

The Third and a Half Noble Truth

February 13, 2020

Cultivate the desire to stay with the breath. Cultivate the desire to do it well—and don't be afraid of that desire. I don't know how many times I've heard people say, "If you desire to do it well, you're setting yourself up for disappointment, for stress, suffering. So just accept whatever comes." But the Buddha was up-front about the fact that, yes, there will be stress, there will be pain, when you realize that you haven't reached the goal, but he called that a pain to be cultivated. He called it "renunciate pain." He called it "a pain not of the flesh."

It's the pain that comes when you realize that you haven't reached the end of suffering, there's more to be done—which is different from the pain of simply sitting around being miserable. Because this pain actually motivates you to practice. The Buddha didn't tell you to develop that pain, that desire, just to stay there. You're supposed to act on the desire. You use that pain as motivation. There's work to be done, so let's do it. There's something to be attained. We're not there yet, but if we practice hard enough and practice wisely enough, we can attain it.

The Buddha's message is very hopeful: that we can, through human effort, reach an end to suffering. It will involve some suffering along the way. But the Buddha was always the sort of person who would think strategically. Some pains are useless as part of the path; others are very useful. After all, we're going to be learning about suffering. We have to comprehend it. What better way to comprehend it than to cultivate a useful and skillful pain? Get to know it well. Use it until it's served its purpose, and then you can put it aside.

Don't short circuit the path by saying, "The cause of suffering is desire, so I just won't desire anything at all. I will have zero expectations." That doesn't take you anywhere. It's like the Dhamma teacher I once heard who said that after many years of teaching she didn't know if there really was a cessation of suffering, she didn't really know if the third noble truth was true, but she had her own truth. She called it her third and a half noble truth, which is that suffering is manageable. I'm surprised that she ranked it higher than the third truth.

Contrast that with Ajaan Suwat's attitude. He told me that there was one point in his practice when he realized that of the four noble truths, he knew the first, and he knew the second, and he knew the fourth, but he didn't know the third. So he set about trying to figure out: What is the cessation of suffering? Because he worked on it and he put a lot of effort into it, he finally

came to know. It's when you set high goals for yourself and stick with them that you really benefit from the practice.

So we know there's a pain that comes from realizing you're not there yet, there's more work to be done, but that's a pain to be cultivated and acted on. The Buddha himself said that the secret to his awakening was that he would not rest content with skillful qualities. What this means is that if the skillfulness in his mind had not reached the level where it put an end to suffering, he would keep working at it more and more. He wouldn't just stop. This is why he left his first two teachers. They taught him skills for concentration, he mastered them, and he realized that they didn't lead to the end of suffering, so he moved on, moved on. He tried six years of self-torment. That didn't work. He moved on. He kept looking for what would actually bring about good results.

So he had very high expectations and he stuck with them. He stuck with them skillfully. And he was finally able to reach, as he said, what he had never reached before. To attain what he hadn't attained before. To know what he hadn't known before. That's his message: There really is something special to be attained through human effort.

During my first year with Ajaan Fuang, he made the comment that there are some people who say the path is simply one of letting go, letting go. He said, "They forget that the path also includes development." Look at the customs of the noble ones. The fourth custom is to delight in abandoning and to delight in developing. In other words, you delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and you delight in developing skillful qualities. That's where you find your joy.

This theme goes all the way through the teaching, even down to the Buddha's teachings to his seven-year-old son. Whenever you wonder about a Dhamma teaching, always go back to those instructions to Rahula to see whether it would fit in with what the Buddha taught Rahula. There's no place where the Buddha taught him to have zero expectations or that he should simply let go.

He said, when you're going to act, ask yourself, "What are the consequences of this action going to be?" If you foresee any harm or affliction coming from the action, you don't do it. If, while you're doing the action, you see that you didn't think it was going to cause harm but it actually is, you stop. You don't just say, "Well I have to accept the fact that that harm is there." You stop. If you don't see any harm, you continue. When the action is done, you look at the long-term consequences. And if you see that you've caused harm, again, you don't simply accept it. You resolve that you're not going to repeat that mistake, and you go and talk it over with someone who knows better, to get some idea how you might avoid that mistake next time around. If you realize

that you didn't cause any harm, you should take joy in that fact that you're progressing in the training, and keep at it.

So there's a definite sense that you can improve by looking at your actions and looking at their consequences, learning from the consequences, and trying to make them better. Don't get caught in the trap of learned helplessness.

A while back I gave a Dhamma talk in which I mentioned that there are some meditation methods that teach you that you really can't do anything, you simply have to accept things as they are. It's like an experiment they did with dogs one time. They put them in a room where wherever they lay down on the floor, they were going to get electric shocks. And the dogs, after trying to find a place where they could avoid the shocks and realizing that there was no safe place, just gave up. Then they moved the dogs to another room. Half the floor would give electric shocks, and the other half wouldn't. The researchers would drag the dogs from one side of the room to the other to show them which side was the safe side and which side was the one with the shocks, but the dogs made no effort to go to the safe side. Wherever they happened to be placed, they just stayed right there. They'd given up.

And there are meditation methods that would have you give up. They say, "Well, there's nothing to be attained, everything is inconstant, stressful, not self, just learn how to be okay with that and you'll be fine." But that's not the equanimity the Buddha taught. His was the equanimity of a soldier who has to face setbacks and has to accept the setbacks but doesn't stay with the setbacks. He keeps looking for a chance to come out victorious. The equanimity is there to make sure that he doesn't get discouraged. It's not there to make him give up.

Then just the other day I received a letter from someone complaining about that Dhamma talk. She had long quotes from a psychologist about how helplessness is a great condition, it's the human condition. This psychologist was saying that wherever you try to strive and realize that something in life is always going to be beyond you, there's always going to be disappointment, there's always going to be a let-down, then when you realize that you're helpless in the face of that, this person said, that's when you can find peace.

Well, that's the peace of the third and a half noble truth—in other words, the peace of giving up. It's like the Buddha's image of the cow. You want to get milk out of the cow and you're twisting the horn. The harder you twist it, the more you irritate the cow. You're not getting the milk you want. Then you stop twisting the horn. Now, some people stop there. They say, "It's much nicer not to be twisting the horn. You don't have to put in so much effort. The cow isn't irritated." But you still don't get the milk.

The Buddha's approach is to look around. There are other parts of the cow that you can pull on and twist and finally you find that there's one part where

you twist and get the milk. There is something to attain. You keep up your expectations.

It's interesting how many of the Buddha's analogies and similes for the practice are about people searching. There's the man searching for heartwood, the man searching for milk, the man searching for oil. They figure out how to find it. And they test it, to make sure they've got what they really want.

This is why we cultivate the desire to stay here with the breath, the desire to stick with all the aspects of the practice, along with the desire to do it well, because those are the desires that will take us to a place that we've never been before. So if you've been taught to have zero expectations, erase that teaching from your mind.

Remember the Buddha's approach. Keep your expectations high. Don't let yourself get discouraged. Have patience, realizing that this may take a while. Have the equanimity of a soldier who faces setbacks. Have the equanimity of a doctor who, in dealing with a patient, may realize that there are some things that cannot be cured, but the doctor doesn't let that stop him or her from treating the patient. You look for the areas that can be cured, areas where—at the very least—the patient can be given some sense of comfort.

So instead of helplessness, you learn hopefulness, and learn to be mature about your hopes. That way you'll be able to attain things you've never attained before, and you'll find that they really are worth attaining.