

The End of Suffering (2 of 5) First Noble Truth

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Hello and welcome to these teachings. This week the topic is the Four Noble Truths. After doing the introduction yesterday, I'll start today with the first, which is the noble truth of suffering. I include an introduction to it on mindfulness of the body. The reason is that to really know suffering well, we must know what's happening in the experienced life that we live. Not in the imagined life, not in the life projected into the future, not in the remembered life, but the experienced life here and now. For many of us it's really through the body that we can feel the greater sense of aliveness connected to life itself and to ourselves. This is the most useful way of being present for the first noble truth, which is the reality of suffering.

The first noble truth, as it's come down to us, is a very simple statement. It says, "There is the noble truth of suffering." That's it. This statement requires a little bit of unpacking.

First, the word "noble." One translator rendered it, the "ennobling truth of suffering." This expression implies that suffering by itself is not ennobling or noble or special. What's ennobling is the possibility of meeting suffering honestly – seeing it clearly and finding a path through it to the other side – in order to bring suffering to an end. It means to really know and understand it well, and maybe to see whatever suffering we have is a messenger.

Then what is the message? What needs to be learned? What is it we need to be present for? Many people, when they have challenges in their lives, can have all kinds of things they're grieving, or distressed about, or are stressed by or afraid of. One of the invaluable supports that can happen is to have a friend who will listen. You might be accompanied by someone for a walk in the park, or you might sit and have tea together. This friend doesn't judge anything or try to fix it. The friend really takes in what you're experiencing compassionately, fully, in a friendly and caring way. You can explain what's happening, and your friend just receives it. It is so good to be received, known, and heard by someone who's calm, settled, and available.

In a similar way, this ennobling attitude of how to be with suffering is to be our own good friend. To really stop and take time to know what this particular suffering is. This process has to be done with a lot of care, love, and attention about how much we can tolerate and open up to at any given time. But this is the message of the Buddha. The direct way to freedom and peace is not by avoiding suffering, but by learning how to stop to recognize it. In a silly way I sometimes say that the bumper sticker for Buddhists would read, "I stop for suffering." This does not mean to suffer more, but to be present for it and offer it ennobling attention. To really know it and see it. This bumper sticker doesn't have any pronouns. And so we stop.

If others are suffering, we can stop to be their friend, to accompany them for a while around what's going on, and to support them. If we're suffering, we stop and pay attention. There are many ways of stopping. Sometimes it's meditating; sometimes it's sitting having a cup of tea; sometimes it's going for a walk in a calm, relaxing place. We can really take time for it as opposed to just going headlong into our busyness and being lost in the fretting, preoccupation, and anxiety about what we're experiencing, or lost in our reactivity. This ennobling is not inherent in suffering itself, but it's what we bring and how we are with suffering.

We now consider suffering itself. The word in Pali is *dukkha*. It can be a difficult word for some English speakers partly because the word "suffering" can imply really big things – catastrophes. And partly because when we speak of coming to an end of suffering, we may think there is some suffering we don't want to end. It doesn't seem right to push it away or stop it. For example, it seems like it's an inherent part of life that a parent who loses a child would feel emotional pain. Are we supposed to not have that?

The *dukkha* that we're talking about here is the emotional pain that arises from our reactivity. It arises not from deep empathy or the deep sense of connectedness where there are no attachments, fear, hostility or conceit around it. It is possible to experience a certain kind of emotional pain in the world – to be heartbroken, for example – and be at ease with it. Not only be at ease, but feel it is part of the fullness of a relaxed, free life to feel both the joys and sorrows of this world. But the *dukkha*, the suffering of the Four Noble Truths, is the suffering that doesn't have to be there.

Dukkha is a subset of all the different ways that we can feel emotional pain. It is the emotional pain that comes from clinging, craving, reactivity, or hostility. It arises from being caught in something or contracted around something – where the desires are so strong that there's a compulsivity to the desires or hostility we have. There is something extra that's going on.

As we start being honest about our suffering – stopping and getting to know it, and experiencing it through the body – we start being able to tease apart that suffering and emotional pain which is fine to have in a certain way. It feels like this is part of lived life, versus the kind of suffering which clearly comes from some kind of reactivity or attachment that we're really holding on to, that we don't have to hold on to, that we're better off without.

The importance of mindfulness of the body is that through mindfulness of the body we're learning a number of different things. We're learning to be present for our emotional discomfort in a relaxed way, holding it in the body, letting the body process it, letting the body reveal to us what's there. That is more holistic than if we only are understanding our emotional discomfort from our thinking mind, where we think about it through the lens of our fear, hostility, or self-preoccupation.

We're breaking the hegemony of the reactive, self-preoccupied, and contracted thinking mind by dropping down into the body to feel our emotional discomfort, and to learn how to be non-reactive to it. We learn how to be present for it in a very simple, open, and caring way. To be present for it as if we are our own best friend. We learn to breathe with emotional discomfort and feel it. This is a tall order. It's not easy. But the rewards of doing it are phenomenal. We have the reward of being able to have a non-reactive attention that doesn't add or subtract, doesn't push or pull, is not rejecting or accepting, but is just there, feeling and being present. Then we can begin to see more clearly.

At some point we see the kind of emotional discomfort and pain which is deeply part of something precious as a human being. It is the love and care that it's okay to have. It is not troubling; rather it is actually enriching because it arises from deep in the heart, deep within us. This is one kind of suffering.

On the other hand, we experience some suffering where we observe, "This is extra. This has to do with my reactivity and my attachments. This is caused by my rejecting or wanting something so strongly that I'm filled with disappointment and anger that I can't have it. This has to do with heartbreak that is not because of the discomfort of losing something. Rather, it's heartbreak because my whole sense of self was tied up in this thing, person, or experience. And I was really attached to that."

And so we start teasing apart that suffering which comes with being human in a relaxed and meaningful way, and that suffering which is extra, that has to do with what we're contributing.

In summary, when we look at the first noble truth – the truth of suffering – we can discern two kinds. We know that there is suffering in this world. There is no way that a human being will be spared some kind of emotional pain going through this life. We can clarify for ourselves to see whether the kind of emotional pain we're having is diminishing or draining us. If it is not diminishing us, this first kind of suffering is not harming us by our reactivity. The path to experience this kind of suffering is to get to know the suffering well. But if we see that we are diminished or drained, we look at our reactivity.

We stop for suffering, and we learn how to do that. We learn how to be present through the body – to relax and breathe with the emotional discomfort until there's settledness and openness. We receive from the body the information that tells us whether the suffering is healthy or unhealthy for us. If we do that, then suffering can be ennobling. We receive the deeper message about what needs to be healed and what needs to be allowed. In this way, the first Noble Truth is the noble truth of suffering.

Tomorrow we will consider the second Noble Truth. Thank you.