The Third Noble Truth - The End of Unsatisfactoriness

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I thought this evening to talk a little bit about the third noble truth, the cessation of dukkha.

From the Vipassana guidelines that we were reading, the very last section offers some description of this—the goal of our path, the cessation of suffering, nibbāna. It goes: "There is the unborn, the undying, the uncreated, the unconditioned, refuge, harbour, home, perfect contentment and peace."

It's interesting to reflect on that. There are some beautiful analogies: refuge, harbour, home, perfect contentment and peace. But then, of course, there's the unborn, the undone, the uncreated, the unconditioned. That can stir confusion to some extent. What does that all mean?

I think the main thing is simply to be aware of what any reflections on nibbāna actually bring up in you. Let the reflection bring up whatever it brings up—whether it's peace and inspiration, or confusion and frustration. Allow that to be recognized, to be noted, and know that we're on the path to nibbāna. We'll find out eventually what it's actually all about.

In the main, the Buddha didn't speak much about nibbāna itself, but rather about the path to nibbāna. That's our focus too—to really work out how we stop suffering rather than spending a lot of time trying to figure out exactly what we're aiming for. What exactly is the unconditioned?

However, there is some value in also spending time trying to clarify what the goal is. Joseph Goldstein uses the analogy of walking through the woods at night. He wanted to get through the woods to reach his home. The fact that he knew his home was in that direction gave him the motivation, the stimulus, the energy, the wish to walk through the woods. He could stop and reflect on that destination to get through the woods if he got a bit dejected. But if he were to just look ahead and try to see his house at the other side of the woods, he'd probably stumble and fall and cause himself trouble.

In the same way, we can stop every now and again and reflect on nibbāna for some energy, for some stimulus to our path. But the main task is then to let go of all that and return to just this moment. Like him looking down at his feet, we take this step safely. We let go of the possible future, whatever it is, and we come back to the here and now, letting our practice lead us to nibbāna.

One way we can gain confidence that nibbāna is actually a very worthy goal is that as we do our practice, we see how it brings out the best in us and how it releases some level of stress and suffering in our lives. We can more and more trust that where we're going is actually a very worthy place.

The Buddha did use some words to describe nibbāna. One was "the end of dukkha"—that's perhaps the most common description. The end of all sense of dissatisfaction or stress or suffering of any kind. Dukkha does not apply there. He called it "unshakable bliss," and another term was "everlasting."

In that sense of everlasting, we see that transience doesn't apply—anicca doesn't apply. Nibbāna isn't a changing state like everything else in this universe that keeps slipping through our fingers. Nibbāna is unchanging, everlasting.

So dukkha and anicca do not apply. But that third characteristic we've talked about, anattā or not-self—it's arguable, and scholars do argue, but many would say that anattā does apply. Anattā applies to nibbāna in this sense: if there's a self, we're always trying to control things and manipulate things and hold them to ourselves. Whenever we reach nibbāna, we won't be able to hold it for ourself. There would be no wish even to hold it for ourself. It's not graspable, and we won't even want to grasp at it. The self brings about boundaries and limits and defensiveness. Nibbāna is without boundary, without limit.

One way the Buddha described it is: "Nibbāna exists, but not the one who enters it." Which is a nice way to put it. Something to reflect on.

Another way of stating that would be that nibbāna is the reality of non-grasping. The self gets created to grasp onto some desire. That's happening all through our lives. Something pleasant stimulates our senses, we feel the desire, and then a sense of self gets created in order to grasp onto that, to try to hold it and make it mine.

So our practice is always to relax, to let go as much as we can. And we can get little moments ourselves. We can tune in to little—you could call them temporary nibbānas. We can get tastes of the state of not grasping, when a desire fades away. It's a very subtle moment, so we don't always tune into it, but it's really worthwhile beginning to notice that sense of the ending of a desire. You might find there's actually no sense of me or mine at that moment. There isn't a sense of stress.

There isn't a sense of anything to defend.

So it really is worth beginning to tune in to these little moments—very momentary ones that we often don't notice at all, letting the next desire come up very quickly instead. But the more we tune in and notice them, we become so interested in them that the next desire won't come up quite so quickly. Every time desire fades, we get a little momentary taste of the peace of nibbāna.

Now, it's a very quiet happiness. It doesn't call our attention, and I think that's why we miss it. We said those who are mindful are in the presence of nibbāna—nibbāna is always present, but we simply don't notice it. We don't tune in to it. And that's really because it is so subtle, so quiet, while our minds are designed to tune in to drama. As we've been discussing, for survival we need to find out where the danger is, where the good stuff is. So our minds are attuned to the dramatic, the loud, the colorful, the difficult. They don't naturally tune in to what's unobtrusive, what's quiet, what's not a threat.

It takes a lot of practice for us to begin sensing those little unobtrusive, non-dramatic moments where there's no big storyline going on, nothing to take home, no big success on offer. Those moments are actually really worth tuning in to, but we have to persuade ourselves of that. We're so goal-oriented—we want spiritual progress, and we have this sense that there will be a big cheer when we get to nibbāna, great delight and everything. The quiet, subtle, unobtrusive little moments don't stimulate us. Our culture doesn't encourage looking for something unobtrusive, something you can't say much about, something you can't tell your friends about. It's not like a prize we tend to value—quietness and subtlety.

So we really have to train ourselves to tune in to quietness, to actually feel the value of it, to feel the immense peace that's on offer. And in those very quiet and unobtrusive moments, the mind easily wanders. That's what I've always found—we begin to lose interest as we get closer and closer to that kind of quietness. The mind starts making up all kinds of little stories. It's funny, it nearly goes delirious sometimes, just making up stories about anything and everything. So again, we just have to be patient with all of that. It's simply our minds not recognizing value, going into some sort of spin.

The Buddha did describe nibbāna as subtle, and at first he thought this state was so subtle that nobody else in the world could actually pick up on it. He wasn't going to teach at first. So we have to have a lot of patience. It does take time for subtlety to persuade us of its value, and even to persuade us that it's there. I remember one teacher saying that the first time she really noticed calm, her noting word had a little question mark on it. It was "calm?" She couldn't believe there was calmness. We really can disbelieve, not trust, and deny calmness. Possibly we're embarrassed because it's always been there—something in our mind says, "Oh my God, I've been overlooking something." There's all that embarrassment about having made a mistake, so we screen out the calmness that is always there. There will be all kinds of obstacles to noticing calm and subtlety, but the more we tune in, the more we'll have some sense of the goal of the path and its value.

When the Buddha talked about this world and nibbāna, he often used the analogy of fire—fire for this world of what's called saṃsāra, the opposite of nibbāna, this world we live in, the round of greed, hatred, and delusion. Fire going out is often the analogy for nibbāna, that moment when fire is extinguished. The word nirvāṇa is actually used, I think even commonly in India today, for cooling. People say, "Will you nirvāṇa the rice?" It's a cooling term. We have such lovely weather here this week that we can have a sense of the value of cooling. In our culture, sometimes cooling might not seem so great, but in India, with their very hot climate, cooling is greatly valued.

And fire, on the other hand, is aggressive, oppressive, threatening. So we have a sense of this world as oppressive, threatening, horrid, and then the ending of all of that—the relief when a fire goes out.

When the Buddha was enlightened, one quotation is that he surveyed the world with the eye of an awakened one. As he did so, he saw living beings burning with the many fevers and aflame with the many fires born of passion, aversion, and delusion. There's that sense that we are actually burning in our own

fevers, burning in our own passions and aversion and delusion.

In the culture of India at the time, fire was thought to be trapped by its own fuel. Fire has to stay in one place—it has to be a wood fire, trapped by the wood until the wood is all burnt out. It can be trapped by other things, grass and so on, and it's trapped there until the fuel is all burnt out.

In our case, then, the fuel is sense pleasure—wanting all the lovely stuff. And then views and opinions. We are very addicted to our views and opinions as well. How we love to be right, to persuade others of our views. So that's one of the fuels for keeping us here in saṃsāra: our very tight beliefs. And often we are quite afraid to examine our deepest beliefs, and that would include the belief in self. That's a hard one for us to examine.

Now again, in India at the time of the Buddha, once the fuel was exhausted and the fire went out, the understanding was that the fire then was freed. It existed in a latent form, hidden but extending throughout the universe. So that's some sort of analogy for us of the enlightened mind, the awakened mind, existing in a latent form, hidden but extending throughout the universe. No longer in that stage bound to its fuel. Unbinding is another term for Nibbāna.

Just a quotation relevant to that: at the death of the Buddha himself, one of his disciples, Anuruddha, says, "Like a flame going out was the liberation of awareness." The fire is freed. As the flame goes out, the fire is freed. We can't see it. We can't access it anymore ourselves directly. But the belief is that it's hidden and extending throughout the universe. We have no way of knowing its whereabouts or quantifying it in any way. It's beyond our measuring, our reckoning.

So questions like "Does the Buddha exist after death?" simply can't be answered, because the Buddha's existence or non-existence after death is indescribable in our terms.

There's a conversation between the Buddha and Upasīva about this. Upasīva is trying to get the Buddha to say whether the awakened person exists after death. The Buddha says, "There is nothing by which you can measure him. That by which he can be talked about is no longer there for him. You cannot say that he does not exist. When all ways of being, all phenomena are removed, all ways of description have also been removed."

We have that mystery—that it's not describable in our phenomenology.

So that's probably a good point to end. Nibbāna is beyond description.

But just going back to the Joseph Goldstein analogy of walking through the woods at night: to reflect on Nibbāna can be useful. And it's worth asking, how do you feel? I often ask myself that. How do I feel when I reflect on these kind of mysterious sayings?

Often it does bring up hindrances. The wish to know a little bit better, for me, might bring me into dullness or aversion of some description. The fact that this can't actually be put into words can be

frustrating. Obviously the path is just to bear with all of those hindrances, just let them burn out.

But what I always find is that once they have burned out, there's some new level of awareness where I'm seeing more beautiful qualities that little bit clearer. It could be peaceful sensations in the body. It could be emotions of kindness that I just hadn't really been able to access before.

I think the reflection on Nibbāna, no matter what it brings up, just allowing ourselves to sit with that will bring us towards Nibbāna.

So I think that's a good point at which to end. We'll just sit for a while.

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