

Four Noble Truths: *Nirodha* (3 of 5) Arising and Cessation

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This is the third talk on the third noble truth, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering.

Some of you might know that the idea of dependent co-arising is a very central teaching of Buddhism and the Buddha himself. This is the idea that things occur in dependence on other factors that are also present. Nothing exists spontaneously without a relationship to anything else. Everything arises in relationship with other things that are also happening at the same time or just prior to it. There is nothing that is permanent, and nothing exists independent of conditions. Nothing is unchanging or has always been there, or always will be there.

Since all things arise conditionally, if the conditions change, these things will cease and pass away in some way or another. The idea of conditionality – that things arise based on conditions – is emphasized over and over again in the early teachings of the Buddha, where there is a central purpose for understanding conditionality.

There are many reasons for the importance placed on conditionality and many ways that this teaching inspires people. Some people dig deeply into the philosophy, the psychology, or the mysticism of conditionality and interdependence.

There are various descriptions of this idea in the early teachings of the Buddha, specifically in the process by which the Buddha became awakened. One of these descriptions gives cessation, or *nirodha*, the third noble truth, a central role in the understanding of dependent co-arising (things arise because of conditions). This idea is emphasized very strongly in one of the stories of the Buddha's process of awakening,

In this particular story, the Buddha realized what is known as the twelve-fold chain of dependent co-arising. This describes how 12 factors come into play in the creation of suffering. But rather than emphasizing that the important understanding is conditionality, seeing how things are dependent on each other, the Buddha arrives at a different conclusion.

This conclusion is the culminating insight that comes after the Buddha first understands the process of twelve-fold dependent co-arising and has deeply realized dependent co-arising – everything is arising conditionally. The text is written like, "Wow! *This* is how things are!" With the understanding of conditionality, the Buddha said: "Arising, arising. Thus, regarding things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light."

Those are grand terms. What he's emphasizing here is not that he saw conditionality, but rather, that conditionality broke up the idea that anything is permanent, constant, and unchanging. That was what he saw: Wow, this is not constant. It's inconstant; it arises. Then, seeing the whole twelve-fold chain of dependent co-arising, he understood that if the conditions cease, all the others cease. Then there is a cessation of suffering. So this is a twelve-fold chain of dependent *cessation*, as opposed to the 12-fold chain of dependent arising.

When he saw this, he exclaimed in a similar way, celebrating this insight. But he made it clear that this insight was even more valuable, more important, and more penetrating than the first. In regard to seeing the cessation of things, the Buddha said the same thing: "Cessation, cessation. Regarding things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light."

Then he added that this was a breakthrough through wisdom. “Breakthrough” means that he experienced the first stage, the first insight of awakening, of liberation. He didn’t experience that with seeing arising. Only through seeing cessation did he have what he called a breakthrough. Even more significantly, he claimed that with this breakthrough that showed him cessation, he understood that this was the path of awakening. And this is the path of awakening that he taught for all his years.

The path of awakening is not seeing conditionality by itself, but by seeing how things arise conditionally. That allowed him to break the trance, the enchantment of the idea that anything is permanent, including our suffering. Then he was able to begin having insight into how suffering arises and passes, how our psychophysical experiences come and go, arise and pass.

When we do this in meditation, we’re not looking at mountains and seeing them arising and passing. Rather we’re seeing the arising and passing of experience moment by moment, in our moment-to-moment living as we meditate. The opportunity of meditation is that we don’t have to think about the past and the future. We don’t have to think about abstractions and big ideas.

When we meditate, it’s possible to settle enough to go to what are called “the building blocks” of our experience – the most basic ways in which we experience. The reason we relax deeply in meditation is not only to have a peaceful mind, but because that quiet mind is very much in touch with the moment-to-moment flow of experience as it’s happening.

I go hiking up in the hills here, and there are a lot of tree roots on the trails. As I go along, maybe thinking about something, it’s a regular thing for me to notice a snake in the trail from the corner of my eye. Then my body reacts to seeing a snake. But when I look down, I see that it’s just a snake-like root that’s poking out of the ground and winding across the trail. So there is seeing in direct experience something that has a long and narrow shape— a snake-like shape. Then my mind constructs it as a snake. And it’s not really accurate.

Once, in Thailand, I did the opposite. It was dusk and so I didn’t see so well. I was walking in a jungle where they have very poisonous snakes, but I wasn’t thinking about snakes. I was on a dirt road in the jungle wide enough for a car. There was a large tree branch lying across the road. I wasn’t thinking at all. I just stepped on the branch. Turned out the branch was a six-foot or longer snake, and the snake immediately started moving. And boy, did I move fast after that. So there I saw a branch for what was a snake.

It turns out that our mind reconstructs reality, and occasionally it’s not so accurate. But even when it’s accurate, it still makes a concept, an idea of what is. The deeper dimension of insight meditation is to let the conceiving part of the mind get quieter and quieter so that when we see the branch on the trail, for example, we just see the shape, the texture, and the color. We just see the building blocks from which we then construct “snake” or “branch.”

Sitting in meditation, we start seeing the immediacy of our feelings of pleasure, pleasant and unpleasant, sadness and joy, before that seeing is constructed into, “I’m having an unpleasant experience,” or, “This is going to be a bad day,” or, “I’m a bad person because I’m having sadness,” or, “I’m a great person because I’m happy.”

We build edifices of all kinds of things based on what was originally very simple data. When we can come down to that level, then we see that in fact, everything is coming and going, arising and passing, and it’s not solid and fixed. This includes even the concepts we have that we tend to get lost in, where we tend to assume that things are more permanent. Concepts have a kind of filter that gives a seeming permanence to experience, because ideas are unchanging in a certain way. But they’re not. They also just come and go in the mind.

It is through this experience of the flow of our experience, the moment-to-moment dynamism – which we can experience when the mind gets focused, unified, quiet, and clear – that we see things arising and, more importantly, we see them ceasing.

To get a little sense of how this is a possibility of freedom, in that cessation when things cease, before they arise again in that gap – who are you? When you have no thoughts to tell you who you are, when for a moment thoughts have ceased, and before the next thought arises – who are you? When for a moment something that’s been bothering you ceases, before it reappears in the next moment – in the moment in between, in the changing

flow of experience, there is a kind of freedom, a kind of peace, a powerful teaching. There we can see the evidence of what it's like to have the cessation of the causes and conditions that have to do with suffering. So when the Buddha really saw for the first time how thoroughly and completely his experience was a flow, an arising and passing of phenomena, this led him to exclaim:

Arising and ceasing. Arising and cessation. Regarding things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light. This was a breakthrough through wisdom. And I realized the path to awakening.

So, arising and cessation is one of the fundamental insights of the Buddha, and I'll talk more about that tomorrow.

Thank you for this chance to do some teaching. I hope that your day is good and that you spread your goodwill wherever it's possible.

Thank you.