

# *A Soiled, Oily Rag*

*(Three Perceptions in Context)*

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Back when I was with Ajaan Fuang—this is after I had started translating some of Ajaan Lee’s books and sending them around—a group of people in Singapore who had received some of the books started a correspondence. One of the first letters we got from one of the members of the group was from a bank official who was saying that his practice of meditation was to see everything in terms of the three characteristics, that everything was inconstant, stressful and not-self. Whether he was at work, meditating, watching the TV, whatever, he was trying to see everything in terms of those three characteristics.

I read this to Ajaan Fuang, translating it for him. And he said, “Write back and tell him to look at what it is that’s saying those things are inconstant, stressful and not-self, because the problem lies with that part of the mind.” In other words, just seeing those things in terms of those three perceptions is not enough. We have to use those perceptions within the larger context for the practice, which is the four noble truths. Turn around and look at what it is that wants to crave those things, wants to desire those things. Because the reason we look at them as inconstant, stressful and not-self, is to remind us that you can’t find any true happiness in them. They change. They’re stressful while they change. And you don’t have any ultimate control over them, so why would you want to try to build a happiness based on those things? What kind of happiness could you get based on those things? It’s bound to wobble. It’s bound to fall apart.

We have to keep hammering this message into the mind because it’s always looking for happiness in terms of those things. And you have to keep reminding it, No, that’s not where happiness is found. For happiness to be true it would have to be something long-term with no stress, and not outside of your control. These are the reflections that lead to the question that the Buddha said is the beginning of wisdom: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? My—long-term—welfare and happiness. The three perceptions are related to those three parts of that question. If something is inconstant, it can’t be long-term. If it’s stressful, it can’t be your ultimate welfare and happiness. And if it lies outside of your control, it’s not yours.

So you’re trying to train that part of the mind that’s looking for happiness there. You’re trying to develop a sense of dispassion around the raw materials from which you usually build your sense of the world, your sense of who you are, and the happiness that you’re going to find in the world. Ajaan Maha Boowa compares these three perceptions to a stick for beating the hand of a mischievous monkey who always likes to grab things. As it reaches out to grab something, you hit it with a stick and say, No. It reaches out again, you hit it again. Until finally it realizes it can’t hold onto those things.

When you see that these things can’t provide a true happiness, the other question is: Where else are you going to look? This is where the role of conviction in the practice comes: that if we learn how to let go of these things, there will be a true happiness. In other words, you’re sticking with that original

question: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? We're not giving up on the idea of true happiness. We're not saying, "Well, I guess I should just accept things as they are, and not try to have any unrealistic desires for anything lasting or true." That's not the kind of teaching the Buddha would give. He's just telling us, "You're looking in the wrong place."

This is why the duty with regard to the first noble truth is that we should comprehend it. We're trying to comprehend what suffering is so that we can stop looking to it for happiness, so that we can start looking someplace else.

To comprehend suffering includes comprehending what causes it. Because suffering includes clinging that comes from a combination of clinging and craving, you've got to look at why you want to continue to crave these things.

As Ajaan Suwat once said, we crave these things because we like them. Our likes and dislikes get in the way. So look very carefully at what you actually get out of these things. The Buddha said to look both for the arising and passing away of these things, and then for their allure—the satisfaction, the gratification you get out of them—as well as for their drawbacks. If there weren't some allure, you wouldn't reach for them. You wouldn't grab at them. You wouldn't hold on. And there are many things that we hold on to but we don't like to admit that we're getting a certain amount of pleasure from them. Anger, for instance. Most people say, "Oh, I don't like my anger. I wish I could get rid of it." Well, one reason you can't get rid of it is because there's a part of the mind that is actually getting a little bit of food, a little bit of nourishment out of the anger. There's some enjoyment that comes with the anger. And if you don't ferret out that part of the mind and see what that enjoyment is, you'll never be able to let go.

So that's an important part of comprehending the stress and suffering: to see what incites you to cling in the first place, to keep holding on and to hold on again and again even as these things keep slipping out of your grasp.

Now to do this, you've got to observe the other duties that go along with the four noble truths. In other words, as you're learning to comprehend suffering, there should come a point when the mind realizes: This is not worth it. The image the Buddha gives is of a blind man who has been given a soiled oily rag. The person giving it to him tells him that it's a clean white rag, so the blind man is very protective of it. He folds it up, and takes very good care of it because he thinks it's a nice white piece of cloth. Later, when he's finally he is treated by a doctor and gets his eyesight back, he can see what it really is: It's just a soiled old rag.

So this is why we try to comprehend the five aggregates, the six sense media in terms of those three perceptions: to see that they're just soiled old rags. At the same time, we're looking for where the gratification is in holding onto them—our ignorant misunderstanding that they're something of value. Then you want to comprehend the drawbacks of craving these things until you really do develop a sense of dispassion. With the dispassion, you start letting go of the craving. That's the second duty with regard to the noble truths: to let go of the cause of suffering.

To get the mind in the right place to be able to do this and not feel threatened by the idea of letting go, you develop the path, a healthy sense of self that comes with virtue, the sense of well-being that comes with concentration that also allows you to settle down and look at things clearly. You look first at your other

attachments—to things aside from the path—so that you're ready for the insight that sees, "Oh, this isn't worth holding on to. All these things that I've identified as me or mine: They're just soiled, oily rags. Or like that Far Side cartoon of a cow, out in the pasture with a lot of other cows. It suddenly jerks back its head, with a startled look on its face, and it spits out a mouthful of grass, saying, "Grass! This is just grass! We've been eating grass!" You see that the things you've been holding on to are just that: grass. Nothing really worth holding on to, especially considering all the effort that goes into trying to create a reliable happiness out of these things.

Because ultimately that's what it comes down to: Our attachment comes from the belief that no matter how much effort goes into it, it's worth it, because the happiness outweighs the effort. But when you really look at these things carefully, you begin to see, No, the effort way outweighs the little taste of happiness, the little taste of pleasure that you get from holding on to these things. And having the mind in a good solid state of concentration helps you see that because you've got a more solid state of well-being, a more lasting sense of pleasure, a well-being that can permeate the whole body, so that compared to the pleasure and ease of concentration, these other pleasures are really not worth it. Whereas the effort that goes into the concentration really does pay off.

So you work on developing that even further, until you get to the point where you're ready to let go of that too. You begin to see that even concentration is composed of aggregates to which you've been holding on to. And the same principle applies. These things arise and pass away too. They're stressful. Inconstant, stressful, and you see them as not-self. You're not looking at this in terms of some abstract theory of whether there is or is not a self. You're looking at where you're feeding for your pleasure and you realize, even this is not worth it. As the Buddha said, if the aggregates didn't give some pleasure, we wouldn't hold on to them. We wouldn't crave them. But we also have to see that there's stress involved in holding onto them as well. Once the aggregates as they have been shaped into right concentration have done their work, you no longer need the effort that goes into them. You can let them go. That's when the mind opens up to something that doesn't require any effort at all: the ultimate happiness.

Notice that that's not the ultimate equanimity. The Buddha never said nirvana is the ultimate equanimity. He said it's the ultimate happiness. You don't turn your mind into a resigned oatmeal kind of state. You find that by letting go, things open up immensely. No limits of space or time. And no need to put in any effort. As to whether you'd call that a self or not, you don't want to call it a self, you don't want to say, there is no self, because that issue is totally irrelevant. One of the ways of getting to that state is, as the Buddha said, to put aside your ideas about existence or nonexistence by just watching things arising and passing away, and seeing them simply as stress arising and passing away. You see that it's just that—stress, arising and passing away—so you can let go of it. You let go of any attempt to build a happiness out of those things.

Having put the mind into a state where ideas of existence and nonexistence are irrelevant, where they just don't occur to you, there's no reason why you'd want to go around banging people over the head with the idea that there is no self, say, or that there is a true transcendent self. There's simply a dimension that lies beyond even the concepts of existence and nonexistence, and it can be

experienced, it can be touched. That's all that really matters. That's the attainment we're working toward.

All these teachings have their strategic purpose. And it's important that we keep using them for their strategic purpose. We're not here to argue, we are not here to establish the one right view about reality. We're here to find ways of putting an end to suffering.

So remember those three perceptions. And that's what the Buddha called them, "perceptions": the perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress, the perception of not-self. He never called them characteristics. He never talked about three characteristics. You do a search for the term, "three characteristics" in the Pali Canon, and you're not going to find it. The Buddha's talking about a way of perceiving that helps you see through your attachments, that helps you see through your delusions about where you can find happiness, so that the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom—"What when I do it will lead to my true long-term welfare and happiness?"—finally gets its answer in the skills you've developed. And part of the strategy in mastering those skills is to master the tasks that are appropriate to the four noble truths. That's what we're doing: We're working on those tasks so that we can handle them skillfully. We want to skillfully comprehend stress and suffering, so we can understand why it is that we keep feeding on these things, even though they ultimately lead to disappointment. That helps us develop dispassion for the craving that keeps pushing us in that direction, so that we can let it go. At the same time, we're developing the path that puts the mind in a position where it can do this without feeling threatened, until it no longer needs that particular position, that particular center. Then you can take that apart as well.

Then when you've arrived at the ultimate happiness, nirvana, you've used the Buddha's teachings for their intended purpose. That's what it's all about.