1st, 2nd & 3rd Noble Truths: Dukkha, its Cause & Cessation

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Soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha decided to teach others how to follow his lead. He first sought out his earlier spiritual companions and told them of four observations that had led him to liberation. These later became known as the Four Noble Truths and are the cornerstone for all schools of Buddhism.

All truths concern dukkha, a Pali word usually translated as suffering, or sometimes as stress, distress, or unsatisfactoriness. Dukkha spans the full range of negativity we experience, from minor irritations to rage, terror, and despair.

The Buddha told his companions that liberation involved seeing for himself: this is suffering; this is the cause of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The word "this" refers to something close at hand. It's not an abstract idea to think about—it's something we can see or feel or experience here and now. This cup, this foot, this thought. We learn the Four Noble Truths from direct experience. We feel how suffering feels, discover what causes it, realize that suffering can stop, and let that guide us along the path that reduces suffering and brings it eventually to a complete end.

As we learn the Four Noble Truths, we move from delusion to an understanding of what causes suffering and what makes us happy. We often think of understanding as a purely intellectual, rational process. We think we should only have to learn the Dhamma once and then have this as a skill we can call upon any time, in the same way as we learned how to drive or fix a puncture. But the understanding we need for liberation is not purely cognitive. We have to take the Dhamma fully to heart. Until we're fully liberated, we'll be continually relearning the Four Noble Truths, feeling the dukkha in experience, searching for the cause.

The First Noble Truth is basically the Buddha's definition of dukkha: Birth is dukkha. Old age and death are dukkha. Sorrow, lamentations, and despair are dukkha. Being connected to what one dislikes is dukkha. Being separated from what one likes is dukkha. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. In short, the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha.

Birth is dukkha. We usually think of birth as joyous, but in fact physical birth is a painful and perilous process for mother and baby. It's when both are pronounced safe and well that the joy arises. Before that, it's touch and go between hope and fear.

We also get a flavour of this when we look closely at the start of any process—a new job, for example. Again, we think of it as good news, something to celebrate, but there is that awkward first day in the office: not knowing anyone or where things are kept or how not to be a nuisance, having to learn new procedures, watching our P's and Q's, taking care to make a good impression. It's not something we would want to do every day of our lives. It would be too stressful.

Now, some of us love new beginnings. There's a sense of potential. Anything could happen. If we're the optimistic type, we project all kinds of wonders into whatever it is—a new job, a new partner, the start of a holiday, the first few hours of a retreat. Everything is going to be perfect. We'll be enlightened in no time. This kind of over-the-top optimism is one manifestation of delusion. The truth is that we don't know what's going to happen, whether things will turn out well or not. And that experience of not knowing is so uncomfortable for us that we concoct lovely fantasies rather than feel the experience.

But after a year, or maybe only a week, of the new job or new partner—perhaps only a day or two into the holiday or retreat—we realise that it's not all a bed of roses, that the reality doesn't match up to the fantasies. And if things do turn out well and our expectations are all met or even exceeded, there will be a time when it all comes asunder. We'll someday have to retire from the job. The holiday will come to an end, as will the retreat. Our partner will die, or else we will die and leave it all behind: the job, the holiday, the loving relationships, all our retreats. Everything we know ends at death.

Death is the second example of dukkha which the Buddha gives. Our own physical death is indeed the big one. Unless we can say goodbye to all we hold dear, death will surely be a time of anguish. We can practice our goodbyes by paying attention to the ending of any activity or event. These can all be seen as mini-deaths.

We often make light of these endings by thinking ahead to what's to come, but that won't be an option at our real death, so we might as well pause at endings now, acknowledge that the holiday or the party or some particular task is coming to an end. There may be relief, a sense of something accomplished, a job well done. Such sentiment is to be treasured. If we can feel the same way at our own death, it will be a great gift.

We might also detect grief, knowing that something we were enjoying is now stopping. There can be a surprising amount of grief, even at the close of relatively trivial events, when we pay close attention.

On retreat at Gaia House one time, I was following the usual Mahasi practice of a single biscuit in the evening, but all the while envying the other retreatants their bowls of soup. I looked forward so much to the final day when I could have that evening treat. Sure enough, the day came and the soup was delicious. I savoured every mouthful until I noticed that the bowl was no longer even half full. A big wave of misery emerged and got stuck in my throat. It was my first real recognition of the truth that all pleasures come to an end. I got the Buddha's full whammy of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. I couldn't even finish my treasured bowl of soup, but went to my room and howled in misery.

Having realised the emotional impact of delusive over-expectations, I never built such high expectations out of sense pleasures again. This is the benefit of paying attention to endings. We move from delusion to wisdom, and instead of being continually disappointed by the world, by other people, we grow to accept that neither the world nor other people can bring us lasting happiness. We grow more forgiving of our own and others' limitations, more appreciative of whatever does happen to go right.

The Buddha summarizes dukkha by saying the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha. These aggregates of clinging are what we mistakenly assume to be our true selves—that essential element of me which has been with me since birth and will remain with me to death and perhaps hereafter. In Christianity, we would call this our soul.

The Buddha searched ardently for his essence and on the way discovered a series of false identities which ensnared him in dukkha. He used this discovery as the basis for his teaching on anatta, or not-self. To find our true essence, we must first see through all the false identities we assume.

At times we identify with the body, feeling proud of our strength or beauty, ashamed of our pimples and wrinkles. This is dukkha. The Buddha points out that such inconstancy is not worthy of being thought of as an essential part of our identity. At other times, we identify with our feelings, get deeply wounded when these are hurt—yet more dukkha. Sometimes we identify with perceptions, swear that the earth was created in seven days, are ready to die for our belief.

Then again, we can identify with character traits. Perhaps we assume kindness or generosity are essential components of our true self. But this means we have to suppress any suggestions of unkindness or meanness, pretend they aren't happening. More harmfully, we can identify with negative characteristics like self-doubt, thinking "I'm useless, I always make a mess of things." Though the identity is painful, it's also comforting, as we never get disappointed because we never expect much of ourselves.

The final aggregate is consciousness, where we assume our essence as the knowing of all our experience, thinking "I am the one who sees and hears and smells and tastes and thinks and experiences the joys and pains of life." The Buddha examined all of these areas but found all such identities to be inconstant, unreliable. Traits like generosity arose depending on conditions, feelings changed when circumstances changed, as did perceptions. None of these provided a stable foundation upon which he could declare, "This is my true self."

He also found that there was great pain, dukkha, in discovering each identity to be false. We cling vainly to our delusions, saying "I am feeling miserable" or "I am useless," refusing to believe that these experiences come and go depending on conditions.

The Buddha realised that peace came only when he relaxed all attempts to cling, when he let go of any attempt to define himself. His teaching on anatta asks us to recognize that clinging to identity causes suffering, prevents us adapting to circumstances, flowing with life's vicissitudes. Note that the Buddha

never denies that we have a self, an ultimate identity. He just says it cannot be defined or captured in any way that satisfies our craving for sense pleasure, our craving to be someone, or our craving to escape it all and be nobody. Any identity we find is temporary. It will eventually break up.

But we can use every temporary identity wisely. He repeatedly asks us to look after our long-term happiness by practicing the Dhamma. We can have and encourage a healthy sense of self, so long as we know this as a friend on the path, a temporary gift, not our ultimate essence.

In summary then, the first noble truth describes dukkha and tells us that we must fully understand it. We can look for dukkha in any new beginning and in every ending—in parting, in saying goodbye, when we're in sorrow, pain or despair. We can turn towards these as opportunities to learn more about dukkha and its causes.

Similarly, when we're getting over-identified with a role or job, believing "this is me" or "this is definitely not me"—these are again perfect opportunities to study dukkha.

The second truth the Buddha wants us to learn is what causes dukkha. We think that the problem lies with the world, or other people, or the laws of nature. But the Buddha discovered that the cause was within ourselves. Desire—*taṇhā* in Pali—caused him to suffer. *Taṇhā* includes what we usually call aversion: the desire to be rid of something.

We suffer because we want more of the nice stuff—cakes and ale and rock and roll, praise, adulation, fame, beauty, health, youth. And when life gives us instead dry bread and blame and loneliness and old age with its wrinkles and decrepitude, we don't know how to cope.

The Buddha's wonderful discovery was that when he stopped wanting things to be anything other than the way they were, suffering also stopped. Even physical pain did not have to cause suffering. Once he accepted the pain, stopped making it a problem, suffering stopped. He was at peace.

But as we all know, we can't command ourselves to accept pain or whatever other dukkha life is presenting. That would be to suppress dukkha, not to uproot it. Luckily, we have the capacity to learn that desire causes suffering. As that understanding sinks deeper, desire loses its grip.

On the way, however, we have to learn to work skillfully with the many deluded desires that arise every day. For this, we have mindfulness. We watch ourselves longing vainly for things to be different. We're not suppressing desire—we're using the experience to learn the second noble truth. Is desire really the cause of suffering? With this curiosity in mind, desire loses some of its edge.

Say it was the desire for fame. We've been looking at Celebrity MasterChef and envying the winner, wanting everyone drooling over our crème caramel. If we turn away from the screen and use this opportunity to study *taṇhā*, we're halfway there. Desire might fade as soon as we spot it, and we realise how silly it was to be thinking that way.

Other desires run too deep to stop on recognition. In that case, we feel the stresses and strains of longing. Watched mindfully, the desire at first grows very strong, but eventually burns out. The energy of desire usually drives thought and fantasies, which in turn feed that very desire. But now all that energy is contained by mindfulness. It's as if we've put ourselves into a pressure cooker. For a while, the energy might tense our jaws, our throat, our chest. We might be panting with unfulfilled desire. But after a while, desire exhausts itself and fades away.

If we're lucky, we sense a moment of peace as desire fades. The absence of desire is a very beautiful experience, which the Buddha recognized as his third noble truth: the end of suffering.

We're so lucky that the Buddha did the hard work of pinpointing this, because otherwise few of us would take any notice of that moment of peace as desire fades. Unless we examine it, bring deliberate attention to it, peace is easily overlooked. It doesn't call attention. It's not a loud experience of joyous bliss that shouts, "This is wonderful!" It's simply the absence of any trouble.

Our whole psychology and physiology is designed to be on alert for trouble and for enticement. It's part of our animal nature. We need to survive, so we have to be on the lookout for danger and also for food, shelter, our pals, and whatever will help us survive. We're not biologically designed to make a big thing out of peace.

That's why it's so easy for us to miss that brief moment when desire fades, to instead notice the next thing that grabs our attention, then have a new desire form around that. To sensitise ourselves to the third noble truth, we need to cultivate a taste for peace. Instead of booking one party after another, we spend some time in quietness—meditating perhaps, or walking in nature, sitting by the fire, listening to birdsong.

This might not always feel so peaceful. We may have to combat our cultural conditioning to be always busy, always achieving something. So we might feel anxious or guilty sitting down doing nothing for an evening. Peace is actually not that easy to tolerate for long. The self, the "me" I presume myself to be, needs a role, a purpose. It wants to be getting something or getting somewhere.

overcoming problems or doing good, affecting the world in some way. In perfect peace, there is nothing for me to do, no problems to solve. Most of us simply doze off after a minute or two, or else we grow restless, start to create problems just so we can solve them.

What we're seeing here is the dukkha of identification. We want to be someone. We want definition. The self is born from reactivity—reacting against what we dislike, busily trying to get rid of it, reacting with desire for what we like, busy planning how to prolong the pleasure, get more of it, be someone important.

To practice with the third noble truth, we can use any moments of peace wisely. Let them be felt, noticed. Notice the tendency to burst out of it with some new identity and just keep relaxing all of that, telling ourselves it's fine to be redundant, to take it easy, have no role to play in life. Quite a practice.

Another way we can practice with the third truth is to start appreciating absences. We usually associate absence with grief, but rarely acknowledge that many absences are very beautiful. We easily notice pain, but we can also start to look out for parts of the body that are not in pain. The Buddha also advises us to notice when we're not angry, for example, not feeling greedy. When we're feeling uptight and frustrated, we can reflect that dullness and lethargy are absent. We can notice when others aren't irritating us or demanding anything.

A retreat is an especially rich time for this. I used to think of my mother as very demanding, always asking me for something or other. It was quite an eye-opener to reflect that while I was on retreat, she was looking after herself, not putting me under any pressure. At first, I actually resisted the thought. My locked-in image of her as demanding was so strong it could not be budged. But gradually, I learned to acknowledge and be grateful for the fact that she was looking after herself quite well while I was away. I began to see her more realistically, admire and respect her strength of character. Our relationship improved, and I'm very thankful that in her last years, when she was more dependent on me, I didn't see this as a burden. Much of the time it was so easy and natural, I hardly thought about it at all. Something I had dreaded throughout much of my adult life turned out to be no problem and, on the contrary, a source of quiet joy.

If there is someone in your life who you see as oppressive in some way, it might really pay off to reflect that while you're here on retreat, they aren't oppressing you.

We can also notice physical absences. When an ugly shed was demolished in this garden, the Dhamma teacher Stephen Batchelor spent days looking out the window, noticing the absence of the shed. In a similar way, we can notice that wherever we walk, there is space letting us pass through. We can look for the gaps between houses in the city, see the sky beyond.

As we attune to space and absences and quiet, peaceful moments when life isn't troubling us, we deepen our understanding of the third noble truth, which the Buddha usually describes very simply as the end of suffering. To give a bit more flavour, we have these analogies from the monk Nagasena:

Just as space is not produced, does not age, does not suffer death, cannot be carried away by thieves, rests on nothing, is the pathway of birds, presents no obstacles, is endless—so also nibbāna is not produced, does not age, does not suffer, cannot be carried away by thieves, rests on nothing, is the pathway of the noble, presents no obstacles, is endless.

The great ocean is all in blossom with the flowers of waves, mighty, various, unnumbered. Precisely so, nibbāna is all in blossom with the flowers of purity, knowledge and deliverance, mighty, various and unnumbered.

Even a brief taste of the peace that comes as desire fades will stir the skilful desire to find our way to nibbāna, which is exactly the concern of the fourth noble truth, known also as the noble eightfold path.

I had been meditating for a while before it eventually sank in that meditation wasn't the whole of the spiritual life, that the eightfold path described many other areas of life that counted too. That gave me great joy and continues to do so. If I'm feeling glum and demotivated about work, I can reflect that my work is part of right livelihood, one of the strands of the eightfold path. That lifts my spirits, helps me to take on the work more willingly. Everything can be lifted from the dull and ordinary when we reflect that this is also leading towards liberation.

The path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality, and the cultivation of our mind and heart through meditation. Each of the eight strands is described as "right"—right understanding, right attitude, and so on. This can make the path seem like a set of rigid rules to follow. "Disentangled" is perhaps a better translation. It's a good description of what happens as we follow the path. We sense our thought processes straightening out, our emotional life disentangling. We become more straightforward in our dealings with others. In meditation, we can often feel ourselves getting into knots of tension as the hindrances show up, and then feel the relief as those knots loosen in the light of awareness.

Because "disentangled" is a bit of a mouthful, I'll follow the convention of calling each step "right this" or "right that." But bear in mind the gentler and more evocative sense that we disentangle ourselves from the binds of dukkha as we develop our path.

The first section is right understanding. We suffer because of not understanding what causes suffering and what prevents it. Reflecting on the four noble truths starts us on the journey from delusion to wisdom. Experiencing these truths in moment-to-moment awareness lets them sink in deeply so that we take the Dhamma to heart.

This naturally changes our attitude, so that we become more kindly, generous, and compassionate. This is what we mean by right attitude, the second strand of the Eightfold Path.

We can also cultivate right attitude by practicing mettā meditation. Mettā is usually translated as goodwill or loving-kindness. We wish ourselves and others to be well and happy. This undermines habits like anger. In our gardening analogy, you could say it covers over the weeds, preventing them from getting any sunlight. They can't thrive and sow more seeds.

When we feel our own pain or see that someone else is in physical or mental pain, the friendly attitude of mettā takes on the hue of compassion. We're sensitive to the suffering, careful not to make it any worse, ready to do whatever needs to be done to make things easier. At heart, we wish ourselves and others to be free from suffering.

When something welcome happens, mettā shades into muditā, often translated as appreciative joy. We are gladdened by good news. We're ready to congratulate ourselves for any achievement, no matter how small. Even getting out of bed can be an achievement some days. When we hear of another's success, we feel happy for them.

Mettā cultivates friendliness, while compassion helps us bear suffering, and muditā lets us appreciate our many blessings. All of these need the support of equanimity.

Without equanimity, mettā easily overshoots into attachment, and we become more dependent on our friends for our own sense of worth. With equanimity, we learn to accept that friends have separate lives, other responsibilities, other affections.

Without the balance of equanimity, compassion slides into pity. We see ourselves as the stronger party, caring for the weaker one. It can become an addiction—needing to be needed. Equanimity restores the balance, lets us see the strength at the core of the other's being.

Muditā easily overshoots into excitement. We celebrate madly and go to excess. When the bills come in, we're shocked. Equanimity helps us recognize joy as a temporary gift, while knowing that all earthly joys are bound to fade.

The Mettā Sutta is a beautiful description of right attitude. We chant this every morning in Pāli. Here's an English translation read by Mark Arthur, another teacher here at Satipañña:

So this is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace. Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways, peaceful and calm and wise and skillful, not proud or demanding in nature.

Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove. Wishing, in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none—the great or the mighty, medium, short, or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to be born—may all beings be at ease.

Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding.

And by not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision, being freed from all sense desires, is not born again into this world.

Right understanding and right attitude combine as wisdom, the first section of the Eightfold Path. The next

section, termed sīla in Pāli, concerns the expression of wisdom in daily life. Sīla is usually translated as morality or ethics. I'm going to use the Pāli word sīla because we often associate morality with a strict, joyless approach to life.

Family photos from Victorian times illustrate this. No one smiles. The children look miserable in their heavy, awkward clothes. An austere father towers over them while his wife sits demurely at his side, laced and buttoned to within an inch of her life. Desire finds no expression in this picture of morality.

But we need to remember that desire can also be wise. The desire to be happy is perhaps our most basic drive in life. It only gets us into trouble because we don't rightly understand what allows for happiness, what causes suffering. The Buddha promises us that if we follow this path, we will be content and therefore happy.

Morality in this life is seen as a step toward happiness. *Sīla* is not an easy matter. For each of us, there will be difficult ethical questions to face at many stages in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response in complex situations, along with a stout heart to meet the challenge. We also need to be patient with our many mistakes, not torment ourselves about them. But remember, we can learn to do better.

The Buddha divides *sīla* into three sections: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Here are three areas of life where we can tailor our behavior so as to promote our own long-term happiness. Tomorrow's talk is on daily life, and as *sīla* is so relevant to this, I won't discuss it further here. Tomorrow I'll give suggestions as to how we can develop *sīla* as we go about our everyday business.

The last section of the Eightfold Path concerns the cultivation of mind and heart in meditation practice. And as we've been engaged in this all week, I'll only briefly mention it here. The Buddha describes three aspects to cultivate: right effort, mindfulness, and concentration. So here we have again the leading trio in our wild geese—mindfulness, energy, concentration.

To see their interrelation, we have the analogy of three children wanting to pick fruit from a tree. None of them is tall enough to reach the fruit, so the strongest one, right effort, bends over to let the tallest one, right concentration, stand on his back, while the steadiest of the three, right mindfulness, provides a shoulder to lean on. Supported by right effort, balanced by mindfulness, concentration can then pluck the fruit. Again, I'll say more about this and all aspects of the Eightfold Path tomorrow as we look at how we can maintain and strengthen our meditation practice in daily life.

In summary, the Four Noble Truths concern *dukkha* and how to bring it to an end. The Buddha said that his own liberation came from fully understanding *dukkha*, from seeing that desire was the cause. As he let go of desire, he realized that *dukkha* came to an end, simply stopped happening. To bring it to a permanent close, he followed the Eightfold Path.

Lost in the jungle of ignorance, we ponder the Four Noble Truths to get an inkling of what causes suffering and what relieves it. As the truth sinks in, our attitude grows friendlier. The sword of wisdom cuts through

some tangles of delusion to form a clearing. *Sīla* blossoms in the form of right speech, action, and livelihood, to be rewarded by the law of karma so that we become happier. The jungle no longer seems so threatening, and we rest a while in the clearing to cultivate our mind and heart in meditation. Supported by effort, led and balanced by mindfulness, our mind focuses on the diamond and the Four Noble Truths sink in even deeper. This sharpens the sword of wisdom, which cuts through another thicket of delusion. Step by step, we form the path that leads from the jungle of ignorance to the freedom of enlightenment.

In what is termed his victory verse, the Buddha uses the analogy of a house builder to describe the delusive desire, *taṇhā*, that drives us to seek our essence within the world, to build castles in the air. The ridge pole for these castles is ignorance, our lack of understanding about *dukkha* and its cause. Here is the Buddha's victory verse:

Seeking but not finding the house builder,
I have travelled through the round of countless births.
How painful is birth over and over again.
Oh house builder, you have now been caught.
You shall not build a house again.
Your rafters have been broken,
Your ridge pole demolished.
The unconditioned consciousness has been attained
And every kind of craving has been destroyed.

I hope this overview of the Four Noble Truths has been helpful. May all beings come to the end of suffering.

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