

The End of Suffering (3 of 5) The Second Noble Truth

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Welcome to this third talk on the Four Noble Truths. Today the focus is the cause of suffering. When the Buddha talked about the first Noble Truth, he described it as suffering that arises or is constructed by the person who suffers. He describes or defines it in the classic way. There are five different ways that we construct our experience where there is clinging and craving involved. We can build up a kind of cathedral of self, a building of reactivity. The accumulation ends up with one big ball of suffering.

When we come to the second Noble Truth, it's the truth of the cause of suffering. And before I tell you what the Buddha offers as that cause, it's important to understand that here the orientation is: What is our contribution to suffering? For example, if someone walking down the street steps on my foot, maybe it hurts a little bit or is painful. I might get irritated. I might relate it to all the different people who have been stepping on my feet lately. I'm just frustrated and angry with humankind because of how thoughtless people are stepping on my foot.

I might start spinning out all kinds of thoughts about myself, and what people are doing to me, and how stepping on my foot is an act of disrespect. I might think I'm always invisible to people. "It must be because somehow I have the wrong kind of glasses. I should really get new glasses, but I don't know what kind. I can never make a good choice and I'm such a bad chooser of glasses." Then the mind spins out and creates all these constructs and can even create huge edifices.

But it turned out that maybe the person was blind and didn't see you. You actually stepped into their path. You didn't see that they were blind with a walking stick. The whole spinning out was your addition to something that was not really present at all in the event itself. Even though there might be some harm done if we were stepped on, we can contribute whole layers of interpretation.

Sometimes other people are doing things which really are hostile and hurtful to us. That should not be overlooked but should be dealt with appropriately. But even there, we can contribute to the suffering ourselves.

I've known people who have seen an event differently years later. They recognized how their resentment towards someone was their way of constructing suffering for themselves long after the original person may have forgotten that they existed or forgotten the event. But somehow the repetition of the story and the resentment is something we can contribute in an ongoing way. The particular focus of the Four Noble Truths is not all forms of emotional pain, but the kind of emotional pain that we contribute to.

The definition the Buddha offers – his explanation for the cause of suffering – is called *tanha* in Pali. T-A-N-H-A. In Pali it usually means "thirst." It's a metaphor. When we're thirsty there's a compulsion, a reaching out, an intensity of wanting something – wanting water – that can grab us and push us to do things. It's not just a simple desire that arises.

Desires, for me, are a dime a dozen. They can come, and I just let them come and go. Sometimes I smile when they come and just shrug my shoulders and let them pass through. And occasionally, I get caught in the desire. When I get caught too much, I have what comes as disappointment, or expectation, or frustration, or being upset by whatever gets in the way of my desire.

When the desire becomes strong enough to get in the way of our ease, peace, or calm – when it takes us, grabs us by the nose and pulls us around – then English translators, to be more descriptive or more to the point, will translate it as “craving.” Craving is a kind of compulsive desire. If the craving is strong, we lose some of our autonomy. We lose our freedom regarding the desire because it now has authority. It now is in charge. It's now pushing us, compelling us to do something. Or at least giving us a feeling – even if we don't act on it. It's such a strong force in the mind or heart, that it churns, pushes, and brings tension. It can get so strong that it constructs the sense of self. It constructs ideas and stories about what an event means. The craving itself is suffering.

There's something about thirst which is uncomfortable when we're really thirsty. It is a kind of pain or a discomfort. And so the cause of suffering in the classic teachings of the Four Noble Truths is a certain compulsive desire that is itself unsatisfying to have.

We might be blinded by the object of desire. We might be enamored with the object, having wonderful fantasies about it. Or if the desire is negative – like wanting something to go away – and there's hostility, I want to push it away. We might be caught up rather than enamored – but really caught in the grip and the trance of the hostility.

Craving can be for or against something. In and of itself, there's tension. There's emotional pain in it when we're grabbed and pushed like that. This is the definition that's offered by the tradition: our contribution to the cause of emotional pain is craving – a certain kind of intensity of desire, wanting or not wanting. We can have a role because of our contribution. That's where we can make a difference.

We can't always change other people. Sometimes other people do mean things to us. Maybe they say something that clearly feels offensive to us. Maybe it's something that ideally we should respond by standing up for ourselves and saying, “You shouldn't do that.” But we don't always have that ability because of who we are or because of the situation. We can't necessarily change other people, but we can change ourselves.

If we're contributing to the suffering, that part is where we can have the greatest role, take the greatest responsibility, and experience the greatest success in making a difference. It makes a huge difference for us to be able to turn around and see what we're contributing. What we're adding that's extra on top of something. It may be the way that we are tensing up or pushing or straining. Or it may be the way that we're collapsing or tightening up all over in the heart, the belly, the shoulders, or the mind.

Craving – this cause of optional emotional pain – can be strong. It often is somatic as well. That becomes an important way to find relief from it, and then eventually release from it. This is by remembering to relax, to calm, and to settle the body and mind.

We can't always settle and relax all aspects of the mind. We can't make pain go away. But sometimes we can relax and open up and soften around the edges. Those places that we can relax, we relax. And then eventually we might be able to offer a presence and be attentive to whatever's going on wherever the attention has not been hijacked by craving.

Where attention has not been used in the construction of suffering – the construction of this edifice of self and stories that we have – that attention has been extricated from all the attachments and all the

identities that we are caught in, so that the awareness itself at least is not caught. The awareness becomes tranquil, peaceful, still, and quiet, and in so doing it becomes much more creative, intelligent and wiser. Rather than a tranquil awareness making less of who we are, it actually brings forth much more of who we are from our depths. It brings much more of the fullness of what's available.

And so we come to the saying that I mentioned at the beginning of the meditation. The simplest version is, "For wisdom, be tranquil." If you'd like to be wise, cultivate tranquility. This is tranquility that frees you from the reactive craving that's seen as the cause of optional suffering.

May you find the ways in which you get caught in desires. And rather than being identified and caught in desire, may you identify with something which can't really be the self, but still is provisionally good. Identify with tranquil awareness itself.

Thank you.