

# Four Noble Truths: *Nirodha* (2 of 5) Freedom from Craving

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

third noble truth, cessation, suffering, rebirth, non-clinging, non-attachment, knee, pain, reactivity, self-pity, desire, aversion, condition, pleasant, unpleasant, cloud, sky, conditionality, impermanent, inconstant, conditional, freedom, son, wife, arises, passes, absence, letting go, abandon, *dharmatā*, *magga*, naturalness, path, river, plant, non-obstruction

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Today we continue with the topic of the third noble truth, which is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. The most classic explanation of this is the cessation of the craving leading to rebirth. However, in interpreting and using the teaching about the third noble truth (and the second noble truth), most people do not refer to how this classic teaching relates to rebirth. Rather, they refer to how it applies to daily life and our life in all kinds of ways.

This craving has a phenomenal role in how we suffer. We want to learn how to be free of that craving. This is discussed in the third noble truth as the freedom from the non-clinging to, the non-attachment to, the non-entanglement with craving. It has a lot to do with our relationship to craving.

When I was a new meditator, I had a lot of knee pain. I learned that to be able to sit and breathe in a relaxed way and not be miserable, I had to notice the reactivity I had to my knee pain. There were all kinds, but I remember there was a period where I clearly saw the relationship between my self-pity in having all this pain and the severity of the pain.

So I would have knee pain. I would resist it, react to it, have self-pity, and the little muscles around my knee would tighten. And the pain would get worse. If I let go of the self-pity, the muscles would relax, and the pain would be better. Because it was so intense, I felt I had no choice but to track myself carefully to make sure that there was no self-pity and to let go of it as it came up. Then I would just be with the pain, and it would not be as bad.

Learning how our reactivity is extra is a powerful thing to do. But we have extra reactivity to desires themselves. We reach for them; we want them; we don't want them. And we feed and fuel them. Even the negative – not wanting something to be there – keeps us caught in cycles of wanting and not wanting.

With the clarity of mindfulness, we begin seeing the relationship – the conditional relationship – between the different ways we react and respond. In that clarity, we can begin leaving things alone. We can leave desires alone and not pick them up. We can leave cravings alone. We can see them arise, but we do not do anything about them.

Or we can see that the cravings and desires have an underlying condition. The condition might be as simple as there is something pleasant or unpleasant – pleasant or painful – that we are reacting to. The desires, cravings, and resistances arise in conditional dependence to the pleasant or unpleasantness. But we can clearly see that in the mind – so clearly we can just leave it alone. And then we do not have a problem with the craving.

We do not have to make the craving into something bad or evil to have. We just see it as another phenomenon that's arising – that's appearing – that we do not have to get involved in. Just, "Oh, look at that." It's like watching a cloud going through the sky, just a natural phenomenon going through.

The noninvolvement with craving can be that strong if the mindfulness is clear enough. It's phenomenal to begin having a very different relationship to our inner life where we do not have to judge, be critical, or be reactive. We see it and knowing that clarity of seeing, we are not involved with it. We are not picking it up. It's just there.

In that clarity, we also start seeing the conditionality. It might be as simple as seeing the connection between pleasant and unpleasant and how we react to it with desires, aversions, and craving. Seeing that conditionality, we can leave things alone. We start to see that things exist conditionally. And as conditions, they are impermanent. They are inconstant. They are coming and going into existence.

For the Buddha, this ability to see how things are conditional – how things arise because of other conditions – is one of the things that leads to freedom. One of the reasons for this is we see that our experiences are not permanent. They are not everlasting. We are not stuck in them.

I remember many years ago when my first son was quite young, we were having a difficult day with him. We were hovering over this little toddler and trying to manage something. My wife looked up at me and said, “We’re having one of those kinds of days.” As soon as she said that, I noticed how much I was operating, unconsciously almost, *as if* the difficulties would be there forever. That was my mindset.

Of course, if you had asked me, I knew it would not be like that forever. But my subconscious was reacting and responding as if that was the case. When my wife said, “We’re having one of those kinds of days,” it popped that bubble of permanence. “Oh, it’s just a day. Okay.” Then I could relax, settle in, and be much more at ease with what was happening.

The Buddha said something very interesting. He said if we see any experience – here, the focus can be our psychophysical experience, mind states, thoughts, feelings, or desires – as it arises or appears, we are not going to believe that it doesn’t exist. If we see it arise, we don’t believe in its nonexistence. If we see any experience as it passes, we won’t believe in its existence. And here, the idea is permanent nonexistence or absolute nonexistence as if it doesn’t exist or if it really does exist.

So it’s a fascinating kind of distinction the Buddha makes. And if things neither exist nor don’t exist, how are they? How they are is that they are processes that are constantly changing and evolving. In fact, the conclusion of this teaching he gives is to emphasize that things are constantly arising and passing. And to see *that* – begins to loosen up the hold and the grip of our craving.

We begin shifting our relationship to craving, desires, and aversions – so there is no passion for them. It is a powerful word in the ancient language – lust – perhaps, clinging to them, grasping for them, being enchanted by them, depending on them, resting our life on these desires and aversions.

This freeing up – so that there is no clinging or craving – is a phenomenal thing to do, because it frees up what is wholesome within us. It frees up the goodness of our hearts in a powerful way. Allowing the goodness of our hearts to flow and come is one of the great pleasures and treasures of Buddhist practice.

Over and over again, much of the goal in the early Buddhist teachings has to do with absence. It has to do with letting go, not having clinging there, not having craving there, not having resistance there. Letting go of the holding, abandoning craving.

It’s all the absence of something. But it is a glorious absence because in the absence of what blocks or obstructs our minds – our hearts – the heart can develop and flow. And this naturalness, the *dhammatā* or the *magga*, the path – over and over again, the Buddha presents the path of practice as a path that develops, grows, and unfolds over time. It is like a river flowing downslope or a plant germinating and flowering. If we can get out of the way and no longer obstruct what is here, it is phenomenal what begins to unfold and open in the practice. The path opens up for us.

*Nirodha*, the cessation of suffering. Yesterday, I said that *nirodha* also means non-obstruction. To really develop this clarity of mind that can see the arising and passing of things clearly enough, so that we see pleasure, pain, discomfort, and desires in relationship to it. We can just see that – without it obstructing anything, without us getting caught and entangled with it. This is one of the goals of practice. This is one of the ways that we can cut the clinging, the grasping, the entanglement that gives birth to suffering.

This has been another take on *nirodha*, the cessation of suffering. We’ll continue with this topic tomorrow. Thank you.