Second and Third Noble Truths: Cause and Cessation of Dukkha

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Tonight I'm going to talk about the second and third noble truths.

The second truth states that desire is the cause of dukkha, and the injunction is to let go of desire. The third truth states that there is an end to dukkha, with the injunction to realize this for ourselves. These truths manifest more clearly as we learn to experience the twelve links in the process that leads to dukkha, described in the Wheel of Dependent Origination. Each link depends on all the previous links having been made. We chant these twelve steps every morning.

It all starts with avijja, usually translated as ignorance. We often hear that word as an insult, but that's not what is intended here. Instead, it means we don't fully understand what causes suffering. One interpretation of this teaching is to see it happening over multiple lifetimes, with each life influencing the next. It's also possible to see the wheel turning again and again within our lifetime, our incomplete understanding of the Dhamma leading us into dukkha at many stages in life. We can even see it turning within the minutiae that we study in meditation practice. Each breath, each footstep, each mood, emotion, thought—to the extent that these emerge from avijja, they result in dukkha.

Bhante stresses that avijja is a blameless ignorance. We didn't create ourselves in this ignorant state, so we're not to blame for our predicament. At heart, we are innocents. Most of us will admit to avijja. Even if we've studied the Dhamma and are convinced by the argument that greed leads to suffering, we can happily scoff an ice cream, telling ourselves we'll practice renunciation tomorrow. And when someone pushes our buttons, we still find ourselves reacting, despite the fact that we've heard and read countless teachings on the benefits of equanimity. Once we fully understand the teachings, ignorance will be eliminated and the wheel will no longer get a chance to turn.

In the meantime, however, avijja allows sankaras to emerge. Sankaras are the drives which push us into and through our lives. These include greed, hatred, and delusion—the strong forces which propel us towards dukkha. We also have beautiful sankaras, for example metta, which means love or goodwill, as well as all the factors of enlightenment and spiritual faculties. In their purest form, these are not linked with avijja but with wisdom. Thus, they do not cause the wheel to turn. They don't propel us into dukkha. It's only the sankaras related to greed, hatred, and delusion that turn the wheel.

So far, we have ignorance and an unskillful sankara beginning to roll the wheel. In order to exercise their driving power, they need to become conscious. To be conscious is to know experience, to hear sounds, feel

body sensations. If we're unconscious, we have no awareness of what's going on. Consciousness is often likened to a screen on which a movie is projected. The story of our lives is displayed on the screen of consciousness. In this case, consciousness has been hijacked by a sankara rooted in ignorance. The Buddha gives this form of consciousness the name vijnana.

The drive now operating through consciousness wants to play a particular movie on the screen. A sankara of greed might want a romantic movie with lots of food and sex, while a sankara of ill-will would prefer a violent movie. A sankara of delusion just wants to control the projector. It wants to play a movie within the movie, to be the producer, director, and central star of all the movies.

For consciousness to manifest in the world, we need both body and mind. Our bodies are part of the physical world of matter. Our minds inhabit the world of thought and imagination. The pair are termed nama-rupa and form the fourth link in the wheel. Rupa gives the three previous links physical reality, which is felt and recognized in our mind. From this, we can see our emotional life as having bodily as well as mental components. Avijja and sankara become conscious and can then express themselves through body and mind.

Let's go back to our gardening analogy that we used for the hindrances. The soil is avijja, ignorance. It contains seeds of unwholesome sankaras. These can grow up to be hindrances if they can work their way through the next links. The seed germinates in consciousness. If you've watched seeds germinate, you will know that two shoots start to emerge, one growing downwards to become the root system, the other growing upwards towards the light. This makes for a neat analogy with the subdivision of consciousness into nama-rupa once it comes under the influence of avijja and sankara.

The sankara now has almost all the apparatus needed to make trouble for us. It just needs to decide which of our senses to work through: the tactile sensory system that runs throughout our bodies, or the auditory system ready to receive sounds, or the visual system, taste, smell, or our sixth sense, which is the mind with its feelings, perceptions, moods, emotions, and thoughts. These sense bases form the fifth link in the wheel. Working through nama-rupa, consciousness can manifest through any of these systems.

Now our sankhara is ready to sprout into the world. Say, for example, it was a seed of greed. It can now look out greedily through our eyes. It can search the mind for happy memories or exciting plans. Similarly for all the other senses. In our gardening analogy, our seed has found six channels—perhaps six little gaps between stones—through which it can sprout up above ground.

This brings us to the sixth link in the wheel: sense contact. A new bit of sense data impacts on our psychophysical system. In our experience, all of the first six links arise simultaneously. We don't experience avijja on its own, for example, or the avijja-sankhara combination. It's only when these meet with the world as it impacts on our senses that we become conscious of all six links. We can sense these working in combination to colour our experience at any moment. We might recognise the sankhara of ill-will, for example, and the way it inhabits our body—narrowing our eyes, perhaps, as well as our mind.

Maybe we feel angry. We might sense some slight uncertainty along with this, or else a bull-headed determination to ignore all obstacles—manifestations of avijja.

The fact that we are aware of anything is due to consciousness, so we can trace all of the first six links in our moment-to-moment experience. I had a good experience of this one time during walking meditation. I was quite content until someone came into the room making a lot of noise. I could have sworn the room got darker. Because of mindfulness I could see that the darkening was internal, in my mind, but I was struck at how vividly this was projected into the outside world, as if the sun had gone behind a cloud.

By now we have come halfway around the wheel. From sense contact onwards, the process occurs sequentially. Let's say the new bit of data was a sound. As soon as we detect the sound, our cognitive processes go into action, opening the filing cabinet of perception to try to classify it. What the sankhara needs is to have the sound classified as a threat or an opportunity for pleasure. So cognition compares the sound with those it has previously recognised as threats, such as a loud bang, and opportunities, such as the jingle of the ice cream van. It also compares with the myriad familiar sounds—like birdsong or distant traffic—which are unimportant in terms of this sankhara's survival.

The new sound can be classified anywhere on a very wide scale: from red alert, major danger, to minor irritation, through unimportant, to mildly pleasant, to wonderful opportunity not to be missed. This classification gives a hedonic value to the sound. If you are familiar with this teaching, you'll recognise that what I'm getting at here is vedana—the recognition of any sense contact as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Vedana, usually translated as feeling, forms the seventh link in the chain leading from ignorance to dukkha. Vedana is arguably the most important link for us to recognise because we can stop the wheel turning at this point. If we can recognise unpleasant sounds, sensations, and so forth without reacting, no dukkha is generated. Using our gardening analogy, the shoot got its first bit of sunlight and has turned green, so it can be seen by the gardener of mindfulness. So far it has been concealed underground and we couldn't influence it, but at this point mindfulness can see the shoot and uproot the weed.

Without mindfulness, our system automatically reacts to vedana. If the sound had been classified as neutral—neither a threat nor an opportunity—our system screens it out. Consciousness barely registers the sound and it's quickly forgotten. This is an example of neutral vedana and the reaction of delusion: ignoring most of our experience, only barely conscious of our environment. This isn't the same as letting go of the sound mindfully. It's an act of ignoring, a form of suppression. The sound isn't allowed to get any attention. If we were to look more closely at such sounds, we might find judgments like "unimportant" or "boring" backing up the neutral classification. This is due to the work of our sankhara seed, jealously guarding consciousness so that the screen will only play a movie it enjoys.

On the other hand, if the sound was recognised as our favourite music, this will be classified as an opportunity for pleasure—pleasant vedana. Our system will be stimulated to perk up. We listen avidly.

This is the reaction of desire, our system's first step in getting what it wants. When desire is strong, it can be felt as a strong flow of energy in the body and a focusing effect in the mind—the mind starting to zoom in on whatever it wants, magnifying this in consciousness.

Now let's say the sound was a loud bang. Cognition classifies this as a red alert and our whole system vibrates with shock, waking us up to the danger. This is the fight-or-flight response, and hormones may be released to stimulate and energise us. We start to tense up as unpleasant sensations prolong and amplify the original red alert response. This is the reaction of aversion—our system's first step in trying to cope with danger. Aversion is actually another form of desire: the desire to get rid of what we dislike.

As we bring our attention to the sensations of breathing, we can experience the three links of contact, vedana, and any reactions of desire or aversion.

Sense contact reveals the rising and falling sensations. Then there is the cognition of these as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. So far we have two links: contact and feeling. It is very beneficial to rest attention here and learn to differentiate these two from desire.

We feel desire as a disturbance that quickly turns the wheel towards dukkha. This gives a visceral illustration of the second noble truth—that desire is the cause of suffering. When we sense the disturbing effect of desire, we can at times be persuaded to relax and let go. We feel the benefit as deeper tranquility.

Sometimes our system oscillates between the tranquility afforded by letting the wheel stop at vedana and little jabs of desire that lead to dukkha. At such times our system is reinforcing its understanding of the second and third noble truths: that desire is the cause of suffering, and that letting go of desire brings an end to suffering.

If we're not being mindful, the wheel continues inexorably towards dukkha. The next link is termed clinging or attaching. We become attached, and attachment brings up a sense of self to protect and guard our position. If we're mindful, we can feel this happening.

Let's look at how a sense of self might manifest as a result of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling.

Say we get a compliment. Lots of lovely feelings may manifest as a result. You might feel energised. There may be a sense of expanding, growing taller, as well as a sense of power and control. I like Gregory Kramer's description of this as "puffing up."

On the other hand, suppose you're waiting at a bus stop, just idling the time away. You're vaguely aware of your body, the passing traffic, and the scene around you, but not interested in these. Instead, you're planning the rest of your day after the bus comes. Here we have an example of how sankhara can feed on neutral feelings. The incoming sense data cannot satisfy its needs, and so this is suppressed. Instead, the seed sprouts through the channel of the mind. Here it finds the excitement and pleasure it desires in the ability of the mind to imagine and plan.

Do you remember Walter Mitty? If you read the story or saw the movie, you will recognise him as a caricature of delusion, pouncing on every idle moment to indulge his fantasy life.

Suppose, as you're idling away at the bus stop, a car passes at speed, splashing you with water from a puddle, drenching your trousers. This time you might feel yourself deflating rather than puffing up. This is the emergence of self resulting from aversion. It can feel like the air going out of a balloon. The deflation may implode to form a tight constriction. Your face tenses angrily. You might feel constricted within your skin, facing a hostile world outside.

These are all examples of clinging or attaching—upadana in Pali. At this step we have the emergence of a sense of self. The mind does a bit more shuffling around in its enormous filing cabinet and decides to classify the incoming sense data as "me" or "mine."

When we get the compliment, instead of simply feeling happy and gratified that something has turned out well, we think it is *me* who is being complimented. This sense of "me" quickly projects itself into the future, and we start feeling powerful, thinking we will always be able to do so well. A very nice way to feel, if only it weren't based on delusion.

When we suppress neutral sensations in order to daydream, the pleasure of being idle is perceived as *me* who has the power to think and plan and daydream. When we cling to anger at the careless driver, we take their carelessness personally. So we don't just get wet—we get insulted.

In our gardening analogy, the weed has blossomed. It's fully developed and is ready to start sowing its seeds.

Our sense of self initiates the next link. *Bhava* in Pali is usually translated as "becoming." We experience this as willpower. The self puts its stamp on the world by an effort of will. Up till now, the sankhara is held as a potential within our body and mind. Now comes the moment for action.

We might shake our fists at the careless driver, hurl insults towards the back of their car. We might smile at the person who paid us the compliment and bring a more animated tone into the conversation. Even thoughts are willed. They don't emerge spontaneously from our mind, but from the intention to think. Willpower keeps us idling at the bus stop, imagining the rest of our day. Think of the effort of will it takes to stop this—to be mindful instead of being lost in thought.

This gives us some idea of the strength of will fuelling idle thoughts.

In our gardening analogy, the weed is now sowing its seeds. Each effort of will drops a new seed into the soil of ignorance. As we indulge hatred, we sow sankhara seeds of hatred. Similarly for greed and delusion. We shape our own character in the multitude of moments in which we exercise our will. A sobering thought. I'll say more about this tomorrow night.

Once we have exercised our will, something new starts to manifest in the world. This is the penultimate

link, termed birth. Say the seed of greed was at the base of this particular turn of the wheel, and it found its outlet in reaction to the alluring smell of pizza. The self forms and wills us to get that pizza into our mouth. Thus the whole process of purchasing and eating a pizza is born. If instead the seed of ill will had found its outlet in the careless driver, an angry self forms, angry thoughts are willed into being, and a storm of rage initiates. Whenever the seed of delusion finds a mind willing to indulge it, we generate a stream of thoughts and images, and we start planning or daydreaming or worrying—whatever is our favourite pastime in idle moments.

The chain of events which we have just started gives our sankhara lots and lots of opportunities to sow more seeds. But every birth leads to death, the last link in the chain. Our idle plans and dreams fall apart when we get that splash from the passing car. Our pizza heaven disintegrates when all that's left on our plate is a few smears of tomato paste. Our bus stop rage could deflate into embarrassment if the car stops, the driver gets out to apologise, and we realise we're hurling insults at our neighbour.

With death comes all the dukkha of dying. The enticing pizza turns into a bloated tummy and worries about putting on weight. The plans for our day rarely work out quite so easily as we expect. The bout of rage ends up giving us a headache and raises our blood pressure.

We can sometimes identify these later links—from contact onwards to dukkha—while emotions fade away in mindful awareness. Say, for example, I've been clinging to rage over some troubling memory. A strong sense of self insists on my viewpoint in the affair. I feel self-righteous and indignant. I can't understand how the other person could have behaved so badly. Mindfulness shows me the effort and strain needed to maintain my self-righteous stance. I feel the tensions running through my body, the fear and confusion that are maintaining my sense of enmity. I am witnessing the stage of dukkha, the final link in the chain.

Sadly, I admit to myself that the effort is too much, that it's taking up all my energy and not getting me anywhere. I realise I will have to let go. Sometimes the emotion simply dissolves at that point. At other times, when the emotion has really run deep, letting go is a very gradual process. Although this prolongs the pain, it also helps me clarify the earlier stages in the wheel.

Once I decide to let go, there is a slight loosening of tension, and I now have the mental space to see more clearly. I feel the allure of self-righteousness, how wonderful it is to be morally superior. What I am now feeling is the dukkha associated with birth. I no longer want this particular birth into self-righteousness and rage, but I have no choice in the matter. Thoughts condemning the other person hammer through my mind. I feel the intense pressure pushing my face into a grimace, pushing my stomach into a knot, pushing the thoughts into my mind.

As I watch this mindfully, the emotion loses power and the thoughts dwindle down to an attempt to sustain them. I can sense willpower pushing the thoughts into being. Because of mindfulness, they now can't get much further than a sort of jabbering: *you, you, you*. What is clarifying for me here is the link of

becoming—the way we push our emotions out into the world by an effort of will. I also feel the pain of each little jabber, each attempt to define myself as separate from the other person. So this is the dukkha associated with becoming.

In time, that effort of will too fades away, and I'm left in a perplexed state, trying to hold myself together. No thoughts form at this stage. It's as if I'm mesmerised. My mind has no flexibility to think. I'm usually holding my breath too. I feel totally stuck. What I'm experiencing here is the dukkha associated with clinging. My system is stuck in body and in mind as desire fastens me to what it desires—in this case, to rewrite the past, to rid myself of the painful memory.

Eventually, the need to breathe overcomes the attachment. I feel my stuck state dissolve as I take those first tentative breaths.

The sense of self fades, and instead I feel a strong pushing sensation in my body that I recognize as aversion. I feel my attempts to push against the painful memory, to shut it out from consciousness. This is the link of desire, in this case in its negative form of aversion—the desire to get rid of the painful memory.

If I can hold attention steady on this pushing sensation, it eventually relaxes, and I sense the painful memory and the bare sensations involved in grief. But there is some flow now. The memory can flow through my mind and unpleasant sensations flow through the body. I might react occasionally and feel the dukkha of enmity. This is now so obviously futile and painful that I'm persuaded to relax again and open to the grief and the painful memory.

These are the stages of contact and feeling. I feel the sensations of grief. I am aware of the memory and also of the unpleasantness of the whole experience. But because I know the pain and futility of aversion, I do not react. Wisdom overcomes aversion.

If I can hold steady on that kernel of not wanting, it dissolves moment after moment as it contacts the painful memory and the sensations of grief. The seeds of ill-will are still sprouting in the seedbed of ignorance, hijacking consciousness for their favourite movie, finding their outlets in the emotion of grief and the pain of the memory. But the wheel stops at vedanā. Aversion is not being generated, and therefore the wheel cannot turn towards dukkha. The process is now sensed as a healing one, and compassion arises. Sooner or later, I start to see things from the other person's point of view.

As we watch the wheel turn and get to know the feel of its various links, we're also cleaning up the seedbed of ignorance, the first link in the chain. Our understanding of the Dhamma is increasing, and so ignorance is transforming to wisdom. Thus the wheel gets fewer chances to start turning.

What can we say about those moments when the wheel isn't actively turning? This brings us to the Third Noble Truth: that there is an end to suffering. Our task, according to the Buddha, is to realize this for ourselves.

So far, I've been talking about the experience of dukkha. To get to know the Third Noble Truth, we have to sensitize ourselves to the absence of dukkha. One danger that's easy to fall into is to over-dramatize this experience. The end of dukkha is the culmination of all our training, our years of practice. Surely it should come with loud applause, hoops of delight, balloons and fireworks. But in fact we sense the absence of dukkha in quiet moments that don't call for any special attention. Just to acknowledge the moment is enough. The penny drops. We realize Nibbāna is close at hand, there for the taking—our natural state.

Another way we screen out those quiet moments is to expect ourselves to be totally enlightened, or at least three-quarters of the way there, before we experience the end of dukkha. Of course there will for all of us be that wonderful moment when the teaching finally clicks into place and we know for certain that desire will never trouble us again. But even in our present unenlightened state we can experience fleeting moments when desire is stilled, when dukkha is not showing up.

There are various reflections that help develop our taste for quietness and the absence of drama. One is the translation of Nibbāna as cooling. The Buddha describes our unenlightened state as one of burning. All our senses are burning with desire. Unwittingly we keep loading on more fuel because of our attachments. But as we learn to let go, the fuel store is gradually burning out. We are cooling down. Nibbāna-ing, you could say.

As our passions cool off, what remains? Nibbāna is often described by absence—the absence of aging, death, pain, and any other form of suffering. Also the absence of what we would not normally think of as suffering. Here is an extract from one description the Buddha gave of Nibbāna:

There is, bhikkhus, that base where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no air, neither this world nor another world nor both, neither sun nor moon. Here, bhikkhus, I say there is no coming, no going, no staying, no deceasing, no uprising. Not fixed, not movable, it has no support. Just this is the end of suffering.

This description is perplexing, bewildering even. Remember that the Buddha first thought that the enlightened state he had discovered was too subtle to be understood by others. Hearing this description of Nibbāna, who could blame him?

Although the description is perplexing, I also find it intriguing and inspiring. I'm drawn towards the mystery. But it can also stir grief and anger, because we think of absence in terms of loss. Could absence actually satisfy us? That would entail a huge shift in our normal way of seeing things.

But we can tiptoe towards this mystery by learning to appreciate absences. The Buddha specifically asks us to do this in terms of our mind states. For example, we are to notice the mind state of greed and the mind state of non-greed, the mind state of hatred and the mind state of non-hatred. We would rarely ask ourselves what is not in our minds at the moment, but it is part of the practice which sensitizes us to Nibbana.

So whenever you are feeling relaxed, see can you note that you don't feel greedy right now and that you

don't feel angry right now. Thus we can deepen our appreciation of the state. We can also take note of the ending of any hindrance. If someone or something annoys us, we might be plagued by irritation for hours. Then it passes. We hardly notice the transition. But it's a very good time to be noting how pleasant it is not to feel irritated. The recent memory of how irritating it was to feel irritated helps us appreciate the absence.

I frequently get cramps in my feet. I used to dread these until I started using them as a Vipassana focus. It amazed me how quickly the pain diminished as I focused on it mindfully. It also intrigued me to find the moment when pain faded away. I noticed how my mind distanced itself as soon as pain started to fade, wanting to find something more interesting to latch on to. It became a good exercise for me to see could I keep track of those lingering sensations until they faded away.

We can practice this with any disturbance, mental or physical. That moment where desire fades away, for example. One moment we were disturbed by our longing for something, the next moment we weren't. It's so easy to miss these fleeting moments of peace as we hurl ourselves forward into the next challenge. But we need to pause for a moment to feel the momentary absence of trouble and learn to appreciate this.

Renunciation gives us an opportunity to practice with absences. This time we're being creative. We are creating an absence, a precious space which attunes us to Nibbana. If we decide not to watch TV for an hour some evening, a whole new space opens up in our lives. If we decide not to eat an extra biscuit, we're diminishing the power of greed as a disturbance in our psyche. Refraining from backbiting a person who annoyed us gives space for forgiveness to grow.

These sound easy but are quite challenging for most of us. It takes continual mindfulness to refrain from whatever is tempting us. Any little slip and we're turning on the TV, gobbling the biscuit, and passing a disparaging remark about the person who has annoyed us. The reward for renunciation is not immediately obvious, whereas the TV, the biscuit, and the catty remark all provide instant gratification. We need to fortify ourselves by considering the long-term benefits of a more peaceful mind.

Sometimes in meditation we feel the urge towards greed, hatred, or delusion but have the resources to resist these. For example, while we are watching the breath, we might feel the desire to stray into thoughts and fantasy. It can feel as though my chest, head, and neck are almost straining to lift off, tear away from the abdomen with its rhythmic, calming sensations. The energy accumulates in my head and I sense the urgent need to think. If I can catch all this, I can usually resist the temptation. The note, "not indulging, not indulging," can help. This gives me a more visceral feel for the benefits of renunciation. I sense the tranquility on offer from the sensations of breathing, counteracting the desire for heady excitement. It's so obvious looking at this that the rhythm of the breath is more deeply satisfying than indulging desire. Although this can bring up the grief of renunciation, it also helps me choose not to indulge desire. As well as strengthening willpower for renunciation, this nurtures the taste for absence.

It helps us question our preoccupation with clinging. Why does life need to be so full of pleasure? It takes

so much energy to hold on to pleasure. Is there a possibility of letting it come and go without so much fuss?

We can cultivate a taste for absence at other levels in life. One teacher described how, having taken down an ugly shed in his back garden, he spent several days looking out the window and enjoying the absence of the shed. In my own case, now that I can no longer talk easily, I can sometimes enjoy the absence of talking. Before the operation, I would have enjoyed the buzz of conversation. While I still grieve the loss of this great joy in my life, I also appreciate the fact that there are now more moments of peace in the company of family and friends. I'm hoping others may also feel this benefit. For the first months, I couldn't use the electrolarynx and used to carry around a whiteboard and marker everywhere. A friend later remarked that when he saw me coming into a party with my whiteboard and marker, he felt relieved, looking forward to those relaxing moments of silence while people waited for me to write.

I am sure you all sense the benefit of not talking while you are here in retreat, and sense the benefit of this particular renunciation.

As we look around us, it's generally the objects we see, not the spaces between them. But what if there was no space? Imagine the clutter. We couldn't move. To find our way from one place to another, we seek out space. We actively search for absence, for the gaps between things. It's only these spaces that have the potential to receive our body as it moves, to let it go as it passes by.

Noticing and appreciating space, gaps, absence of difficulties, the ending of pain and emotional disturbance, the peace of not doing—all sensitize us to the third noble truth, the end of suffering. These unobtrusive, non-dramatic phenomena, so easy to ignore, have nonetheless the potential to alter the course of our lives, to reveal the quiet mystery at the heart of life and death, the stillness that penetrates all things.

Before finishing, I'd like to focus on that crucial mid-section of the wheel and show its potential to reveal the second and third noble truths as they show up in our experience.

Let's recap on the wheel using our gardening analogy. The soil of ignorance holds seeds of the unwholesome sankhāras. To get the wheel turning, one of these germinates in consciousness, implants itself in our body and mind to search through our senses for satisfaction. A seed of greed looks for pleasure, generates the desire for more, and a sense of self emerges to consume the pleasure. A seed of ill-will looks for displeasure, thriving in the battle to destroy and vanquish. It stimulates aversion and a sense of self emerges to fight its battles. A seed of delusion looks for neutral vedanā, thriving in the security of our imagination, where we are always the boss, protected from reality.

Once the sankhāra has blossomed into a self, it gets to work sowing new seeds. The willpower needed to drive each thought, word, and action drops another seed into the soil of ignorance. And as the thoughts, words, and actions manifest in the world, they initiate a chain of events. A seed of greed might get us

gobbling some biscuits. A seed of hatred might get us into a tantrum. A seed of delusion lulls us into a spiral of thought and imagination. Dukkha emerges as the biscuits transform into indigestion, as the tantrum turns into spoiled friendships, as Walter Mitty falls back down to earth.

The remedy for this never-ending round of misery is, of course, mindfulness. Mindfulness of dukkha is one starting place, or, whenever possible, mindfulness of sense contact and vedanā—the point before the seeds have had a chance to blossom. If we can hold attention steady there, unwholesome sankhāras don't get a chance to spread their seeds.

At times we can grow quite peaceful, feeling the flow of sensations and feelings. Then a little prickle of desire emerges, prompting us to hold on to the peace. We sense the disturbance, the budding anxiety that edges desire. If we can note *desire, desire*, watching the disturbance as it manifests, it eventually fades away, leaving us in peace again.

Here we have the second and third noble truths manifesting in our experience. We sense for ourselves that desire causes suffering and that letting go of desire ends suffering. It's as simple as that. Simple but not easy.

I hope this reflection on the second and third truths helps us trust our underlying simplicity, our natural beauty, our birthright of ease.

May we and all beings be free from suffering.

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