the “self,” whatever: just put it off to the side. When you see that the activities causing suffering are unnecessary, you drop them. And it so happens that you drop a lot of your sense of self in the process, because that particular self was part of those activities. But you don’t have to attack your sense of self directly. Just notice that there’s an I-activity in here that’s causing trouble, so maybe you should drop the action that’s creating it. See it as an activity rather than as a thing—and, eventually, that it’s an activity you don’t have to engage in. It’s an identity you don’t have to assume anymore: the “I” that feels wronged, the “I” that feels self-righteous, the “I” that feels—whatever. The “I’s” that lead you to do all kinds of unskillful things: Learn how to step away from them. And when the path has done its work, you can step away from the “I” doing the path as well.

It’s in this way that you can gain a handle on this problem of suffering so that you really discern it, comprehend it, understand it, and understand a way to put an end to it. That’s when you’ve really benefited from right views and right practices. That’s when you can put them all aside.

So keep this point in mind. The reason we’re not practicing as much as we should is because we don’t really discern suffering. If you really discerned how much it was driving you, placing all kinds of unnecessary burdens on the heart, you’d want to do whatever you could to put an end to it, or at least to get your head above water so you can see clearly where you are and where you can go.

That’s when you can be, in the Buddha’s terms, “consummate in release of awareness and release of discernment.” Freedom, that’s what he’s talking about. It’s a freedom that doesn’t need to feed, so you’ll never have to worry about starving. That’s how total that freedom is. As the Buddha and all the awakened masters have said, it’s a real possibility—i.e., it’s possible for you. Look at your mind every day to see how many times you say Yes to that possibility; how many times you say No. When you find yourself saying No, ask yourself, “Have you had enough suffering?” There will be times when you say, “Yeah.” Okay, you can build on that.