

The Noble Truths Come First

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We meditate because there's stress in our lives. The word "stress" here translates the Pali term, *dukkha*, which can mean anything from very subtle levels of stress all the way to very deep suffering. So whether we feel a lot of suffering in our lives or just a little bit, however you translate the term, that's the problem that makes us want to come and meditate, to straighten out things inside. As the Buddha said, the reason we suffer is not because of uncomfortable or unpleasant things outside: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. It's because of what we bring to these things from the inside: That's why we can suffer even from pleasant things. We suffer, we feel stress, because we cling.

The word clinging, *upadana*, can also mean feeding. We feed on things. And here the word "feeding," of course, means not just physical feeding, but also mental and emotional feeding. To be in a position where you have to feed is a very unstable position. You always have to worry about your source of food.

The mind has this sense of lack. Because of the lack, it wants to fill it up. You fill it up a little bit and then it grows empty again. Our intestinal system, for instance, is not a sac. It's a tube. Whatever comes in, goes out. And the same with the mind's intestinal system: Things come in and they give us a little bit of pleasure and then the pleasure's gone. We want something new, something new, something new all the time.

So it's a bad position to be in, having to feed. Because we identify ourselves as a being of one kind or another, that being has to feed. And then the feeding, of course, creates our sense of who we are: the way we feed, what we feed on. It's a vicious cycle.

And so we meditate to get out of this. We're going to work directly on our minds, because the problem is in the mind. It's not out there. So focus on what your mind is doing. See if you can bring the mind to a state of stillness, so that you can have a sense of satisfaction being here. One of the reasons we feel so hungry for everything and so overwhelmed by all the choices out there is that we have this limitless sense of dissatisfaction inside. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't satisfy our desires for sensuality. And that's just one kind of desire. There are lots of other desires we have, lots of other hungers we have. So try to get a sense of satisfaction being right here.

All of what we're doing here falls under the four noble truths. We see that there's suffering and that its cause is in the mind. And the solution has to lie in the mind as well.

It's always important to remember that the four noble truths form the framework for right view, in other words, the right understanding about what we're doing. This is a point that a lot of people miss.

For most people, the three characteristics are right view. That's the framework, and then the four noble truths get interpreted inside that framework. In other words, they say that we suffer because we don't realize that things are inconstant or impermanent, or because we don't realize that there's no self, which is one of the interpretations of *anatta*. If we'd only learn the truth of these things, then we wouldn't suffer anymore. We wouldn't have any unrealistic expectations and we'd be content to just accept the way things are. That's what they say, but the mind doesn't work that way.

The mind is hungry. If you could just let go of your clinging and craving simply by seeing that things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, it would be like saying that because food is inconstant, stressful and not-self, and your stomach is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you're going to content yourself with not eating anymore. If you actually tried that, you'd starve. Or before you starved to death, you'd probably say, "Enough of that," and go back to eating again. That's the way the mind works. No matter how much you tell yourself that these things out there are not satisfactory, you say, "Well, that's all I've got." And sometimes that's what Buddhist wisdom is interpreted as: just being willing to accept that "Well, this is all we've got, so let's satisfy ourselves with what we've got."

But the Buddha realized that the hungers of the mind, and the damage they cause, run a lot deeper than that. And so instead of placing the three characteristics first, he put the four noble truths first, and then the three characteristics—which are actually not really characteristics; he called them perceptions—find their role within the framework of the four noble truths.

In other words, you see that you've got to comprehend suffering. You've got to abandon its cause. You've got to realize the cessation of suffering. And then you've got to develop the path to its cessation. These are duties we have to do—duties not in the sense of being imposed on us from outside, but duties that are simply built into the way things are; the way suffering works and the way its end is going to work. If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do. If you don't want to put an end to suffering, you're free to go anywhere and do anything you like. But if suffering is eating away at you and you do really want to solve this problem, there's no other way but to follow these duties.

The first three duties revolve around dispassion. In other words, to comprehend suffering is to see exactly what is the clinging that constitutes the suffering. And why is it that you like that clinging? Well, again, we're feeding. We feel that we get our satisfaction out of feeding, but the Buddha wants you to see that there's suffering inherent in the feeding, and to really comprehend that suffering to the point where you feel dispassion for the whole process.

Then you look for *why* you're clinging. It's because you're thirsty. You crave. That's what you've got to abandon, which again you do by developing dispassion for the craving. That's what brings about the cessation of suffering. How are you going to do that? Through developing the path. The path does this by giving you an alternative source of food: the pleasure, the rapture, the sense of fullness, the refreshment, that can come from getting the

mind into concentration. You want to be able to tap into this because this is going to be your food on the path. And this is the one duty that doesn't have to do immediately with dispassion.

In fact, you've first got to have some passion for your concentration. You want dispassion for the craving. You want dispassion for the objects that you cling to. That dispassion is the third noble truth. But to see these things so that you can develop dispassion in those ways means you've first got to have passion for the path. This is one case where you're not going to just say, "My concentration is inconstant, stressful, not-self. I'll let it go." You're actually fighting against those three perceptions.

You want to make the mind as constant and as easeful and as much in your control as you can. And, at this stage of the path, you apply those three perceptions to other things: anything that would pull you away from the practice of virtue, the practice of concentration, or the practice of discernment. You see those distractions as inconstant, stressful, not-self. These perceptions are there to develop a sense of dispassion for them.

It's only when the path has really completed its work—in other words, it's fully developed—that you then let that go, too. Then you apply the perceptions to the concentration itself. When you can let go of the concentration, you go beyond it to what the Buddha calls the property of the deathlessness. And if you have passion for that, you don't get fully awakened. But the fact that you've touched it means that you're awakened to some extent.

This is where it's important to realize that the three characteristics, or the three perceptions, don't cover everything. In other words, this deathless is not inconstant and it's not stressful. But still, the Buddha says you've got to let go of it. That's why he says *Sabbe dhamma anatta*, not just *sabba sankhara anatta*: Not just all fabrications, but all dhammas, all phenomena, fabricated or not, are not-self. That's the perception you apply to that experience. That's when you're totally free. You can develop dispassion for that too.

That may seem like a subtle issue. Which comes first: the four noble truths or the three perceptions? It may sound like it's applicable only at the very end of the path, but it's important to keep this perspective in mind all along the way. One, just to remind yourself that the problem is not just with the objects of your awareness. It's with how you relate to them. And two, if you come up with anything that seems constant, seems permanent, like a ground of being of some kind, or some deep interconnectedness, a oneness, non-duality, you have to ask yourself, "Are you still clinging to it?" If you're clinging to it, if there's any sense of identity in there at all, there's going to be suffering, no matter how constant the object may seem. The fact that you're in a position where you're trying to feed on it is where the suffering lies.

So having these frameworks properly sorted out helps get you past those kinds of wrong releases, as the Buddha would call them. In other words, you think you're released, but you're not. You think you've had something really impermanent, but you haven't. So this is your protection.

Also, of course, there's the whole question of how to interpret those three perceptions—the tendency to make them metaphysical truths, i.e., characteristics of things as they are, especially if it gets to the question of “Is there a self? Is there no self?” The Buddha calls those questions a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views. In other words, you get entangled in the brush off to the side of the path.

If we had to spend all our days arguing as to whether there is or isn't a self, we'd never be able to practice. We wouldn't have the time. We wouldn't have the opportunity. But if we see “not-self” simply as a perception, a label that you apply to things when you need to develop dispassion for them, then not-self, instead of being a thicket, is actually a machete for cutting through the thicket. It develops dispassion, and when the dispassion has done its work, you can put the labels down.

There was a controversy years back in Thailand as to whether nibbana was self or not-self. The issue got so politicized that it made its way into the newspapers and on TV. So someone asked Ajaan Maha Boowa whether nibbana was self or not-self, and he answered, “Nibbana is nibbana.” In other words, you don't apply either of those perceptions to nibbana. It's something that's beyond. But that's because it is total dispassion. There's no clinging there at all.

So the clinging is suffering, not because we cling to impermanent things, but because just the act of clinging in and of itself entails suffering.

Keep that in mind because that's what we're looking for. That's what we're working on as we practice. You're going to cling to the meditation. That's fine for the time being. Remember Ajaan Chah's example: Coming back from the market, you've got a banana in your hand, and someone asks you, “Why are you carrying the banana?” You say, “I want to eat it.” “Are you going to eat the peel too?” “No.” “Then why are you carrying that?” Ajaan Chah says, “How are you going to answer them?” As he said, you answer them out of desire, your desire to give the right answer. And that's what gives rise to the discernment that allows you to say, “The time hasn't come to let go of the peel. If I let go of the peel now, the banana's going to be mush.”

So you have some passion for your practice as you try, at the same time, to develop dispassion for things that would pull you away. You apply the three perceptions wherever you need to develop that sense of dispassion. When the path is fully developed, okay, you can have dispassion for that too. Because that's what we're working on: the way the mind relates to things, trying to feed on them all the time out of a sense of passion for them. We're such compulsive feeders that even when we have our first experience of the deathless, we're going to try feed on that, too. It's like a little baby that goes around and sees everything as stuff to put in his mouth.

But when you find that there really is something where there really is no clinging in it, there really is no sense of hunger, that's when you realize that the feeding was the problem all along. And that's when you can put everything down.

So remember to keep the framework and the contents of the framework in the right order. The three perceptions are just there to help you within the framework of the duties of the four noble truths. The four noble truths come first because they alert you as to where the real problem is. If you keep your eyes on that, then it's hard to go wrong.