

Second Noble Truth: The Cause of Suffering

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 14:45

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

So we're struggling our way through the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, which is the turning of the wheel of the law. We call it the first discourse—not that it was actually what he said first, but it contains the platform of all his teachings. It's basically telling us that the middle path is not one of indulging in the world nor of exercising severe mortifications.

He then goes on to explain these four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the end of suffering. We're up to the second part there, and this is how it reads from Bhikkhu Bodhi: "Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is this craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination."

Now, I'll go through that again. Some of Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations are a bit heavy. I'll give you alternative translations which I think make a little bit more sense. "Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the arising of suffering"—in other words, how does suffering arise? Origin for me is a little bit too strong, because the original cause is ignorance. But how do we experience the arising of suffering? Where does it begin? And it is this craving. On dependent origination, it's the word *tanhā*, which translates as thirst, craving, sense of lack.

So this craving that leads to renewed existence—we'll come to that in a minute—accompanied by delight and lust. You have to take that as meaning both the emotional pleasures we get out of life and the physical pleasures. Lust is a bit too confined a word really. It's delighting in sensual pleasures, seeking delight here and there.

What the Buddha is suggesting is that our lives are constantly a movement towards what is pleasant, trying to escape what is unpleasant. In finding something pleasant, we form an attachment to it, we indulge it. Remember, there is an inbuilt obsolescence with pleasure. What made you excited yesterday is now boring. Your boiled sweet has to have a different flavour—you just get bored. So this business of seeking pleasure here and there, you see, and it's desire which is the mechanism, the first mechanism that comes.

I think the best place you can see this is when you eat. Having prepared yourself a meal, just sit there for a

moment and catch your relationship to that meal. A part of it will be ordinary appetite—that's a desire, but that's a good desire because it wants to nourish the body. But the other desire is seeking happiness in sensual pleasure, seeking delight in sensual pleasure. And that's indulgence.

You have to be careful with this English word "desire." Not all desires are bad. The desire to meditate is hardly something which is unwholesome—it leads to liberation. The Buddha himself desired to go on alms round to get some food. When people asked him a question, he desired to answer it. So you've got to be careful with desire. It's a specific desire—it's a wrong desire, it's a desire based on wrong understanding, which is seeking happiness in the sensual world.

So he says this is the reason for the arising of suffering—this desire. You can call it the psychological reason. Actually speaking, if we're aware of desire, you see, we're not actually suffering. It's when we identify with the desire that the suffering is felt. That's on dependent origination—that's the grasping of it. Anyway, that's perhaps a little too detailed for such a short talk.

But he points out that we've got to observe desires as they come. It's in knowing a desire to be unwholesome and in waiting for it to pass away that we decondition that desire within the heart. When we see a desire which is wholesome, if we empower it, then that's the conditioning which will grow in the heart. So in the Eightfold Path you'll see we move from selfishness to generosity, hatred to love, cruelty to compassion. It's done by recognizing a desire as unwholesome, not reinforcing it, not acting on it. When you see one that's good, then you act upon it. In this way you change yourself. Very simple—the mechanism is very simple, but it's not easy, of course.

Now he says "renewed existence." Existence is every time a self arises—it's a becoming, a constant state of becoming, of a making of an I. When you're asleep this isn't happening, see. As soon as you wake up, you say, "Oh, here I am." The I has arisen. And it says, "Got to get up and got to get some breakfast." This I is constantly recreating itself through its actions.

Now he's translated it as existence, but actually the Pali word *bhava* is better translated by "becoming"—constant state of becoming. If that state of becoming is driven by wrong understanding, that's what we mean by *saṃsāra*. *Saṃsāra*, the world of constantly onward going, the rotation, the day in and the day out, the moment in, the moment out—that's what we mean by *saṃsāra*. So I think it's better translated by "renewed becoming."

So then he posits what these cravings are. The first one is the one we've discussed, which is the craving for sensual pleasure. Sensual pleasure—he's including here everything, all the joys and happinesses that the world has to offer us. He's talking about sensual pleasure meaning all the joys and pleasures of life. It's the desire—it's the wrong desire for them which is the problem. The wrong desire manifests as an indulgence, it manifests as compulsive behaviour, addiction, it manifests as frustration when you don't get it, and so on. So then you know that's a wrong desire.

But then he says craving for—he translates "existence"—craving for becoming. So we're constantly trying to create the future. Constantly—that's the whole business of planning: what I'm going to do tomorrow, what I'm going to do next year, what I'm going to do when I'm retired, what I'm going to do when I'm dead. He's constantly trying to work out the future, you see. So this desire to constantly become, become, become. Most of us do that because if we're not becoming, we must be dying.

Now, then he also says, of course, craving for—here he translates it as "extermination," but I slightly prefer the usual word, which is annihilation. So that's, at worst, suicide. Life gets so horrible, so unbearable, for one reason or another, that one wants to get rid of the self, and that's suicide. But we also do it in little bits and bobs, you see. When we're a bit bored, a bit depressed, you think, "Oh, to hell with it," and you launch yourself onto the sofa or couch and fall asleep. So you block out for a while. Every time you do that, you're self-annihilating.

That's one of the causes why we feel in meditation, but also in daily life, the dullness and the lethargy sometimes comes up. That's because we've pushed all this stuff down through sleep. Sleep's a great suppressant. Often you wake up and you are feeling better. But actually you've pushed stuff away, you see. So that's this idea of seeking, craving for non-existence, you see. Craving—that's better actually—craving for not becoming.

Although you have to be careful here because the enlightened person is no longer in that state of creating this self. Remember, when the Buddha was enlightened, he didn't disappear. He kept being a human being. But he didn't suffer from this, you see.

So this creating of a becoming is to do with a self. The self isn't an object, it's not a thing—it's a process. So the self is always changing depending on what it happens to be doing at the time. If you were to define yourself, you might define yourself variously as a friend, by your profession, as a mother, a father—the definition of self keeps changing, see. A sociological self, an existential self. I've got a list of selves somewhere that somebody wrote—there's about thirty of them. But I mean, that can't be exhaustive, because every time there's a self, there's a type. So it's "selfing"—that would be a better word. It's constant selfing, and that arises out of a wrong relationship with the world, with the body, with the heart and mind, where you're saying, "This is me."

So the liberation is when that sense of "this is me" disappears, but there is still that awareness. The Buddha is awareness within the world, but not of it. That relationship has been broken. Therefore, it's impossible for that person to suffer.

Now, in your meditation, when you become the objective observer within yourself, and you're observing maybe some physical pain or something, or you're observing an emotion—you're feeling it, feeling an emotion, you see an image—all these things have been objectified. They're an object to you. So whatever knows has extracted itself out of this body, heart and mind, see? And when you're in that position and you come out of it, just reflect a bit. What was it like being there?

It's very different from being a physical self like when you trap your finger in a door. See, for that one moment you are the finger as a physical self. It's very different from being an emotional self when you lose it and you find yourself swallowing about or getting angry. They're different from a thinking self when you're lost in thought. It's another position, isn't it? Something else. There's no thought, there's no emotions, and there's no body when you're the observer, when you're the feeler, is there?

Now, if you haven't experienced that, then you have to come here and do a week's retreat. Because that's what the Buddha says: when you are mindful, and he's talking about this level of mindfulness, you are in the presence of *Nibbāna*. You're in the vicinity of *Nibbāna*. So we're very close to it.

So that's basically how he phrases the noble truth of the arising of suffering. It is this craving that we have that leads to renewed becoming, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, and craving for annihilation.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you, by your clear understanding of desire, liberate yourself from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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