

The Second Noble Truth — Desire

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 14 min read

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

QUESTION

Make a list of people's objectives as you see them in a 'post-industrial, post-modern, materialistic society. ❖ What motivates people? ❖ Why do they work? ❖ What do they live for?

Divide the items on your list into those you think lead to happiness and those to unhappiness.

The Second Noble Truth was formulated by the Buddha in his first ever discourse after his Enlightenment at Isipatana Park near Benares on the Ganges River. It is called ❖❖❖ The Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta.

'This, O Monks, is the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering: that craving which leads to rebirth combined with pleasure and passion, finding satisfaction now here now there, namely the craving for sense pleasure, the craving for new existence and the craving for annihilation.'

So the cause of suffering or unsatisfactoriness in our lives is desire or craving for sensual pleasure. ❖ To understand why this is, we need to go down one step further and ask why is it that we desire in the first place. ❖ According to the Buddha our fundamental, call it existential position, is that we are ignorant. ❖ This ignorance is not stupidity or blameworthy lack of education. This ignorance means the same as the root meaning in English - not knowing. We simply don't know. ❖ And what is it we don't know? It is the cause of our suffering and how to put an end to it. ❖ Because we are ignorant of this, this ignorant mind which doesn't know, seeks to find an answer. Since this answer is based on wrong understanding, sometimes even a guess or fantasy, for the real truth of the matter is hidden, delusion is produced in the mind. ❖ This delusion is the active side of the passive ignorance.

We often see this in our daily life. ❖ The TV suddenly goes funny. ❖ We haven't a clue how a TV works or why it has gone funny. ❖ But since we can't get someone to service it, we'll mess about with the knobs, and even lead ourselves to ❖ believing that a thump to the casing might work! No wonder the first words of the exasperated service person is 'Whos been messing about with this?' We, of course, adopt the posture of innocent ignorance. More seriously, in earlier times, when people were really exasperated with disasters such as floods, famines, droughts, suddenly gods needed to be appeased. Animal and human

sacrifice called for! ❖ The great problem with delusion and its manifestations is that we don't know they are delusions ❖ This is by definition the meaning of delusion. ❖ In mental illness the problem with the paranoid person, for instance, is that he has no insight. ❖ They don't realise in any way that their thinking does not match reality. No matter how much you explain, yet the disturbed thinking persists. ❖ Delusions are rock hard.

Now this ignorance and its consequence, delusion, are the fount of two further manifestations: desire and hatred. ❖ Desire (tanha) here always refers to sensual desire (kama). ❖ It is first of all believing that life is about sensual indulgence, and secondly that happiness is to be found in sense pleasure. This is what constitutes the delusion. Herein is our great confusion. ❖ We, as human beings, have five senses which respond to the world and through which we enjoy a lot of pleasure, be it food, lovely sights, the feeling of a sea breeze or sexual pleasures. Even within the mind itself, the sixth sense in Buddhism, there is great pleasure to be had in fantasies and mental states of excitement, infatuations and so on. ❖ In fact, for most of us a lot of the time, life can be very pleasurable. ❖ Our technological society goes out of its way to try and turn this life into a sensual delight from compact discs, TVs, Jacuzzis. You name it, there is some machine somewhere to heighten our sensual pleasure.

Unfortunately, pleasure has an inbuilt obsolescence. ❖ No matter how wonderful, how exciting, how pleasurable our experience is, there comes a time when we tire of it. ❖ We get bored. ❖ So now this desire, which has caused us to find pleasure with its attendant emotional high, drives us on to seek more and more pleasure. ❖ If we watch ourselves closely throughout the day, we will see how tireless we are in trying to make ourselves comfortable and to enjoy some sort of 'new' pleasure all the time. ❖ As soon as I write, I think, What new cereal can I have? I need to look for something interesting. Can you imagine a weekend with nothing to do? ❖ For others who lead stressful, busy lives, they may look forward to a weekend of 'nothing to do'. If something turns up they have to do, they're very unhappy! ❖ When we see this merry-go-round desire forces us to ride, we realise there is no end to the demands. We desire this. This gets boring. So we want that, and so on. The search for pleasure can never end, for desire itself as a disposition of mind can never be fully satisfied.

This, however, is only the surface of things for underneath the merry-go-round sits fear and anxiety. ❖ The more we attach to our pleasure, the more we define ourselves by it. ❖ This self-identification with pleasure and pleasurable emotions and feelings is the ultimate delusion. ❖ I have a job; it gives me wealth and status. ❖ When I walk the streets, I can hold myself high. I am a prime minister, a nurse, a bus driver or a teacher. ❖ It doesn't matter what it is so long as I identify with it, so long as I say, . Suddenly I lose my job! ❖ Now what am I? ❖ No wonder people go into severe depression when they are made

redundant. To be made redundant is to rip someones badge off. It's to denude them. It's to say, That person thought she was a prime minister, nurse, bus driver or a teacher, but in fact she's not. ❖ These job definitions aren't us in any essential or real way at all. But we think they are. That's the delusion. ❖ That's why it causes us so much suffering to lose our jobs. As if the drop in standard of living were not suffering enough, we compound it with the loss of self-esteem and confidence. Even when we know our redundancy is not caused by our bad work or unpunctuality or anything like that, we react with depression, anxiety and so on. ❖ When we realise the connection between pleasure and identify, between pleasure and the fear of loss of pleasure, then at least we can begin to look for another way of looking at life which won't cause us to suffer. ❖

In order to find out how we can undermine our personal suffering, we need to observe ourselves in daily life. ❖ We need to question our attitudes, all our greeds as opposed to needs and see what stands up to reason.

If my father comes home from the pub with a black eye, I'm furious. I go to the pub. ❖ I want to know how it happened. ❖ I want the attacker punished. ❖ I'm very angry. ❖ I'm very upset. ❖ If Jimmy, the neighbour I argued with last week, gets beaten up, I think it serves him right. He was asking for it. ❖ If my car is stolen, it's a shock. ❖❖ My car! ❖ How can I live without my car? ❖ I'm full of hatred towards the thieves. ❖ I find no peace of mind until my car is restored to me, or the insurance is paid and the thieves brought to justice. ❖ When my next door's car is stolen, I am full of commiseration about the rottenness of the world today. No shock. ❖ No anger. ❖ I don't feel depressed. ❖ Why should I? It's not my car!

This is what the Buddha meant when he talked of desire and all its ramifications. Desire arises out of a particular delusion that somehow our happiness rests on the quantity and quality of sensual pleasure and the emotional delights it creates. ❖ This delusion sits on, arises out of that fundamental ignorance of not knowing. This delusion sits on the fundamental ignorance of not knowing where we are to find our ultimate happiness. ❖ This ignorance, this delusion, this desire create craving for things and so life is a continual 'finding satisfaction, now here now there', but with no rest, no permanent satisfaction at all.

It is good practice to listen to ourselves and write down the words of desire we use: I want, I wish, I would like, etc. ❖❖ Next to see how we use the words of obsession: I have to, I must, I need, I should, I ought, etc. Then to make two lists of those things we desire and those things we think we need and see how many are realistic. ❖ Of course, I need to eat, but do I need to go out to a restaurant. ❖ When we become more aware of how we use these words, we become aware of our attachments and obsessions. The way we use language reveals our delusions. ❖❖ It's a good practice to make this list and really question

what is . It surprises us to find how little we do actually need. The Buddha wanted to reduce the monk's needs to the absolute basics. He called these the Four Requisites: food, clothing, shelter and medicine and in each case the rules go on to show that it is only the basic rudimentary kind of these four requisites that is sufficient. Sufficient means that which is actually needed.

This came home to me when I once attended a meditation course in India. The food for the three weeks I was there was simply chapatti, a flat unleavened whole wheat bread and dhal or lentil soup. Now and again I got other vegetables and fruit, but in no way consistently. It was only for three weeks, but I remember how worried I became! I thought my body would fall apart for lack of proteins and vitamins. In fact I never felt healthier and people remarked on how healthy I looked! It made me realise all the fears and obsessions I had about food. Such fears and obsessions cause me suffering.

So here we have the deluded human being thinking that sense pleasures are the be all and end all of life. This is hedonism. Such a person who really thinks that 'pleasure to be the greatest good' (Oxford Dictionary Definition) is a hedonist. But in reality, this pleasure, this greatest good is a wild goose chase. Running after this, only to find boredom. Running after that only to find dissatisfaction, disillusionment. And so on and on and on. But worse. When we move from one pleasure to another, we want it to be better. We don't just want films to continue, the same old cowboy movie with the same old plot. We want it to be different, more spills, more thrills. So the old cowboy movie becomes a sexy musical or realistic Sam Peckinpaw film, showing bullets exploding out of cowboy chests. The horror movie of yesterday makes us laugh. We want real horror, real terror. Love stories have to have desperate twists and turns. And if this is true of movies, how much truer it is of our lives. We so much want to be in the movies. We so much want to emulate the film stars, be heroine/hero. Whatever! We have to succeed, but this success especially in our greatly materialistic western civilisation is measured simply by how much pleasure we can buy, be it consumer goods or services. Last year I went to Spain. This year I'm booked on the spaceship to Mars.

Now this delusive desire has established an identity and this identity is what I call 'me'. As far as I am concerned, I am what I want. I am what I have. I am the satisfaction of my desires. And through this 'me', I define and identify what is 'mine'. If I lose what is 'mine', I also lose a bit of 'me' and that is when this 'I' reacts with anger or depression or fear or what have you. In extreme cases, this 'I' thinks it will go mad or even loses the desire to live. When we are at the point of 'to be or not to be', we are at the second and third type of desire the Buddha described.

The desire in this sense is really the desire to become, to keep on renewing life, to keep on living. Whenever death comes near, either by way of the loss of a dear one or a life threatening illness to our own person, great terror arises. Essentially the terror we feel

now at the possible loss of life, is no different from the fear or anxiety we feel if our jobs are threatened, or loved ones leave us. The quantity of terror, fear, anxiety we feel is the measure of our identity with the loved one, the job and this 'my-self'. And yet we know we will die! We know very well we will grow old and die! We know it very well. There is undeniable evidence that everyone else, even my loved ones, will die, will grow old and die.

But even though we know it, we don't seem to really accept it. There's something in us that keeps blinding us to the fact, and we carry on behaving as if it happens to everyone else, but not to us! How deep our delusion is! So much so that because we can't face the death of 'my-self', we create all sorts of heavens where we shall be able to enjoy the pleasures of life forever. Transitory, fleeting pleasures, mind! Here then is the fallacy of eternalism. Whatever is eternal cannot in itself be fleeting. It cannot in itself change! And yet such is our inability to conceive of a life that is not transitory, and therefore nothing to do with fleeting pleasures, that we create happy hunting grounds, eternal realms, everlasting heavens where we can eat forever, or drink forever or have any pleasure you care to name - forever. This is eternalism. The belief that the same person carries on in the same way, but in continuous perfect happiness after death. It is but an extended hedonism. But what we really see here is the problem of ignorance and delusion. Delusion cannot see beyond itself. It has no other option but to recreate itself, even though all the time the feedback is saying, No, this doesn't last! This isn't permanent! Even though experience tells us pleasure, the search for pleasure, the dependency on pleasure only accumulates worry, obsession, anxiety, frustration, depression and worse!

Now when I fail to achieve the great pleasure-drome, then awful feelings of inadequacy arise, a loss of self-esteem. In my depression, I face this horror. Realising that in fact pleasure does not deliver the permanent good, I see only death, only annihilation. In my despair, I believe death will be some total ending. A permanent relief. Even in ordinary life, if things get too much I run away. If a relationship gets too hard, I divorce. If the job gets too much, I change. If I'm unhappy, I go to bed. I annihilate myself in sweet sleep. When pain and suffering arise, the desire to get rid of it, arises. This is the twin to desire the desire to do away with what is painful. If I want pleasure, I don't want pain. Aversion is just the negative side of desire. And this, in its extreme delusive form, produces the escape mentality. The running away. At worst from oneself, by killing oneself. From life by suicide. Death ends all. This is the annihilationist. Believing in annihilation at death is the logical outcome of believing that human life is only about sensual pleasure. That it will end. And there's nothing else worth living for.

So where have we got to? We've said that because of our fundamental ignorance, the not-knowing what suffering is, nor the cause of it, nor how to put an end to it, we produce solutions. Since these solutions are based on wrong understanding, our delusions are born.

Because we want to be happy, desire arises and we attach to what gives us immediate gratification - our sense pleasures. ❖ The mistake is then made of believing that that is what we really are. ❖ When pleasures fail us, we are thrown into an identity crisis. ❖ Faced with disease, old age and death, most believe either we will be able to take it up again in some heavenly plane forever or we will all annihilate into nothingness.

In meditation, this merry-go-round should become more and more obvious to us. ❖ All sorts of emotional states and fantasies assail us. ❖ Some highly pleasurable: some painful. ❖❖ Some full of hate and fear and sorrow: others full of excitement, sentimentality and delight. ❖ All sorts of mental states with their accompaniment of daydream and internal dialogue. ❖

Films indeed! But in meditation, our work is to become the detached observer. ❖ We must begin to take a side seat from which we can be attentive to every passing conscious moment. Whatever the object of our meditation, be it good/bad, painful/pleasurable. No matter what the object, we watch with keen attentiveness. All that happens in our mind is to be considered so much phenomena, so much mental stuff. ❖ As we come to know, perhaps for the first time in our lives, how much our mind is filled with desires and aversions, insights begin to arise. ❖ Just look at all this stuff! ❖ It really is suffering. It is just coming up and I've no control over it. All these desires, these wants, these obsessions! All these petty dislikes, hatreds, grudges! All these self-definitions, self-identifications,

opinions, beliefs, criticisms! They are all a source of suffering for me. ❖ Then the question arises. Can I live without desire and attachment? ❖ Can I live without aversion and hatred? ❖ Can I live without continually reconditioning myself to look at life as if it was one huge birthday cake for me! ❖ For no and me and one else.

With these thoughts, we move into daily life. ❖ We begin to question all these little people in our heads, shouting at us, ❖ 'I want this. I need that. ❖ I can't live without this. ❖ I may as well kill myself if I don't get that'.

By questioning our desires and aversions, by seeing them for what they really are, we begin to discover the Path that leads out of all this mess. And this is exactly what the Buddha did himself. ❖ Realising that no amount of pleasure was ever going to satisfy him, he set out to discover the Path that leads out of suffering. ❖ But before he could discover the Path, he had to discover the cause. ❖ Remember the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, is not a pill to be taken every morning. It's a handbook, a guide which we ourselves have to put into practice. ❖ Discovering that desire for sensual pleasure is not something we should indulge in, is at first painful. ❖ But I like my beer! I like my food! But as we come to let go of our obsessive, grasping natures, we will discover a kinder nature, one of peace. A nature that does not feed off grasping and expectation, but allows generosity and sits squarely balanced in reality. ❖ A nature no longer pushed about by internal compulsions, but free to respond to others with love and care. ❖ It all leads to a greater satisfaction with our lives. ❖

