

The First Noble Truth

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It's good to come out to a place like this where you're outside of your ordinary life, and all the concerns that come from being within that life can be put aside. You can step out of them and look at them from the outside, and they don't seem so oppressive.

The Buddha talks about this. He says when you go out into the wilderness, you should have in mind the perception you're in the wilderness. Then the perceptions of being back home, the perceptions of being with this person or that person, fade away. They seem a lot smaller. The concerns that go along with those perceptions are put in a new light. It's called getting into physical seclusion.

Then there's getting into mental seclusion. This is where the Buddha's first noble truth comes in. He gives a list of all the different kinds of suffering there are: birth, aging, illness, death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair; having to be with things you don't like or people you don't like; being separated from those you do; not getting what you want. It's as if he's putting out a sign that says, "If you have any of these problems, I've got the solution."

The solution is seeing these things as five clinging-aggregates. All these pains and sufferings you have: Try to see where there's clinging. Are you clinging to a form or a feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness?

He puts these in terms that allow you to step outside of the suffering. Because the big problem of the suffering is that you're often *in* it, in what the Buddha calls becoming. You've taken on an identity in a particular world and it's causing you suffering. As long as you're thinking of yourself as, "I'm this person in this world in this situation that's causing suffering," it's going to weigh you down.

So he's giving you another way of looking at it. Step outside. Just look at it as these impersonal things. And look for the clinging: How are you feeding on a particular form? It might be a physical form or it could be a form in your imagination.

The body here is the main issue. Sometimes it works well and sometimes not so well. It has all kinds of diseases that it can spring on you.

There's a nice passage where Ven. Sariputta has you contemplate the four elements. He says the four elements can be internal or external. When you look at the external ones, you can see that even they undergo huge changes. Sea levels rise and fall: In his accounting, sometimes they fall down to the point where there's almost nothing left in the oceans. Other times, water floods places that have never

been flooded before. Fires rage and then go out. Winds blow and then they stop. Even the earth can quake.

As he says, with the external elements so vast—with so much change, so much alteration—what about this little body you’ve got here? Is there anything in there that you can really lay claim to as being you or yours? And, as he puts it, it has here only a No. In other words, it denies any claims you might want to make on it at all. So as long as you try to feed on it, make your happiness dependent on it, there are going to be problems.

Similarly with feelings: pleasures and pains, neither-pleasures-nor-pains. Sometimes the pleasures come from your desire for sensual things: You want sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations to be this way, and they’re not that way.

Sometimes the pleasures and pains come from your desire to gain awakening. Those, the Buddha said, are actually useful. There’s the pain that comes when you realize, “Okay, there’s awakening out there and I haven’t gotten there yet.” He says not to try to snuff out that pain by saying, “Well, it doesn’t matter.” It *does* matter, but you have to learn how to live with it in a mature way.

So some pleasures and pains you want to hold on to; others you want to let go. In other words, there are some forms of stress that actually are useful. As long as they’re useful, you develop them. But otherwise you want to let them go.

You look at your perceptions and you see how arbitrary they are. You can walk into a situation and perceive all the people there as your enemies or you can perceive them as little kids who’ve grown up and don’t know what they’re doing. That it changes your attitude toward what they do and say.

Your thought fabrications, your consciousness: All these things are very, very arbitrary. They arise according to causes and pass away according to causes. Sometimes you feed the ones that you like and they turn around to bite you. You’re feeding them because you want to feed off them, but they turn into difficult or impossible animals to have around.

So learn how to step back from your issues—about this and that person, this and that situation—and see them in terms of these five aggregates, or particular combinations of them, and the fact that you’re clinging to them. You’re trying to feed off them. Or simply, there is feeding going on.

Then you say, “I can give myself something better to feed on.” You develop dispassion for the things that cause you to suffer and you try to develop passion for something that would lead you away from suffering: Develop passion for the path.

The Buddha’s analysis here is really interesting. He doesn’t define what

suffering is, he just gives you a range. He says if you're suffering from any of these things, it all comes down to this habit of the mind. And it's impersonal: Your name isn't stamped on any of these habits, because we all do these things. The fact that someone is born means that that person already is engaging in these habits. So it's something we all engage in. Think about that for a bit. That, too, helps take some of the sting out of your pains and sufferings.

So whether it's physical pain or mental pain, whatever the issue: It's as if the Buddha puts up a sign in front of his clinic, "You've got this disease, that disease? Well, we've got the cure."

A large part of that cure is learning how to see your sufferings from the outside. Just allowing yourself to look at them in the terms of clinging-aggregates makes a big difference right there. You're not so much *in* them where they weigh down on you, where they can squeeze you. You can step out of them a bit so that you're not putting yourself in the middle of the squeeze.

So just the first noble truth—even without going onto the others—offers a lot of relief right there. Suffering is there—he's not saying that life is suffering. He says there are these different kinds of suffering and they all come down to this same problem: clinging.

And it's not something particularly wrong with you that you're suffering. To take on identity as a being is going to involve suffering regardless.

But you have the choice. You can disidentify with all the habits that lead to suffering. You can learn how to identify with the habits that lead away from suffering.

Once they get to the end of suffering, then you can let go of all identities. Because why do we identify with things? We identify because we think we're going to get some pleasure out of them. And our problem is we've been identifying with all the wrong things.

But we've got the choice: We can re-identify, develop new skills, take on new identities. Once those new identities deliver us to the place of true happiness, the mind doesn't need any identities because it doesn't need to do anything for the sake of happiness anymore. That's when it's free.