

Satipaṭṭhāna (64) Third Noble Truth

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Today I want to offer an alternative interpretation of the second noble truth – how it is taught in the ancient teachings of the Buddha. The modern version is that craving is the cause of suffering. The more common interpretation in the ancient texts is that the second noble truth involves seeing the arising of suffering – seeing the appearance of it – without any explanation for why it is there.

Sometimes the search for the reasons and causes of suffering is a little challenging and can lead us astray. The search takes us away from the simplicity of our experience in the moment. There is certainly a time and place to look for causes – for why things happen. It is a wise life that understands conditionality and causes. But it can also lend itself to thinking a lot, reflecting, and analyzing.

Satipaṭṭhāna practice moves us towards abiding more and more in direct experience. In direct experience, the idea of cause becomes less important. You can still see it sometimes in the moment. “Oh, I was grasping at something in that moment, and I saw there was suffering in that grasping.” So you can see the causality.

But there is another way of seeing – to simply see that suffering arises and ceases. Suffering appears and disappears. The suttas emphasize the insight into the arising and passing of many things, not just suffering. Perhaps, suffering is an umbrella term for all the things that we become aware of. We see the arising and passing of the aggregates, the faculties, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

The suttas emphasize the arising and ceasing of things. The simplicity of that experience is particularly valuable in the deep, concentrated practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*. In ordinary states of consciousness – the world of cause and effect – thinking is a very common phenomenon. But as the mind gets quieter, more focused, and clearer, it is not inclined to look at experience through the lens of analyzing and finding reasons and causes for what is happening. Instead, awareness becomes just a simple experience in the moment of the river of change flowing by.

I want to repeat what I said before. I think we can assume that this last exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the exercise on the Four Noble Truths, represents a deep and mature level of practice. It is not easy to come into this level of seeing and insight as a beginner. We get a sense of this from the refrain for each exercise, which talks about this very thing. We are seeing each of the things we are looking at – the phenomena of the body, phenomena of feelings, and phenomena associated with the mind – arise and pass. The aggregates, the hindrances, the fetters, the Seven Factors of Awakening – with all these, at some point, we are seeing their arising and passing. This is what is emphasized in the refrain.

Sometimes you start seeing it quickly. First, the text says, “Seeing arising, seeing ceasing.” Then it talks about seeing arising and ceasing, where the arising and the ceasing happen very fast. In deep, settled practice, the moment-to-moment experience of direct experience comes and goes. When suffering arises in that context, it is not overwhelming. It is not so difficult because the suffering does not persist. It comes and goes, although it might reappear quickly.

There might be disorientation because we live in a world where we expect things to be constant. We want to hold on to certain things to be oriented and to know ourselves and the world around us – to know we are safe by knowing certain ideas are settled. So some people may feel a period of disorientation as the mind gets quieter and quieter in meditation. Then, the usual ideas of self – the things we are holding on to or depending on – are no longer available because some level of constancy is required to hold onto them. But when things come and go, there is a whole different way that we are asked to relate to experience.

To see the arising of suffering is to see its contingent nature – to see it is not permanent, not solid. We can see that it arose from a time, place, and situation where it did not exist before it arose. When we see it cease, we know there will come a time when it will no longer be there. That seeing begins to loosen up the grip, the resistance, or the fear of the mind. We start appreciating the freedom of it all. We appreciate that the emptiness or lack of constancy is not something to be worried or upset about – or to cling to.

The deeper seeing of things arising and ceasing – their constant inconstancy – begins to loosen up the grip of some of our deepest attachments. We had to let go of many attachments to get to this level of meditation. A lot of our preoccupations fall away as we get concentrated and settled. What is left are some of the deepest attachments – attachments to self and even to life itself. Those attachments are all ways of interfering with the flow of change. We are *becoming* the flow of change.

As things begin to loosen up, get massaged, relax, and let go, something in the mind gives way at some point. Perhaps, it is like you are standing in a flowing river. You start walking deeper into the river. The current is not dangerous. You know how to swim. You can feel the river flowing against your body more and more as you walk out deeper into the river. You begin to feel very light like you are floating. It feels very comfortable. The river gets deeper until you reach a place where you are not touching the bottom. Suddenly, the gentle current picks you up and starts to carry you down the river.

As we let go more and more into the flow of change, there comes a time when the bottom is not there, and we can start being carried in the current – carried in the stream. This is the meaning of the Buddhist idea of stream entry.

The word for “stream” (*sotā* in Pali) means “current” – entering the current. This can be seen as the current of change that is always here. I like to think of it as the current of non-clinging, non-grasping – not holding on to anything, but beginning to flow in a dharma current. The dharma starts flowing through us because the dharma current that we are in is the current of non-clinging and non-grasping. This begins to carry us on a dharmic path – in a dharmic life.

The third noble truth is the truth of the ceasing of suffering. This means seeing arising and ceasing – the constant change, coming and going. But it also represents that point when the bottom of the river is out of reach and falls away, and a more dramatic ceasing occurs. This is ceasing that changes things. For example, in the analogy of going into the river, when you are no longer touching the bottom and nothing keeps you stationary, the current has a chance to carry you. Going into the river marks a very important change.

So the third noble truth involves not only seeing the arising and ceasing of things – their constant coming and going. It is also when we really become the coming and going, relax into it, that there is a more complete ceasing. This is more than just the particulars of the moment. The ceasing feels much more holistic, more inclusive. It changes the whole flow, the whole current, our whole understanding of what *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is. I will talk about that tomorrow.

The second noble truth has two meanings, and both are good. They have value in different contexts. In more ordinary states of mind, seeing the cause of suffering is often very helpful. But in deep meditative states of mind, looking for a cause keeps the mind busy. In deep meditation, we want to just rest in the current of the arising and passing of direct experience. This is only possible if we have some level of stability and concentration, where we are not distracted and do not wander off in thought – we are really here.

Then we see that we are living in arising and ceasing. The second noble truth is seeing the arising. The third noble truth is appreciating the ceasing – the passing. Initially, the ceasing comes and goes, until finally, the ceasing becomes more comprehensive. Then that opens the door to understanding the fourth noble truth: the Eightfold Path. That will be the topic for tomorrow. Thank you very much.