

## *Respect for What's Noble*

*April 20, 2022*

The Buddha taught that we have basically two responses to the experience of pain. One is bewilderment: Why is this happening to us? And the other is a search: Is there somebody who knows a way to get past this pain? It's because of pain that we look for things in life. If we didn't have any pains at all, what would we search for? We'd be perfectly satisfied where we were. What would we have to think about? It's because we're bewildered that we start thinking.

But it's also the case that, because we're bewildered, we start thinking in ways that are actually harmful. When our search is guided by bewilderment, we can meet up with and believe people who have all kinds of ideas about why we're in pain, what we can do about it, whether we have to accept it—simply because it's a fact of nature, or because it comes from some creator god, or because it's our punishment: whatever the explanation may be.

The Buddha offers his teaching as a response, to cure that bewilderment and put an end to the search.

When we understand his teaching about why we have pain, or why the mind suffers, we can see why there's such an etiquette of respect around the teaching. As he said, if you really want to get the most out of the teaching, you can't despise the teacher, you can't despise the teaching, and you can't despise yourself, because an attitude of respect for the teacher also includes respect for yourself. After all, the Buddha's teaching you that the reason the mind is suffering is because of its clinging.

The word for clinging, *upadana*, can also mean the act of taking food or sustenance. And here the Buddha's saying something very radical: that one of the activities we most enjoy in life, which is a large part of our *being a being*, is taking in food. Yet this act is symbolic for all of our suffering.

But, he's saying, we learn to put an end to that clinging, first by searching for the cause, which is three kinds of craving—for sensuality, becoming, or non-becoming—and then putting an end to the cause.

So the truths he teaches go against the grain, because they locate suffering and its cause in things we like, things we feed on. To be willing to accept the Buddha's truths requires that we respect the teacher, respect what he or she has to say. But we also realize that these teachings are asking a lot of us, which means we have to have respect for our own ability to carry these things out.

When the Buddha calls this the “noble truth of suffering,” he’s not saying that suffering itself is noble. What’s noble lies in adopting his perspective on suffering, because it requires that you take responsibility for your own sufferings. You’re willing to step back from your urges, from your moods, from your likes and dislikes—and that’s a noble act in the mind.

So we approach the teachings with respect, because they’re going to make us good people, make *us* people worthy of respect. After all, you look at most of the world, and it seems as if everybody believed that advertisement they had for Sprite years back: “Obey your thirst.” Wherever you thirst, wherever you hunger, go for it—that seems to be the message in the world outside. But the Buddha’s saying, “No. This is why we suffer.” Instead of simply falling in with our clinging, we have to step back and try to comprehend it—in other words, get to the point where we understand it so that we have no passion, aversion, or delusion around it.

He says that there are four kinds of clinging. We cling to five things. They’re called “aggregates,” but they’re more activities: form—this body of ours, which is constantly changing—feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. These are all activities that are involved in feeding: The form is the form of the body, the form of the food we eat. Feeling, in the feeling of hunger that drives us to eat, and in our desire for the feeling of pleasure that comes when we’re full. The perception of what kind of hunger we have; the perception of what kind of foods out there will satisfy our hunger. Fabrication, trying to figure out how to find that food, and then when we’ve found it, how to fix it, how to maintain a source of food that goes on into the future. And consciousness, our awareness of all these things. These are the activities that go into feeding. We identify ourselves with them. That’s part of our *being a being*.

We cling to them in four ways: one, simply for whatever sensual pleasure they can provide for us, whatever sensual fantasies we can concoct around them. Two, in terms of our views of the world, how the world works, what we need to do in order to find the food we want, the satisfaction we want. Three, our clinging to habits and practices: Once we have an idea that we’re going to find happiness this way or that way, and we just hold on to that idea, whether it’s working or not. And then the biggest clinging, of course, is our identifying with these things, either as what we are, or as something belonging to us, or that we’re in them, or they’re in us. For example, you may have the idea that you are someplace in the body, or that you are an infinite consciousness, and the body is in you—these kinds of things.

This is how we cling—and this is how we suffer. And again, we hold to these views very tightly. We hold to our ideas of the world, our ideas of what we should

and shouldn't do, and who we are—we hold *really* tight. So here the Buddha's asking us to do something noble: to step back from these forms of clinging.

The best way to do that, of course, is to see why we're clinging to begin with. That's when we look at those three kinds of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming—that's to take on an identity in a particular world, focused on a desire of any kind. Then there's the "you" who can bring the desired object about, and the "you" who's going to enjoy it once you've found it. And then there's the "you" who's watching the other two senses of "you," to see how well they're doing, what they might do better. We might call it the "inner critic." That's an important part of your identification.

But, in getting past these things, you can't just drop them. The Buddha teaches us how to engage in them first in better ways. After all, as we're on the path, we have to feed. This is the lesson he learned from his own experience with the austerities: He almost starved himself to death, but after six years he realized that that was not the way. Then he realized that the way was going to involve right concentration—which required a certain strength of the body, enough strength that required a certain amount of food—then learning how to feed the mind with right concentration, and then adopting new ways of clinging. Instead of looking for sensuality, look for the pleasure of concentration.

You also adopt views about how the world works, in terms of how karma works, how causality works, in such a way that you can have an understanding of patterns of cause and effect. There are tendencies in the world, but they're not ironclad, and they're not deterministic. There's room for you to make changes. Views about what habits and practices are good to follow, in terms of the precepts, in terms of the practice of concentration. And even your self—you want to develop a sense of self that feels that you're competent to do this and that you'll enjoy the results. You have to train your inner critic to watch the other two skillfully, so that it's not so critical that it's discouraging, but that it holds you to a high standard.

What kind of happiness will you find satisfactory? Here, again, the Buddha's asking you to be noble. He says the noble search is one that looks for something that's deathless, something that's not subject to aging, illness, and death, that's not willing to settle for second best. So this inner critic has to be strict but encouraging.

When the Buddha himself was giving Dhamma talks, the texts say that he'd give talks of four kinds: instructing, urging, rousing, and encouraging. Notice that: four verbs. Only one is "instructing." The other three basically give you the energy you need to follow through, convincing you that, Yes, you can do this.

So here, again, the Buddha's asking you to have respect for yourself. Don't underestimate your abilities. This is something you can do. This way, when you train these forms of clinging to be actually part of the path, as you develop virtue, concentration, and discernment, you have energy. You have confidence. This is another reason why we respect the Buddha: He basically teaches us to respect ourselves, that this is something we can do.

So it's all of a piece. Sometimes you hear people say, "Well, Buddhism is a nice philosophy, but I don't know about the religious side." But this religious side, the etiquette of respect, is an important part, an integral part of the practice. After all, the Buddha's teaching you to step back from something that's very intimate and that you're very much attached to: the way you feed, physically and emotionally.

He's holding you to a high standard, and there will be parts of the mind that resist. To overcome that resistance, you have to remind yourself: This really is a respectable, honorable path that we're taught here. As the chant says, it's "admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end." It starts with good principles. In carrying through with them, you're not asked to do anything that's not noble. And the goal is the ultimate goal of any noble search: a happiness that's totally harmless, a happiness that's totally unchanging, totally free.

So we hold the Buddha in high respect because he holds us to a high standard. And he solves that problem that we began with: our bewilderment over our pain and suffering, and our search. He turns our search into a noble search and puts an end to our bewilderment. This means that our respect is not respect out of fear. It's respect out of gratitude that there is such a path, and there are people who went through all the trouble to open it and keep it alive.

Ajaan Suwat made the comment one time: He said when somebody's followed the path to the end, as they're following the path, they have to clear away the weeds and the obstacles. But when they get to the end, then as far as *they're* concerned, the path can get overgrown with weeds again. But then they look and see other people coming along the path, and there are also people putting obstacles in the path. And so, out of compassion for the first group, they try to keep the path open.

We're the beneficiaries of that. Always hold that thought in mind.