

The Third Noble Truth: The End of Suffering

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 12:16

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've been through the first two Noble Truths. The first one, of course, was telling us what suffering is—what the Buddha means by suffering. The second one, as it's translated, is the origin of suffering, the arising of suffering, or the cause of suffering. That's the better translation: the cause of suffering, what is the original beginning of how suffering arises.

So he goes on—perhaps I could read that, it's very short: "Now this, monks, is the Noble Truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering, union with what is displeasing is suffering, separation from what is pleasing is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering. In brief, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering. 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 pleasure, craving for existence, craving for extermination."

So this is the third one: "Now this, monks, is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-attachment."

First of all, there's this amazing statement that there is an end to suffering. I don't think any modern psychologist in the West would ever think of that. They think of an accommodation, being able to be generally at ease with the way things are, but the end of fear? I have a book which is a companion to the book *Emotional Intelligence—Intelligent Emotion*, it's called—and in the preface she says there will always be fear, there will always be anxiety.

So there's no conception in Western psychology, in Western psychotherapy, that there's an actual place where suffering actually comes to an end. Even in our religions, the Abrahamic religions, the end of suffering is in heaven. That's where you go. There's no way you can end suffering in this life, as far as I understand. Perhaps the saints do, but it's generally understood it comes afterwards. It comes when you get to heaven.

Now, of course, in Buddhist understanding, it takes quite a while to get to this point where there's an end of suffering. But the statement is you can do it right here and now as a human being. So this is quite—to me, it's always amazingly radical—that there can be right here and now this end of suffering.

And he says it's the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-attachment. So he centres the whole of his teaching concerning the end of suffering on this point of craving.

Now you've got to remember that he's pointing to the word *taṇhā*. *Upādāna*, *taṇhā upādāna*. These two words are telling us about our psychology when it comes to seeking happiness. There's a seeking happiness in the world, and of course the world can't deliver. That's the point. The world cannot deliver perfect peace and happiness, even if it's on the simple grounds that things arise and pass away. So as soon as you've got something, you'd like to say stop the world, but it doesn't happen.

And this craving, this craving and this grasping of the five aggregates—this body-mind complex and the grasping of it—remember, is that suggestion of identity. So in this he's basically saying not until the identity passes, this same craving. Remember in the Second Noble Truth he says it's the craving for existence, craving for extermination, but the suffering itself is the five aggregates subject to clinging. So that clinging, remember, is *upādāna*—this business of identifying with the body and heart and mind. And because we identify with that, we seek happiness as a product of that body, of that psycho-physical organism. And that's why it'll always fail.

So he says when that completely passes away, when that desire to seek permanent happiness—this happiness in the world—passes away, there's a complete non-attachment to it. And so here his formulation is very much in that *via negativa*—the way in which you say what something is by saying what it isn't.

So in the state of enlightenment, state of liberation, and here the big word is non-attachment—in that state of liberation from craving, liberation from wrong identity, there is this end of suffering. So you have to be careful that therefore there's not an interpretation of that in a very negative sense, that there's nothing there anyway—that's the end of it, you enter into this blank, this cessation. You'll come across these words like *nirodha*.

The end of suffering meaning some complete cessation—remember when Christian missionaries first came across Buddhism, they interpreted that just as a clever way of annihilation. Since there was no self, there was no self to be saved, and therefore when you were liberated you were basically—it was a subtle form of annihilation.

So you've always got to counterbalance that with these very clear statements the Buddha makes about *Nibbāna*. He doesn't say *Nibbāna* here. He's keeping clear of that word for the moment. He's just telling us what's not there. Of course, later, when he talks about end of suffering later, he says it's *Nibbāna*. And that *Nibbāna* translates as no desire, but it also translates as not shackled, not binding.

And this refers to something within us which no longer attaches to the world. And that's referring back to this awareness, this *satipaṇṇā*, this awareness, this intuitive awareness. And again he has various ways of

pointing to that in that negative way: there is an unborn, undying—this should be not born, not dying, not compounded, not conditioned.

And remember that—I think I've said this before—the word he uses when he talks about that is a specific word in Pali which really translates best as "there exists." So there's two words for "is": *hoti* and *atthi*. *Hoti* is what we would normally use for something like "this is a book" or "there is a book in the other room." But *atthi* translates much stronger—it's actually an existence. "There exists, not born, not that."

Then he talks about it as an *āyatana*, which is a sphere. And remember in his language there are six spheres of experience which relate to the five basic senses and the mind as a sense base. So these create spheres which don't interfere with each other—you can't see through your ears. Then he talks about there is a sphere where none of that exists, where there's no moon, no sun, et cetera, et cetera.

And then he has lovely words like "the island," "the refuge," "home"—things like that, all suggesting something very positive about that particular experience. So whenever you read the scriptures, you always have to remember that his approach to what is, for want of a better word, transcendent—but remember it's right here and now, so it's also immanent. It's right here and now, this possibility.

His preferred way of expressing it is by telling us what it isn't. You have to be careful that in so doing you don't translate it as something which just doesn't exist—some form of a clever way of telling us that we're going to be annihilated because there's no self. Therefore when you get rid of the self there's nobody there—but that wouldn't be correct.

So keeping that in mind, in this particular first discourse where he's first of all expounding for the first time his understanding, he keeps it very simple. He states that the cause of suffering is this desire, this attachment, this identity, and it's when this completely fades away that there is this non-attachment. So that non-attachment equals the end of suffering equals *Nibbāna*.

And when he's questioned—because of this way of expressing *Nibbāna* always in the negative sense—even in his time he is accused of being an annihilationist. And he constantly says the only things to be annihilated are greed, hatred, and delusion. Greed, hatred, and delusion—and the delusion, remember, refers to this identity we have with this psychophysical organism, human being.

So when you're reading the scriptures like this, we always have to remember that his preferred way of talking about that which is transcendent of this world is always in this negative sense.

So this, monks, is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering, the end of suffering, the complete end of suffering. It is the remainderless—there's nothing left—fading away and cessation, complete ending of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-attachment.

I can only hope my words have convinced you that there is an end to suffering and that you will attain that sooner or later.

The Third Noble Truth: The End of Suffering

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.