

# *The Origination of Suffering*

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The basic lesson of the second noble truth is that the origination of suffering comes from within. In fact, that's what the Pali term that we translate as origination—*samudaya*—tends to mean: causes coming from within the mind itself.

We tend to forget that. We think we suffer because of people outside, situations outside, and a lot of people are very painful, a lot of situations are painful. You look at the human race, and you realize it's a very imperfect race in a very imperfect world. If the true source of suffering were outside, we'd be *hopeless*. We'd have to make the world a perfect place, and it resists being perfect.

Even heavenly worlds are not perfect: They have their pleasures for you to enjoy, but then you fall. Whereas entrance into the human world is a lot less stringent, or the standards are a lot less stringent, than those for the heavens. People with pretty mixed karma can come here, and so you're bound to meet up with all kinds. If you allow yourself to get upset about those things, you tend to forget: It's *you* who are getting upset because you cling to things inside, you're craving things inside. That's where the problem is—which is why, when we come to meditate, we close our eyes.

If the problem were in the world, we'd have to keep our eyes open to see what we could do to improve the world out there. But we're here to improve the world *inside*, which is why when we establish a frame of reference, it has a double side. On the one hand, you stay with the body in and of itself, as when you're focusing on the breath right now: letting the breath come in go out, having a sense of ease as it comes in, as it goes out.

Deal with the breath on its own terms. All too often, it gets shunted off into the background as you feel you have more important things to focus on. And there are times when you do have to focus on other things, but now you have time to allow the breath to have its full space throughout the body.

The other side of our task, of course, is to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts about the world outside right now, you just put them aside. Remind yourself: What are those thoughts? The world itself, as the Buddha said, is simply sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and thoughts. And your thoughts about the world:

Either they're memories about things that happened in the past or speculation about what's happening now and on into the future, but at the moment they're just thoughts. So let them go away, because you've got things you've got to focus on here.

When the Buddha set up the four noble truths, he set up the path that we're following to attack the problem not at the problem itself, but at the cause. It's like having a boat with a leak, and water's coming into the boat through the leak. If you just spend your time bailing out the water, bailing out the water without fixing the leak, you're never done. In other words, if you keep on trying to solve the suffering, let go of the suffering, but without focusing on the cause, it's not going to work.

So what do you have going here in this cause? The Buddha says it comes down to three types of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. Craving for sensuality is craving for our fantasies and plans around sensual pleasures. Notice: The problem is not the sensual pleasures themselves, it's with our fascination with thinking about them, planning them, adjusting our plans—again and again and again. We seem never to tire about this process of fantasizing about how this pleasure would be nice, that pleasure would be nicer, this sight, this sound, this smell, this taste, this touch. It's because we have craving for this process that we end up clinging to it. But in the clinging, there's suffering.

The second cause, the Buddha said, is craving for becoming. This is your desire to take on an identity in a world of experience. It starts by focusing on a desire. When the Buddha talks about craving that creates suffering, you may remember it's *tatra tatrabhinandini*: delighting now here, now there. You focus here, focus there, and around those little spots of focus—which act as nuclei—you create a world. Then there's an idea of yourself in that world: That's the becoming. The self can be the self as the consumer who's going to enjoy whatever you desire, the self as the producer who can bring it about, and the self as commentator, who comments on both the agent or the producer and the consumer and even the commentator itself, to see how well they're doing, how they might do better.

So, as we focus on this complex of self in the world focused on a desire, that gives rise not only to craving, but also to clinging. The clinging separates itself out into views about the world, clinging to your ideas about how the world works—in other words, what you have to do in the world in order to get what you want—and then you as the person inside negotiating between your wants and what the world offers.

That's how these cravings give rise to the clinging that the Buddha said is suffering, and that

we're experiencing right here right now, which is why we're trying to get past the craving for sensuality.

As the Buddha said, to get the mind in concentration, you have to be secluded from sensuality. Any thoughts that come up about sensual pleasures, you have to put them aside. Instead, you create a state of becoming here around a different kind of pleasure, the pleasure of form: the body as you feel it from within. And you try to adjust it so that this is a good place to be.

This is going to be your food on the path, but you learn how to use it to *see* into other becomingings. In other words, any thought world that would arise in the mind right now that has nothing to do with the breath, nothing to do with the mind focused on the breath—you've got to let it go.

This is going to be good practice, because when you die, that's what's going to happen. A thought world will appear, and at that point you're pretty desperate: You realize you can't stay in the body anymore, you've got to go.

And this will offer itself: Here's an alternative, this world will have these attractions. Or, if it turns out that it's a world based on *bad* karma, there's a sense of compulsion: that you've done something wrong, and here comes the punishment. You have to remember in every case that you still have choices. You don't have to go into those worlds.

And how do you learn how to not go into them? You do that by what we're doing right here right now, putting aside greed and distress with reference to every world that comes up into the mind. You leave only one world: the world of the mind in concentration, you in this body right here right now. Try to make that as solidly established as you can, with a sense of well-being as best you can manage.

Of course, at the moment of death the body will not create a sense of well-being, but by that time you should have a sense of just awareness itself being able to look after itself. That's what we're working for here. That, too, is a state of becoming, but it's a more skillful one. It puts you in a good place, where you're not compelled to feel that you go off after those other becomingings.

So sometimes as you're meditating you may feel it frustrating that, as you're trying to stay with the breath, this comes up, that comes up, this thought about this, this thought about that. You have to fend these things off, and the mind doesn't feel very quiet. But remind yourself that you're learning an important skill: how not to slip into these vagrant becomingings, because

they can be pretty random.

The image the Buddha gives is of a fire burning one house, and then the wind blows it to another house. We know how erratic and unpredictable fire can be. That's what you'd be faced with at that point. And if your sense of being fully established right here with your awareness in and of itself is not strong, you'll be easily swept along. But if you're used to seeing thought worlds appearing in the mind, then going out a little ways, and then disappearing *while you don't go with them*, you'll have had some practice.

At the same time, as the mind settles in, and the sense of the body gets more and more refined, your sense of awareness gets stronger and stronger, you'll be providing yourself with a good place to stay when the time comes that you simply cannot stay here any longer.

So you're getting good practice on how to deal with the causes of suffering both right here, right now, and as they'll get really strong at the moment of death.

Now, this is work nobody else can do for you. People out in the world keep on saying, "Why are you so selfish, meditating when there's so much suffering in the world that needs to be attended to?" Well, we don't just meditate. The practice also involves generosity and it involves virtue. But the fact that you're doing something here that nobody else can do *for* you, and that you can't do for anyone else—that should give you a good sense of priorities. This is work that has to be done within.

After all, the true causes of suffering are within, the work is within, so try to keep your mind established within, right here, right now, so that it becomes second nature that this is the place where you want to stay. You're not going to get pushed off easily; you're not going to get swept away by any vagrant storm winds coming by that would pull you to places where you don't want to go.

These are some of the lessons of the second noble truth. Then as Ven. Sāriputta said, "If you want to understand the Dhamma, you have to see how it all fits into the four noble truths." So, if you want to understand what you're doing right here, right now, remember you're here to attack suffering at its cause. This means you've got to understand the cause and the strategic challenges it presents: You tend to like your cravings. You tend to like the states of becoming you take on—or then you decide you don't like them.

That's the third kind of craving that can cause suffering: craving for non-becoming. That leads to more becoming because, as you decide you want to see this sense of self in this world be destroyed, you're still thinking in terms of a sense of self and in terms of worlds. As long as

you think in those terms, you're going to go to another state of becoming.

The trick, the Buddha said, is to see the various elements that would lead up to becoming simply as events. This is another reason why we focus here on getting the mind concentrated using the breath. One of the events that leads up to the craving that leads to clinging is the process of fabrication: the breath coming in, going out, your conversation inside, your thoughts, acts of evaluation, perceptions, feelings. Try to see these things simply as “those events” until you get a sense of dispassion for them. That's how you can get past this dilemma of the fact that both craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming can lead to more suffering.

So. We're here to get the mind into concentration, so that we can see these processes as they form before they coalesce into states of becoming. Again, the practice we get in nipping these things off at the bud is going to be *really* useful, not only in handling death properly, but as the Buddha said, “This is the path to awakening”—so that, ultimately, you can go beyond birth and death entirely.

This means that as you understand the causes for suffering, it helps you understand what you're doing right here, right now—and how it will help you on into the future. It's good to keep these things in mind.