The Second Noble Truth - The Cause of Unsatisfactoriness

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 24:02

I'd like to say a few words about the second noble truth now, which is the truth of the cause of suffering.

In the Buddha's words: "What is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is craving which renews being and is accompanied by relish and lust, relishing this and that. In other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being. But whereon does this craving arise and flourish? Wherever there is that which seems lovable and gratifying, thereon it arises and flourishes. There is this noble truth of the origin of suffering. Such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing, and light that arose in me about things not heard before. And this noble truth must be penetrated by abandoning the origin of suffering."

So we have three sources of suffering that the Buddha describes here. The first is sense pleasures—all the lovely sights and sounds, here in the countryside, good food. Remember that sense pleasures also include all the pleasures of the mind: good conversations, good discussions, a detective story if you like detective stories, any sort of happy thoughts. And of course, the opposite is implied. If we like the pleasant, we also want to get rid of the unpleasant—pain, irritating noises, unpleasant tastes and smells. And of course, all the unhappiness of the mind: depression, fear, unhappy thoughts of all descriptions. Craving is the word used in that particular sutta; it's often called desire, or sometimes lust. Craving, desire, lust—that wanting. You could describe it as wanting what's lovely, not wanting what's horrible.

There's also this secondary craving: the craving to be. That's a craving to be somebody. We want to be recognized. We want to be valued. We want to be respected. All of these make us feel good; they really give us a boost in our life. We can experience this around family, for example, if we're identified with our family. The role of parent can give a lot of joy and pride and happiness. It can make the hard work involved in being a parent worthwhile. It can make sense of life. There's a role in life, a meaning to my life: I am a father or a mother. This can provide great joy in life, and these are real joys. The Buddha doesn't in any way say don't enjoy life. There's a list of the various happinesses, and one of them would be looking after family and friends, cherishing children.

Another area where we identify would be our jobs. There again, we can really crave that sense of recognition around being somebody with a skill, somebody with a trade, somebody who belongs to some organization, somebody with expertise. The craving to be an expert, to be a really good carpenter, plumber, whatever it is—our hobbies as well, if we want to be the best gardener, the best bridge player.

This is all the area of craving to be, and it would include friendships, too. To be a friend, to have friends gives us a lot of comfort. It helps our sense of self-worth.

Again, this can be used very skillfully along the spiritual path. But it's important to see where we are also allowing it to draw us into suffering—that real neediness for our friends to always be available, for example, or a terrible anxiety about our friends because we can't live without them. All these desires can be used skillfully to support us along the path.

There's another huge desire, of course: the desire to be enlightened. That can really get in our way. Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist master, would call that spiritual materialism—getting our status out of spiritual matters instead of houses and homes and material things, but getting our sense of self-worth from spiritual progress. That can be an area which causes huge suffering as well, so it's just to be aware of it. These are all the craving to be, and you can probably think of many more examples.

And then there's the craving not to be. That includes all the areas we don't want to be identified with—failure, for example. Most of us would dread the thought of being seen as a failure, so we tend to hide our mistakes, gloss over our mistakes, even pretend to ourselves that we didn't make them somehow or other.

Joseph Goldstein has a nice story around that. In one of his interviews with his teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, without really having made a decision to do so, he found himself reporting his practice as a tiny bit better than it was. He realized afterward that he was doing this. He had a sense of what he should be seeing at this stage of his meditation practice after so many years, how equanimous he should be, how many insights he should have. That was coloring the way he was reporting everything. Just at the end of the interview, U Pandita said, "That's not true."

At the end of a long, flowing interview filled with reports of spiritual success, Upandita simply said, "That's not true."

Joseph Goldstein said he wanted the floor to open up and swallow him. He was so embarrassed—it was terrible. He spent days struggling with embarrassment and self-judgment of all descriptions. And he realized, as soon as it was said, that he had been exaggerating.

At the end of about two days of pure agony, he was able to simply see: the mind does this as well. That's another aspect of the human mind. We want to be a success, and that's what the mind does—it pretends that it's a little bit better than it is. So he was able to see himself more humorously from then on. In that sense, it was a very good lesson for him. He never took himself quite so seriously after that, because the human mind plays all kinds of tricks. It really is very devious.

We don't want to be a failure. There's also the whole area of employment. Often our first question when meeting someone is, "What do you do?" To have to say, "Well, I'm unemployed"—that's a bit of a comedown. In certain social circles, to be a janitor is a comedown. We just don't want to have to say any of

that. The whole area of employment can become a source of real embarrassment, and that can become a big source of stress for us, not wanting to be seen in certain social lights.

There is really so much stress built into the human condition—wanting to be a success, not wanting to be a failure, wanting to be accepted. And we must be careful not to blame ourselves for all of this. We can hear the Second Noble Truth—desire is the cause of suffering—and then start blaming ourselves for having all these desires. It's a very easy mistake to make, and it's a mistake I find myself in again and again.

I find it helpful instead to reflect on the whole condition and to generate some compassion around it. All of these desires are part of our survival strategy. This probably comes from our evolution, just as we were mentioning before: in order to survive, we need to thrive. We need the good stuff in life. We thrive on things like good food, good education, a safe space as a home—maybe with a nice garden in the countryside. All those pleasant sounds, pleasant sights, a sense of good social status, the safety—all of that would allow us to thrive.

Naturally our self wants to thrive. These desires are built into our system. It's not that they're our fault, or that we're wrong for having desires. They are essentially survival strategies, and in that sense, they are wise. All of those desires that promote health and well-being, a sense of confidence, a sense of self-worth—these are certainly not to be despised.

So we generate compassion around that whole area of desire, reflecting that desires are natural. Many of them can be used for good, as we were mentioning before. It's a question of deciding which ones to follow and which ones not to follow.

There is this teaching that desire causes dukkha. There may be the tendency then to judge desire as wrong and to suppress it. But that is just another desire—the desire for enlightenment, the suppression of desire in order to get to the end of suffering. That's a vicious circle. It can't work. It's an easy mistake, but we just have to see it again and again and keep dropping it.

What can we do? The Buddha says this noble truth must be penetrated by abandoning the origin of suffering. We have to abandon—or as we often say, let go of—desire. We can acknowledge the desire. Especially here in meditation, we don't have to fulfill our desires, but we can really acknowledge them, feel them if possible. That way we're not suppressing; we're allowing the desire to express itself in our minds and our bodies, but we're not indulging it. This is the middle way between suppression and indulgence.

If we feel the desire to rush—the Mahasi technique asks us to do everything slowly, and we just really feel the desire to rush through that door—can we feel that desire and feel the way it propels our body forward, and instead just see: can we relax, take it easy, open the door slowly? That's allowing the desire, the impatience for getting here, there, and everywhere, to burn out. We have the desire to gobble our dinner,

to just get through it quickly.

And again, if we can just feel that desire, acknowledge it, not make ourselves wrong for it, but simply acknowledge it and let it be felt in the body. Perhaps the shoulders wanting to move, the hands wanting to reach for the next spoonful, the jaws wanting to chew quickly. Notice all of the tension associated with that desire, and yet slowing down, relaxing as best we can, not following the desire. This is just letting the desire burn itself out. That's our middle path, our work here.

We can also simply listen to our thoughts. "I want another biscuit." It's so easy to come in and dismiss that, "That's a stupid thought," and put it away. But if we listen to it—okay, I do want another biscuit—and allow it to be felt, really listen to it, that's a kinder way of being with desire. We listen to those thoughts and realize that's what's happening. There is a desire. You might even feel somewhere in the body a kind of grasping around that thought of another biscuit. "I want to go to bed." Again, just listening to that, really listening into it, feeling the wish to go to bed with interest in the feeling itself. We're taking the interest off going to bed, that dream of how lovely bed will be, and instead placing interest in the here and now, the feeling of wanting to go to bed. Listening attentively to our own desires rather than quickly answering them with a put-down of some form. Allowing ourselves to be human, to have all these desires.

Of course, then there is the whole area of suppression of desire. We can't just stop that either. We can't just turn off the suppressive forces within us. They're probably very deep habits. So again, it's a question of listening to those as best we can. And that can be hard—well, I find it anyway quite hard.

The suppressive forces would often involve a very stern crossness somewhere. So just tuning into where in my body is stern or cross. For me, I find it in the forehead. And sometimes around the back of the neck, the jaws. All of that is trying to almost clamp down on these desires for more biscuits or wanting to go to bed. We tune in to the suppressive forces as well, and again, listen to them. The quick giving out, the quick answer back to any desire like "I want a biscuit"—and something says, "No, you don't. You've had enough." Just noticing those quick reactionary thoughts and perhaps feeling into them. That's listening and acknowledging the control freak in us, which is a strong force within us.

Linked to that, there can be a lot of shame. Shame at our own imperfections, hating imperfections. Again, it will be linked to fear of failure, fear of judgment. These go deep within us and they need tender acknowledgement, a lot of compassion, a lot of sympathy. It's a long and patient process, really, being with this human condition that has so many desires built into it.

It's very interesting that there are so many different desires, and they're often in conflict with one another. The desire for the biscuit and then immediately, "No, you don't want a biscuit." Other desires too—we want to be liked by everybody, but we also want to have our own way.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu has a wonderful series on selves and not-self. As we were saying last night, each desire has the effect that our whole being goes into this idea of self. An idea of self is born in order to

fulfill the desire. So every desire brings up some aspect of ourselves, some aspect of our personality. It can be the whiny child who wants another biscuit, or it can be the stern schoolteacher saying, "No, you've had enough."

He likens our condition to being like a committee. We're not a person. We're a committee. And we're a committee at loggerheads with one another, one member shouting at the other. Often a lot is going on under the surface. We're not very honest because we actually don't know ourselves that well. There's an awful lot of subconscious activity going on. It's not even a committee, he says—it's more like a corrupt town council, where people are taking bribes from each other and stabbing each other in the back.

We really have a bit of a job with all these conflicting desires, and somehow trying to survive in the midst of all this is no joke.

Now, one other possibility we have here is to see the detail of the arising of desire. Desire is born from either pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

And the feeling, if you remember, is just the recognition of some sense impression as being pleasant or unpleasant. So we smell the food, for example, at dinner. That's a pleasant aroma, and it would lead to the desire: "Okay, I want to get stuck into this now." And then the self is created in order to pick up the spoon and shove it into our mouth and get going on eating.

If we can notice all of that—the aroma, and then the sudden way the system is ready to eat, the tension in the muscles ready to pick up knives and forks—if we can see that and just stop, just let it go, don't act on the desire, and let it all die away, what we'll have at some stage, a little bit later when the system has relaxed, will be again simply the pleasant aroma. Can you stay at that level of a pleasant aroma?

If we practice this, the desire then is just letting itself burn out. And if we can stay at that level of just pleasant vedanā, life is so peaceful. We don't have the urgency of desire. We don't have the stress of a self being created to fulfill them all.

The Buddha says this is really how we let suffering die away: we stay at the level of sense contact and vedanā, of knowing our sense impressions, knowing whether they're pleasant or unpleasant, but allowing desires to fade away. And they do burn away. So it's really for us to see that desires do burn—they do just fade away. If we don't indulge them, if we don't suppress them, they just burn away. It's very interesting.

Now, they come up again a second later, and you have to let that one burn away too. So it's a patient process. But to see at least one, just that it dies away, and I could be with this dinner even for a few moments with just the pleasure and no stress, no need to hurry, just appreciating—that's an example of the peaceful life we could live, and we will all live when we come to the end of suffering, when we abandon all our desires.

I just want to leave this with the reminder that we don't have to judge ourselves wrong for having desires.

We can use desires skillfully to get to the end of suffering.

There's a conversation between Ānanda and a brahmin, who is asking Ānanda about the way to the end of suffering. "For what purpose, Master Ānanda, is the holy life lived under the Buddha, the ascetic Gotama?"

"It is for the sake of abandoning desire, brahmin, that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One."

"But, Master Ānanda, is there a path? Is there a way for the abandoning of this desire?"

"There is a path, brahmin. There is a way for the abandoning of this desire."

"But, Master Ānanda, what is the path? What is the way for abandoning of this desire?"

"Here, brahmin, a bhikkhu develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to desire and volitional formations of striving. He develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to energy..." and Ānanda goes through a whole lot more of them. "This, brahmin, is the path. This is the way for the abandoning of this desire."

So notice what Ānanda is saying: that we develop the basis for spiritual power due to desire. We desire our spiritual progress. We use that desire to develop our spiritual powers. So it's a bit of a conundrum, isn't it? We're using desire to get to the end of desire. We're striving to get to the end of striving.

The brahmin picks him up on this. He says, "Such being the case, Master Ānanda, the situation is interminable. It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself."

And so Ānanda answers, "Well then, brahmin, I'll question you about this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, brahmin? Did you earlier have the desire, 'I will go to the park'? And after you went to the park, did this corresponding desire subside?" He had gone to the park to meet Ānanda.

So the brahmin answers, "Yes, sir."

"Did you earlier arouse energy thinking, 'I will go to the park'? And after you went to the park, did the corresponding energy subside?"

"Yes, sir."

And Ānanda goes through them all like that.

He aroused volitional formations as well to go to the park. So he strove to go to the park. He desired to go to the park. He strove to go to the park. He got to the park. But then they all subsided. Desires simply subside after they've been fulfilled—or if we just watch them and let them burn out anyway.

So we can therefore let the desires we want to fulfill be fulfilled. Our desire is to meditate—we can act on that, we can allow that to be fulfilled. Our desire to come on retreat—we can strive like mad to go on retreat. And that desire, that striving, will simply pass away when we arrive at the retreat. We don't have

to be afraid of our desirous nature, our striving nature. We can use it in the right direction.

And so the Brahman is eventually completely convinced. Ananda asks him, "Well, what do you think now, Brahman? Is the situation terminable or interminable?"

"Surely, Master Ananda, such being the case, the situation is terminable, not interminable. Magnificent, Master Ananda! From today, let Master Ananda remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life."

So although desire is the cause of suffering, this is a gradual path, and we use our desire to come to the end of suffering to get us to the end of suffering.

Thank you.

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