Four Noble Truths

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 46:09

Thinking about this freedom, the possibility of freedom, it can be perhaps interesting or useful to look at what the Buddha described as the experience in the moment of his awakening. It's described in different ways, and I'm just going to pick one of those tonight to look at. We're going to basically be spending the week looking at a variety of different ways to explore this: What is this freedom? What is this awakening?

In one description the Buddha gave of his awakening, he described that he had four insights: "I directly knew as it actually is, this is suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the origin of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the cessation of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering."

In this framing, insight is being described here—directly knew as it actually is. This is a little different than the framing of these statements which are typically understood to be the Four Noble Truths. When the Buddha had the insights, the way I kind of think of it in my own understanding, there was some insight that was born in him. And it's no surprise actually that the insights were framed in this way around suffering, because his whole path, the whole exploration, was around this question of what is suffering. This was a question that motivated him. What is suffering? Is it possible to be free of it? How does it come to be? How does it end? These were the kinds of questions that motivated his search.

And so the understanding that arose and the freedom that arose with that understanding, framed in terms of suffering—it kind of makes sense. But the way he expresses it is a direct understanding, a direct insight, a direct knowing. "This is suffering." It's different from "this is the truth of dukkha, birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, death is dukkha." That's a kind of teaching, perhaps. Maybe my understanding of this is that there was some insight that he had around dukkha in these four ways, and the rest of his teaching career was trying to help us understand that—help us understand how we could see that for ourselves. The framing of the Four Noble Truths was one of the ways that he spoke to help us begin to look at our experience from this perspective, from a different perspective.

So this question of whether it is possible to be free from suffering—I think this first insight, "this is suffering," in some ways speaks to a probably radical reframing of what even the idea of suffering is. The possibility to be free of suffering, ending suffering, doesn't mean that we somehow finally figure out how to arrange a life to our liking. That whole notion that we might—actually it's great news that freedom from suffering doesn't depend on that, because it doesn't seem to be possible to arrange a life to our satisfaction.

Pleasant things will happen, unpleasant things will happen. There'll just be this stream, this flow of

pleasant and unpleasant experience happening. And fixing or changing that flow is not what is meant by the ending of suffering. The suffering the Buddha discovered—what suffering is that's possible to be free of—is a suffering that is in relationship to that flow. The flow of unpleasant, pleasant, neutral experience is going to continue.

The unpleasant experience in particular, from a kind of unenlightened or unaware perspective, unpleasant experience is dukkha, unpleasant experience is suffering. And the understanding that actually, no, unpleasant experience itself is not suffering, and pleasant experience that disappears is not inherently suffering—this, I think, is a new understanding that the Buddha brought for us. This insight, "this is suffering," was a kind of radical reorientation of the mind around what suffering actually is.

This question of our relationship to pleasant and unpleasant, our wanting it to be pleasant, our wanting to get rid of the unpleasant—it's pointing to the second noble truth, the framing of the second noble truth: that the possibility for ease and peace with this flow of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral comes with the ending of wanting it to be some other way, that craving for it to be some other way, that constriction for it to be some other way.

The Buddha offered, over the course of his teaching, an understanding of the Four Noble Truths. In some ways I like to think about the Four Noble Truths as put firmly at the beginning of the Eightfold Path, right view—the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, right there in Right View. This is the intellectual understanding. The beginning of our path has to come with some kind of rethinking of what we think of as suffering, beginning to reframe our understanding of the possibility for freedom from suffering.

freedom to arrange the world the way I want it to be.

The framing of the Four Noble Truths in that first discourse the Buddha gave—I think of it as the perspective he wants us to explore, to bring to our practice. And this is what we've been looking at for the whole course of this program: How do we bring this perspective to our lives?

I want to explore the Four Noble Truths in a somewhat different way this evening—from the perspective of there being insights, and from the perspective of there being a framework through which we can directly meet experience.

This pattern that I described, the Buddha said he understood as it actually is: "I directly knew as it actually is, this is suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the arising of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the cessation of suffering. I directly knew as it actually is, this is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering."

In various places in the texts, it points to this pattern: "I directly knew" or "I directly understood" X. "I directly understood the origin of X. I directly understood the ending of X. And I directly understood the practice leading to the ending of X"—where X is replaced by many things in the teaching. This pattern of the insights around the Four Noble Truths was not just applied to the word dukkha.

It was applied to the five aggregates: "I directly understood form, the arising of form, the ending of form, the path leading to the ending of form."

It was applied to the sankhāras, the formations: "I directly understood mental formations. I directly understood the arising of mental formations. I directly understood the cessation of mental formations. I directly understood the path leading to the cessation of mental formations."

It was applied to the six sense bases. In short, it was applied to our experience—all of our experience.

And this, I think, is what the pointing is in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness. We're encouraged to look at the Four Noble Truths in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, and there it uses suffering. But I think we are encouraged to understand experience itself. The five aggregates, as we talked about in the last retreat, encompass all of our experience—it can be understood through the arising of the five aggregates in various configurations. All of our experience can be understood in terms of the arising of senses, of this meeting of experience at the six sense bases.

And so we can explore not just around suffering, but anything. Whatever's arising, we can be curious about: What is it? What is its origin? How does it arise?

This is another way to frame this language, because the word here in Pali—often translated as "the cause of suffering" or "the origin of suffering"—is samudaya. This is the word used for the second noble truth, the origin or the arising of suffering. At least as I understand from Gil Fronsdal's research, in other places in the suttas when the word samudaya is used, it means arising.

So what is the arising of suffering? The arising of suffering happens with the arising of craving. It's a subtly different framing of the second noble truth. Craving is not the cause of suffering, as if craving happens and then suffering happens. When craving arises, suffering arises with it. It's a co-arising.

As we learned in dependent co-arising: with the arising of craving is the arising of suffering. With the ending of craving is the ending of suffering.

So the exploration might be: What's the origin of something? Or we could simply explore: How does it arise? What's here? What's arising? What's ending?

This can be some of what we look at in our practice. And this is what I think the Fourth Foundation, this teaching in the Fourth Foundation, was pointing us to.

In another place, in Majjhima Nikāya 2, he describes this same pattern—looking at suffering, the arising of suffering, the ending of suffering, and the path or practice leading to the ending of suffering—not so much as insight already realized, but as an orientation or framework through which we look at our experience. This is a teaching on wise attention.

Here the Buddha says that in order to learn how to free oneself from suffering, one needs to attend wisely.

How does one attend wisely? One attends wisely: "This is suffering." One attends wisely: "This is the arising of suffering." One attends wisely: "This is the ending of suffering." And one attends wisely: "This is the practice leading to the ending of suffering."

So we can look at our experience through this framework. In a way, what this points to—one way I understand this teaching, at least—is that whatever is happening in our experience can be seen through one of these four perspectives. It's either suffering that's already here, suffering that's coming into being, suffering that's ending, or we are cultivating tools and practices. We're cultivating the pāramīs. We're cultivating mindfulness. We're cultivating concentration. We're cultivating the path that heads us in the direction of freedom. Whatever is arising in our experience, whatever's happening, we could know it from this perspective.

And this is important to recognize: it's not about "this is unpleasant experience." The suffering is about the contraction, the constriction, the craving that comes along with it—the wish that it were some other way. Either the wish that unpleasant experience were not here, or the wish that pleasant experience would not be disappearing, or the wish for something more exciting than neutral experience. Or the suffering that comes with unawareness, with just spacing out around experience. So it's not the unpleasant experience itself; it is that relationship, that wishing it were some other way, the craving. I think you're all familiar with what this means, to understand suffering when it arises. And I think you also understand the distinction between unpleasant experience just as unpleasant experience and feeling into the ease and peace that's possible even in the face of unpleasant experience.

Another thing I appreciate about this particular teaching, this framing of wise attention—"this is suffering," "this is the cause of suffering"—*this* is the operative word. What's happening now, in this present moment. In this teaching the Buddha is encouraging us to look at the now. Not what happened five minutes ago or two years ago or eight years ago, but what's happening now. Suffering happens now.

This was a really important recognition for me when I began exploring this perspective. On one retreat, this got highlighted for me. I was experiencing a lot of suffering—embarrassment was the experience—that came up as I remembered an incident from several years before. This memory kept popping up; it was a particularly embarrassing memory of being on stage and forgetting a line. There I was, standing looking out at the audience, not having a clue what to say. That moment arose in my memory over and over again.

What I got to see was that while the suffering was arising in dependence on that memory coming up, the suffering was being recreated in this moment. It wasn't that somehow the old embarrassment from years before was being dredged up, or that it was sitting in some little storeroom and I'd opened a trap door to find the embarrassment waiting there. The memory arose, and in that moment—I got to see this so clearly on retreat—the memory arose and the reaction to that memory was embarrassment. The suffering, the embarrassment, was created in that moment.

Suffering arises now. If you are experiencing suffering in this moment, the information you need to understand it is arising now.

Whatever you can know about this moment will help you to understand what will lead to freedom from that suffering.

Likewise, the cause of suffering arises now. In that example, the reaction to the memory was some kind of wanting that not to have happened—some kind of craving for that not to have happened. Again, arising in the mind, in the moment. This craving for that not to have happened.

So again, suffering happens now. The craving that leads to that suffering happens now. This is hugely freeing when we can start to watch it. And this pointing to seeing the suffering happening now, seeing the arising of suffering happening now, leads us to the place where we can see the suffering ending now also.

We learn about our experience through this framework of looking at experience. This is suffering. We begin to see how suffering arises now. It arises in dependence on things that have happened, yes. It arises in dependence on memories and things that we've done in our past and conditions from the past. But those conditions are like all pulled together here again in this moment. And the suffering arises now.

As I began to witness this over the course of watching the mind, I began to see thoughts that would arise that had habitually triggered particular reactivity—those thoughts could simply arise. That was a bit of a shock to me. I had kind of thought that certain memories inherently came with their baggage. Memories are pretty habitually connected to the baggage. It's like our baggage is floating around with us. It doesn't weigh anything, though, unless we pick it up.

So the thoughts can arise, memories can arise, moods can arise, and the subsequent habitual response does not have to arise. This is experiencing the freedom from suffering—watching, seeing that in the moment.

Sometimes this third noble truth is experienced as watching something release, seeing a clinging and feeling it let go. That feeling of seeing the clinging let go has a particular quality of release. We recognize that contraction releasing. That's one way that we sometimes experience this third noble truth, this ending of suffering.

But sometimes we experience it in a different way. We sometimes might experience it as suffering that doesn't arise—the non-arising of suffering.

The best example I have of this is one that I've given a lot, so some of you may have heard this story. One very particularly clear example from my practice: I had spent quite a bit of time watching anger in my life in my early days in practice. It was my very first mindfulness practice—watching anger in my daily life. And I got really familiar with the dukkha of anger. Really familiar with that.

As I look back on this story, I see how the mind was applying the Four Noble Truths to experience without

consciously knowing what it was doing. I had learned enough about the teachings to be curious about what is anger. Okay, well, this is what anger feels like. That right there is the curiosity of "this is dukkha." Okay, here's anger. This is dukkha. What is the human experience of anger? That's dukkha.

In this exploration of watching anger for a couple of months, I really got it that anger is dukkha. Really got it. Completely.

And so one day I was just in my kitchen doing some things, cutting an apple, and as I cut that apple a memory arose. I was not trying to practice here. This was just the fruit, really, of being available for anger and being available to watch and be curious about experience. In that moment, I saw the arising of a thought of being with the person that I was angry with. We were together at a fruit stand.

So in that moment I could see there was a connection between what I was doing—cutting the apple—and the memory that came up. And I could see the memory coming up. With this particular person, I had a lot of associations. Pretty much just about anything I would do would find a pathway to some memory with this person. So this one, cutting an apple, brought up a memory with this person.

And in that moment, the mind saw that memory and saw this kind of urge—this urge to jump on that thought and think more thoughts and get angry at him. Think thoughts to make myself angry. There was a strong urge in that direction. It takes a while to describe this, but this all happened in about a second, or a split second.

In that moment of seeing that urge, that heading in that direction, the mind wanting to get angry, I could see that I wasn't yet angry. Anger had not arisen. And in that moment the mind thought, *Don't pick up that thought. Don't go there.* And again, this wasn't something I did. It was the mind. Actually, my understanding came in retrospect. And so much understanding, I think, happens in retrospect, as Temple was saying earlier. We see how we've become free as we reflect back on things.

In retrospect, I understood that the months of looking at anger and realizing it was suffering—the mind recognized in that moment that wanting to get angry was headed right towards suffering. And because it understood that it was headed towards suffering, the mind said, *We don't want to go there.* So the mind did not go there.

This was not something I could have tried to do. In fact, I stood there waiting to get angry because it seemed impossible in my mind for this person to arise in my mind and anger not arise in my mind. And yet it didn't. I stood there waiting for myself to get angry and I didn't get angry. At that point I kind of sank down to my knees. It was like, *Wow. This is possible.*

That moment was a real moment of seeing. That was the seeing of the non-arising of suffering. It wasn't seeing the ending of suffering; it was seeing it's not happening, it's not arising. That was a very powerful moment in my practice. I really credit that moment with having me commit to this practice for the rest of my life.

So this third noble truth we can see through this releasing—the sense of feeling the clenching and the craving and watching it. Sometimes we can see it let go. And sometimes we can simply see it's not arising. That non-arising of suffering might be experienced in different ways. I'm not going to go into those; I'm hoping you'll explore some of those in a few minutes when we have an exploration of this.

Whatever is happening in our experience is a possibility to understand it from this perspective. Each noble truth in the first discourse of the Buddha—which I think we assigned to you recently—each noble truth in that discourse is associated with a task, an action that essentially turns those understandings of the Four Noble Truths into practices. Suffering is meant to be understood. Craving should be abandoned, released. The ending of suffering should be realized. And the path leading to the ending of suffering should be cultivated.

In that discourse, there are three ways each of those insights is explored. Around suffering, the first insight is simply to recognize, *This is suffering*—that same recognition, that same insight that we just talked about. What actually is suffering? This is an insight when we recognize, *Oh yes, anger is suffering*.

This is an insight. Maybe it doesn't feel good, but this is an insight. So this is suffering.

The second insight is that suffering should be understood. It's useful, it's valuable to turn towards suffering and begin to get curious about it. This is the second insight. Again, we can see ourselves in this teaching, I think, because we spend a lot of time when practicing being curious, turning towards. Anytime we recognize, "Oh right, frustration is happening," and ask, "What's the experience of frustration?"—that's an expression of this second insight around the First Noble Truth. Suffering should be understood.

The third insight: suffering has been understood. This is the realization, the recognition of what it actually means to understand suffering. Suffering has been understood. To me, these three right here are a kind of description of the whole path. In some ways, I think each of these three insights around any one of these truths is a whole path of practice.

So suffering is arising. It should be understood. We turn our attention towards it and begin to be curious about it. When suffering has been understood, we are already beginning to understand the Second Noble Truth. When suffering has been understood, we understand something about why it arises. We understand something about the craving that has conditioned it. When suffering has been understood, there is a release from that craving. And so in some ways we can look at these actions associated with each noble truth as leading onward to the next.

Understanding suffering leads us to recognize that craving is the cause of suffering, and that it should be released and can be released. Probably not by saying, "Oh, I'm going to let go of you, I'm going to do the letting go," but more along the lines of curiosity, exploration, creating the conditions for the letting go to happen.

That letting go happening—that's the Third Noble Truth. As we allow craving to be released, the

abandoning occurs. Craving is abandoned with the abandoning of craving. And again, these three framings: This is craving. Craving should be abandoned. Craving has been abandoned. When craving has been abandoned, what's the experience? This is the ending of suffering. This ending of suffering needs to be realized, and has been realized. So each of these noble truths leads onward to the next, just as we do this simple path of turning towards our experience, recognizing our experience.

Another piece I want to bring in around "suffering should be understood" concerns the First Noble Truth and the Third Noble Truth. The teaching around this, often in the way we talk about it, is very much internal. We are looking at suffering as it's arising here, exploring what the human experience of suffering is. And this is a piece of what the Buddha encouraged us to explore. But he also encouraged us, with respect to suffering, to look at suffering in community, in relationship.

In a teaching he gave to his son—and we've talked about this teaching, but I want to point to it here again—he encouraged us to look at suffering in community. He said to his son, before you do an action of body, speech, or mind, reflect: Is this going to cause suffering for yourself, for someone else, or for both? So right there he brings community in. Exploring and understanding suffering is not just about suffering that happens here, but also understanding when suffering is happening based on our actions, based on other people's actions in our communities.

And so this is an avenue for the exploration of the questions we've been looking at around suffering in our systems, in our cultures—around race and homophobia and ageism and sexism, the suffering that comes around war, around jealousy, around hoarding, around using resources. Looking at how actions impact self, other, both. This is part of the exploration of suffering too. And I think we are really, as a community of practitioners, bringing that piece into our practice. I think it's been left out of our practice, but we're bringing it in. What is suffering, not just in here, but in our communities as well?

And then the Third Noble Truth: peace is possible. Peace is possible.

The ending of craving leads to peace. Again, a peace that's really useful to recognize—and just to say over and over again—that peace around letting go of craving does not mean that we let go of action.

We may recognize there are situations and conditions in the world, and we've lost our sense of constriction around the wanting for that to not be there. So the constriction's not there; the heart's not clenched. And yet that very heart not being clenched—it feels the suffering way more strongly.

We think perhaps peace means non-action because what does it mean to act when we don't want? If we're not wanting, why would we act? That's our question. If I didn't crave something to be another way, why would I act?

Well, the heart wants to act to alleviate suffering. The heart wants to act in resonance with suffering, with joy. And so the heart at peace, to me, is the heart of non-constriction, but it's not the heart of non-action. The action comes from compassion, from joy, from kindness, from wisdom—instead of from craving.

The third noble truth, peace is possible, doesn't mean that we end up floating on some cloud somewhere. I think this brings us into engagement. It brings many of us into engagement.

I was pointing earlier to the way that the expression of a free mind and heart can take so many different forms. I've met monks who seem very free who are sitting in caves, kind of removed from the world. And other people who seem very free who are deeply engaged in the world. The expression of freedom will have your flavor. Look for that. What is your flavor of freedom?

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