

# The End of Suffering (4 of 5) Third Noble Truth

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Welcome to this fourth talk on the Four Noble Truths. The general title of this series is “The End of Suffering.” That’s the purpose of the Four Noble Truth teachings. Ending the optional emotional pain that we feel as suffering. This is pain that arises because there’s a reactivity inside of us. Somehow there’s craving, or a compulsion, or an attachment that we engage in. The very attachment itself is painful.

This type of pain leads to a cascade of other pains that come whenever we’re holding on tight to something. It leads to disappointment, fear, and anger. It contributes to the creation of an edifice of abstract ideas about who we are and who we think we should be. Part of our identity is the result of the stories we tell about ourselves, as well as stories that our society tells us about what it means to be a human being. So the First Noble Truth has a lot to do with the accumulation and the gathering together of all the different attachments and clings we have as we construct a personal world of suffering.

The Buddha once called this world of suffering that we accumulate “a tangled ball of thread.” And sometimes it’s hard to understand even why we’re suffering. Suffering can be so integral to our whole experience of self that it’s our identity. It’s who we are, and it’s inconceivable we could be something else than the suffering we have.

But in fact, the Second Noble Truth says that the tangled ball of thread has become tangled by the force of craving. In another place, the Buddha talks about clinging and craving as the seamstress who sews together this tapestry of attachments that can be our walking manifestation.

To begin getting a handle on this idea of attachment, craving, clinging, and compulsion, one of the places to see it is in the story-making mind, the discursive mind. It can be quite phenomenal, the spinning of the mind – the churning, moving, thinking about something on and on. And even if we’re successful at letting go and stopping, it just comes right back to spin out more stories.

Some people have no trouble with the thinking mind or the discursive mind, because they just believe it. They’re invested in it. They think that’s who they are. Even though it might be painful, they just go along with it because it has authority. If we think it, we should believe it. And if we think it, then it says something about who we are. These people have a strong attachment to discursive thoughts and stories, with a strong identification and sense of self that gets built on conversational thoughts that they have, including commentary and judgments about the world around them and also of themselves.

We can all too easily belong to that discursive mind that’s spinning and churning and jumping from one branch to the other, never letting up. The continuity of thinking can give us a sense that we’re always supposed to be thinking. This is what life is.

As we get a handle on craving, clinging, and attachment, and we begin to soften, meditate, and relax more deeply, we find there are wellsprings inside us of deeper sources of understanding. There are ways of thinking that are not discursive. They are not running along telling or rehearsing stories, or repeating stories of the past.

One of the remarkable things that can happen is that the discursive mind becomes quiet and still. It can be such a relief to have that release. That’s why some people distract themselves from their discursive thinking mind by doing something that’s very different – reading a book, or watching a movie, or going for a walk in a park, or doing some kind of exercise, or going to sleep – because it stops this endless churning of the mind that is not emotionally freeing. It carries a lot of emotional baggage. It’s almost like we’re creating an atmosphere through

discursive thinking. Then that atmosphere comes back and has a profound effect on us. It can create a conditioning for us. So to have that become quiet can be such a relief.

It's very important not to think that meditation is about quieting every thinking. It is possible to have very subtle quieter thinking, more like thoughts rather than continuous thinking. There are very quiet thoughts about the present moment. These thoughts can come out of wisdom, or kindness, or out of gentleness or sensitivity to what's happening. These thoughts are very simple. They don't carry the violence of attachment, clinging, or compulsion. They are just there, softly and lightly.

Sometimes we can see that the discursive thoughts and the emotions that go along with them have stopped for a while. They have paused. When this happens, we have a sense of the Second Noble Truth, which is the cessation of suffering. Cessation can happen on many different levels. For today's talk, the accessible level I wanted to emphasize is the cessation of discursive thoughts. The temporary ending of them. The pause between one paragraph of thinking before the next paragraph begins. This can happen when there's the end of a sentence in the mind. We can take a break from a movie we're looking at in the mind. We can pause and appreciate the quiet mind, the more peaceful mind. We can appreciate the softer, quieter ways of thinking that arise out of wisdom or kindness – ways that are often drowned out by the loudness of discursive thoughts that go on and on.

When we stop the discursive thinking, we can appreciate something much deeper, more intimate, and more integral to what's happening in the present. We experience deeper reservoirs of peace, quiet, and stillness – reservoirs of kindness, love, and generosity. At some point, we start seeing that the suffering that came with discursive thinking begins to abate as well. We notice that various kinds of suffering, stress, and other distress that we experience, stop. Any time we notice some kind of distress, anguish, stress, emotional pain, or emotional discomfort has stopped, that's an invaluable thing to notice.

The bumper sticker for today would be, "I stop for stopping." When you've noticed that a mental state that was troubling you is no longer there for whatever reason, don't just go on to the next thing to do. Stop yourself and register it. Take it in. Feel the cessation of suffering because it's teaching a very important lesson. The lesson is that there is optional emotional pain that we contribute to, and that it can stop. It can cease. It can come to an end. That's the good news of Buddhism. It is possible.

Then the emotional pain that might remain is not so difficult. There's a whole different relationship to it. It's part of the richness of life. It's part of where compassion might arise, or knowledge and wisdom might arise. And when there's no conceit, no identity, no "tangle of a ball of thread," it's very simple. Emotional pain that we might still experience – even the heartbreak in the world – becomes very simple and does not become a burden. Rather, it becomes a source of meaning. It provides the meaning of compassion, care, and kindness, of living a different way in this world. We're here to support each other and to care for ourselves. So this Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, is a truth that is possible.

It's not an all or nothing thing that we can expect to happen today or tomorrow. But it's a step-by-step gradual beginning to appreciate the small cessations. What I want to emphasize today is the quieting and the stopping of discursive thinking, which is such a troublemaker for us. Be careful that you don't invest too much importance in the story-making mind – that you don't give it too much authority over you. Because the optional suffering that we can experience around our stories has a lot to do with the amount of authority we give those stories, how much we invest ourselves in them, and how much our sense of identity gets tangled up in them. Be careful of this process.

One way to be careful is to begin noticing all the little places during the day where the story-making mind stops, for whatever reason. And if it stops, pause for a little bit, even for a few seconds. Remember the bumper sticker, "I stop for stopping." And then just pause even more. Take it in. Feel the goodness of it. And see if that pausing of stories can connect you to something deeper inside. A deeper wisdom, love, and peace.

We can develop our practice of The Third Noble Truth: the cessation of suffering. The way to enrich it and expand it into our life so it can become fully realized is what the Buddha calls the Fourth Noble Truth, which will be the topic for tomorrow.

Thank you very much. And may you enjoy cessations.

