

From Darkness to Light

December 19, 2022

We sit here watching our breath because the breath is very close to the mind, and the mind is where the problem is. The problem, of course, is that we're causing ourselves suffering through our own actions. Even though our intentions are done for the sake of happiness, pleasure, and well-being, they end up causing all kinds of trouble. That's because of our ignorance.

Technically, it's said to be ignorance of the four noble truths. But it's not simply the fact that we don't know the four noble truths. You've probably heard the four noble truths many, many times. For many people, that's the first thing they learn about Buddhism. We know the words, we can know the definitions, but we can still be ignorant of them. In other words, we don't know how to use them. The truths are not simply statements about how things are. They're categories. Each of the categories has a duty. If we want to get past our ignorance, we have to follow the duties for each of the categories.

When you look at your experience, how do you divide it up? Usually it's "me, I" versus "the world out there," or things you like versus things you don't like. The imperatives are "to maximize my happiness by gaining the things I like." But that's problematic right there, because as the Buddha says, suffering is clinging, and we cling to things because we like them. When we have them, we want them to be a certain way that we like. This means that the imperatives of the ways we look at things are actually causing us to suffer. We need a new set of imperatives. We have to change our ways. We have to change our habits because the way we're acting is what's causing suffering.

We have to look at our habits from the perspective of the four noble truths and figure out where the clinging is. That's something we have to comprehend. In other words, you have to look at the things you like until you finally see that they really aren't worth clinging to anymore. You have to understand that.

Then you look for the cause. The cause, as the Buddha said, is the three kinds of craving that lead to becoming. Those have to be abandoned. But here again, we run into trouble because a lot of things we crave are the things we hold on to. We actually develop our cravings, we elaborate on them. Sensual craving is probably the most elaborate. We like to sit around thinking about sensual pleasures, and we can think about them for long periods of time, to dress them up this way, dress them up that way, then change them back again, looking for variety. So there we are: developing the things we should be abandoning.

As for the qualities of the path that should be developed, we tend to put them aside. If we were really mindful—which means, of course, keeping in mind the tasks of the four noble truths—we’d have to drop a lot of the thinking we like. So we tend to snuff out our mindfulness, snuff out our ardency and alertness. In other words, we abandon the things we should develop, and develop the things we should be abandoning. We see that, and we don’t like to see that, so we tend to look outside. Ajaan MahaBoowa used this image in one of his Dhamma talks. He said we take the mud that’s in ourselves and we throw it around outside, saying that everything outside is muddy. We find fault with this person, find fault with that situation. We can’t stay anywhere. We have to keep going, going, going. You have to look back into yourself and admit: The source of the mud is inside.

But inside there’s also the potential for cleaning it up, because we can take those four noble truths and apply them to what we’re doing right now. We do formal meditation in situations like this where it’s quiet. There are no other responsibilities right now, so we can get used to seeing things in terms of these categories and applying the right duties.

You notice that, in the categories, there’s no mention of “you” in there, just mental events and the results of mental events. So you want that to be your focus. The problem is, when you leave meditation, you go out to deal with other people. All of a sudden, it’s the question of “you” and “them” again. The priorities get changed, the duties get changed again. We drop the framework we’ve been using while we meditate and pick up our old framework. It’s no wonder that the practice never develops any momentum. We keep switching back and forth, back and forth.

Ajaan Lee makes this point. For most of us, he says, the eightfold path is divided. We follow the right eightfold path for a while, then the wrong eightfold path for a while, then the right path again, then the wrong path. He said it’s no wonder we don’t get anywhere. You have to learn how to take that framework—“Where is the suffering right now? What’s causing the suffering? What actions are causing the suffering, and what actions can be done to abandon that cause?”—and try to keep that in mind as much as you can.

This is why we have a monastery like this, so that you can practice dealing with other people in the context of the four noble truths, and get that context strengthened so that you can carry that ability out into the world where nobody knows anything about the four noble truths at all and nobody’s following the duties. It’s so easy to fall into the way they see things, and the way they do things because those were the ways you used to see things and do things before. You’ve got to get really strong in maintaining this framework. That’s what it means to bring knowledge to the ways in which you’re causing suffering so that you don’t have to keep on causing suffering.

The Buddha talks about how to bring this framework of the four noble truths to every factor in dependent co-arising. He doesn't say that you have to know the whole series. In fact, you can focus on any one of the factors, and think about it in terms of: What is that factor? What is its origination, and how do you apply the noble eightfold path to bring about its cessation? You can do that with any factor because ignorance underlies all the factors. What you have to do is to erase the ignorance or change from ignorance to knowledge. Then you can bring that factor and its origination to an end. You can escape from it.

We tend to like to use the image of "cutting" dependent co-arising. But that's only one way in which the Buddha presents it. He also talks about escaping from it. In fact, I don't think he uses the word "cutting" with any of the factors. It's more "escaping," "cessation," "dispassion." In other words, you grow up and you have no more interest in getting yourself involved in that particular activity again. So you just stop. You see that the allure is not worth it. Whatever little pleasure you get out of it is way overwhelmed by the pain. And when you see that there's a necessary connection between the suffering and its cause, you can lose your passion for the cause. This is why the Buddha placed such an emphasis on cause and effect. When you see that it's a necessary connection, you're going to drop the cause for sure. You just stop doing it.

I was reading a couple of papers a while back where the authors were talking about how, when the Buddha describes dependent co-arising, it's all very deterministic, in the sense of hard determinism. In other words, once things are set in motion, they're just going to have to follow through. And even though the Buddha would criticize people who taught that everything had to follow through from something that was done in the past, still, these authors said, the Buddha himself fell into that trap.

But there's no place where the Buddha describes the dependent co-arising in those ways. In the commentaries they do. You do something in this lifetime, it's going to take another lifetime, or still another lifetime, for the results to come. In other words, once it's been set in motion, there's nothing much you can do about it. That's what the commentaries say.

But the Buddha talked about dependent co-arising both over long periods of time and, more importantly, in terms of what's happening in the mind in the present moment. You can bring knowledge to what's happening in the mind, right here, right now, and change things. The causes are not billiard balls, where one ball gets set in motion and will have to hit the next ball. You have ignorance underlying the process. The ignorance is what sustains the process of suffering. All you have to do is bring an end to ignorance, and the process has to stop because it's no longer sustained.

We can do that in bits and pieces to begin with, to cut particular patterns of habits in the mind that would lead to suffering. Then we get more thoroughgoing until we can see things in terms of the four noble truths all the time.

So the causes are happening right here. You don't have to trace them back to your childhood or a previous lifetime. They're constantly being repeated right here, right now, right here, right now. In fact, as the Buddha said, you can't trace things back to a very beginning point because it's inconceivable how things began. But the fact that certain things are sustaining the suffering right now—and you could put an end to those things right here, right now; stop doing them right here, right now—means that right here is where you do the work. Right here is where you focus your attention.

It doesn't matter how long the process has been going on. The fact that you can stop it now means that it'll have to stop. Ajaan Suwat's image is of a cave that has been dark for who knows how long. If you bring in a light, he said, the darkness has no right to say, "You can't bring in that little light. I've been here much longer. I'm more established. This is my place." When the light comes, the darkness has to go.

So, bring some light to your mind. Examine the things you really crave. Examine the things you hold on to and cling to, and see them from the perspective of those noble truths. This is what makes those truths noble. Instead of just clinging and craving, and clinging and craving like animals, we have the maturity and the nobility to step back from those clings and cravings and say, "Ah yes. What I thought I liked is causing suffering. Things I hold on to: That's suffering in and of itself." Taking that attitude is taking a noble attitude. And that's the attitude that will set you free.