



**Ajaan Thanissaro**

## **The Four Noble Truths in Context: Afternoon Dharma Talk**

September 09, 2023

Ajaan Thanissaro 00:07

Okay, we did the first noble truth this morning. Now we move on to the second.

Second Noble Truth is defined as the craving that leads to further becoming. Sometimes you hear it defined as any desire at all; that's not the case. After all, the desire to gain awakening is part of the path, it's part of right effort. The desire to get rid of unskillful qualities in your mind and the desire to develop skillful ones, is also part of right effort.

The cause of suffering is not also- sometimes you hear it defined as the general desire for things to be different from what they are. And if that were the case, there'd be no end to suffering. Even arahants can see, if things are bad, they can be changed. But they've learned how not to suffer from that desire.

The Buddha actually defines the cause of suffering as three types of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. Sensuality, as we've already explained, is your tendency to fantasize about sensual pleasures. Thinking about what a great meal that was, what a great meal you have tonight.

Becoming is your sense of yourself in a particular world of experience, now this can happen on a micro level on the macro level, the macro level is where we are right now, you sitting in this room- that's a kind of becoming- we're on the level of the human becoming on the level of sensuality. It can also happen inside the mind, this is where the process begins- you have a desire, and then around the desire comes the sense of what needs to be done in order to attain that desire, where that desire will be found, or the object of the desire, where it will be found. The 'where' becomes the kernel for your sense of that world in that thought world. And the sense of you as either being capable of getting it or not getting it, which talents you have that would enable you to get it, which ones would get in the way. All three roles of self that we talked about this morning, the self as the agent, the self as the consumer and the self as the commentator. And you go through this process many, many times in the course of the day, thinking about something you want, where is it? How can I get it? Okay, that right there is a level of becoming. And sometimes you just lose interest in it, and you move on to another one and then another one.

The Buddha calls this further becoming because it happens not only on the internal level in the mind, but from the internal level, it spreads out to the outside level. When you have to leave this body, there will be desire to go on and continue finding a new identity in a new world based on a desire- that is further becoming.

And then finally, there's the craving for a non-becoming: you have a particular state of becoming, and you don't like it, and you'd like to see it destroyed. Either you don't like your identity in that world, or you don't like that world at all. And you'd like to destroy it. See it go away.



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Now, all three of these- any three of these- any one of these three, let's back up a bit. Any one of these three can come in really strong at death. For example, craving for sensuality, you're in pain. And for most people, what is their alternative to pain, fantasizing about sensual pleasures. So you start thinking about where you could go or what kind of sensual pleasure you would like you're not necessarily thinking about where you want to go, but just what a good pleasure would be. And then you find yourself kicked out of the body-whoop; go!- that can be dangerous, because you know how random your sensual desires are. Ajaan Mun says he remembers- he could recollect 500 lifetimes in a row when he was a dog because he liked being a dog. As Ajaan Lee says, "Dogs have no laws."

Craving for becoming- again, you would like to take on an identity someplace, you don't like the idea of being obliterated. So you see some opportunity to take on an identity, you go for it.

Craving for non-becoming is you start thinking about what a miserable life this was, how miserable you are at the moment, and you'd just like to be obliterated. That too can happen at death. And the Buddha said all three of these kinds of craving lead to more becoming- even the desire to be obliterated. There are the states of being that they call the states of non-perception Where you just kind of blank out for eon or two. And then you come back and you've got to start all over again.

So this creates a strategic problem- we're trying to go past becoming, and yet the desire to destroy becoming is going to actually lead to further becoming, so what do you do? The Buddha's analysis says you have to look at the processes that lead up to becoming, see them as steps in a process, and that none of them are really worthy of passion. None of them are worthy of your desire. So you basically kind of abort the process before it yields a state of becoming before you start having an identity in a particular world. You see this, it's just mental fabrications, thoughts, perceptions, all very flimsy material. They come and they go, and how can you hope to find any lasting happiness in something that's so flimsy? So that's his strategic solution to get past this otherwise impasse.

Now to abandon these kinds of craving doesn't mean simply allowing them to go away on their own, you have to do something in order to get them to stop, you have to see through them to the point where you actually have dispassion for them. Otherwise, as long as there's some sense of underlying passion for them, the next time the opportunity comes you'll go back for it again, but to get past that, the Buddha says there are two kinds of ways in which causes of suffering should be treated. He says some of them actually do go away simply as you look at them. It's like they get to function in the mind simply because you're not paying attention. But if you actually looked at them, straight on, you begin to realize I couldn't possibly go for that. This is crazy. Why do I allow myself to be pulled into these things? And they go away. In other words, you stare at them and they wilt away.

There's a second kind where you stare at them, and they stare right back: "Try to make me go away." And that's the case where the Buddha says you have to exert a fabrication.

Now fabrication here has three meanings in this particular context. There's what's called bodily fabrication, verbal fabrication, mental fabrication. Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself. The Buddha calls it directed thought and evaluation. Mental fabrication would be feelings and perceptions. So we have to say, Okay, look at that particular desire, how are you breathing together with that desire, what kind of breathing aggravates the desire, or if it's anger that you have- what kind of breathing aggravates the anger? How are you talking to yourself, What are you saying to yourself about this particular object that you either love or dislike intensely. And then also, what are the perceptions you're holding in mind, the images you have with regard to that? Your boss does



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something really stupid, and all you can see is the boss as an ogre or a monster or a fool. And you have to realize- that's only part of the boss. The boss has other sides as well.

So this is the beginning to take it apart, if a certain way of breathing is aggravating your anger, breathe in a different way. If a certain way of talking to yourself is aggravating the anger, learn to talk to yourself in a different way, point out things that are equally true, but you've been ignoring consciously. The Buddha says, you know, when you're angry at somebody, you have to stop and think okay, what good qualities do they have? He compares it to coming across a desert- you're hot, tired, trembling with thirst, you come across a little bit of water in a cow's footprint. Now, you know if you tried to scoop up the water, you'd get it muddy. So you have to get down on all fours and slurp it up. Now, you don't want anybody with a camera and Instagram to come along at that point. But you realize that this is what I gotta do. So there'll be times when somebody you really are angry at and you feel that it's demeaning to actually have to focus on their good points, but you realize- I've got to do it. So you have to slurp up their good points, in spite of that.

So that would be verbal fabrication- and mental in terms of the perceptions. So that would be verbal fabrication- and mental in terms of the perceptions.

So these are some of the ways in which you redo your emotions to get past them. The Buddha says to really get past them you have to go through what he calls- well he doesn't call it a five step program- but it is a five step program. Sorry I'm losing my voice so early today.

The first step is to see how does this particular emotion originate? How does this particular craving originate? And that means where does it come from inside the mind? You're not looking just at it arising- but you're looking at what's the cause that gives rise to it. And when the Buddha uses the word origination- samudaya in Pāli. It's usually, nine times out of 10, something coming from within, inside you- okay, what inside you is giving rise to the craving. Then also notice how it passes away. You may have a craving or something for a couple of hours, but it's not a solid one hour craving, it comes and it goes, it comes back again and goes again. And you want to see when it goes, Why did it go? When it comes back again- Why did it come back?

This is where you get to the third step, which is to look for the allure. What is it about the mind that keeps dragging this up and then holding on to it again? And the allure can be either something you like about this- or maybe it may be an emotion that you really don't like, but you feel obligated to think about it. Or obligated to think in those terms. Or there's part of your mind that is wallowing in self pity and you say, "Well I'll just wallow in this, this miserable thought." There's lots of different reasons what the allure might be. So it's not obviously something you like about it. But there's something that you feel compelled for some reason or another.

And then you look at the drawbacks. If I actually focused on this thought, or this emotion, for a period of time, what would happen? And you look at the drawbacks of it. This is where the three characteristics come in. In the context of trying to figure out your attachment to a particular craving. One way of looking at the drawbacks of the thing you're craving is: one, see that it's inconstant. I prefer to translation inconstant to impermanence. Because impermanence could apply, say to mountains, like you know the Sierras are not going to be there forever. But you figure, "Oh, I can build a house in the Sierras and it's not all that likely that it'll get torn down anytime soon." But if you realize, okay, you're living in a place where there's earthquakes possible at any time, it's not a good idea to build a house. So these things that are coming into the mind, they're not reliable, that's the point that's important. They're not stable enough to depend on. And if they're unstable, if they are that unstable, then they're going to be stressful



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to move into. And when they're unstable and stressful are they worth calling you or yours? In other words, do you really want to lay claim to them?

The Buddha doesn't come to the conclusion "There is no self" out of this analysis, basically, he wants you to see, it's not worth holding on to. Years back, I was on an interview show in France, you know in France, they have a weekly show where they interview Buddhist teachers? And the first question they asked me when I when they invited me to go on this was "Why don't you have this in America.?" And I said, I have no idea. So at any rate, they had me on the show about not-self. And so I said, "You know, the Buddha said look at these things and see that they're inconstant. When they're in constant, they're stressful. If it's inconstant and stressful, he does not come to the conclusion that there is no self." Now they were doing a simultaneous translation, which I couldn't hear. But it was recorded. And then several weeks later, we got back. And it came on YouTube. And they had me saying "The Buddha said- Okay, things are inconstant, they're stressful, therefore he comes to the conclusion there is no self." That's when I really wish I knew French.

So once you see the drawbacks outweigh the allure, that's when you feel Dispassion for them, whatever it is that you're analyzing, and through the dispassion you let go. That's how you let go of craving- it has to go through that process. That was the outline of what I wanted to say about the second noble truth. Are there any questions? Yes.

Questioner 13:59

The process you just described seems like there's a lot of cogitation involved. So, but in meditation, in meditation instruction, like we're usually just told, like if we're ever engaging in thought, like, just go back to the breath, so like, is this not something we're supposed to do during meditation? Or are we supposed to be thinking like during meditation?

Ajaan Thanissaro 14:19

Ok, there are times when you say, "Look, I'm trying to get my mind concentrated, just go away." And do whatever you can to get that thought out of your mind. Other times when it keeps coming back, you've got to say "I've kind of think this through a little bit. Look at the drawbacks." Great, thank you.

Questioner 14:34

Thank you. I've heard you explained that a strategy to let go or stop clinging for sensuality is by clinging to pleasure of form? Or by the pleasure you can get through concentration? Is that something that's different from what you're talking about now?

Ajaan Thanissaro 15:13

if you do have that kind of pleasure that you can access, then it's a lot easier to see the drawbacks of sensuality.

Questioner 15:20

And would you do that by just developing greater deepness of concentration?

Ajaan Thanissaro 15:25

...greater depth of concentration, and also just learn how to be quicker at getting into concentration. So you can say "Hey, there's this pleasure over here, guys. Let's go there instead it's a lot better." And if you're talking only in theory that there must be something better than sensuality but I don't have any concentration yet, they're gonna say, "Come on...." Thank you.



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Questioner 15:57

Thank you. You mentioned about investigating where this need or craving is arising from, like, which part of the mind could you give an example of what those causes might be?

Ajaan Thanissaro 16:13

Okay? Well, again, we've looked at the way the Buddha lines up dependent co-arising, there are a lot of different things that come before becoming. And before clinging and craving. You have these three kinds of fabrication, you have what he calls name and form, which is another way of talking about the five aggregates. And then he defines the aggregate of fabrication into an attention, intention, contact. So you can ask yourself, "What intentions do I have right now that are causing me to focus on this? Or how am I paying attention to something in such a way that makes this desirable or this disagreeable? Can I pay attention to other things?"

Questioner 17:01

So, for example, like just a simple thing, like, say, somebody's always irritating you at work, and there's always like this irritating feeling and you just need them to like, behave in a different way. And that need is coming through what I'm paying attention to?

Ajaan Thanissaro 17:21

Right. Now, you may decide because this person really should be behaving in a different way. But if I allow myself to be irritated, I won't be able to think of a good way for that person to behave in a different way. And it won't be able to strategize in such a way as to actually get that person to behave in a different way. So you say, "I've got to overcome my irritation first." And then say objectively, "Okay, given where that person is coming from, what would get that person to behave in a different way." So it allows you to step back.

Questioner 18:04

I have a question about meditation practice. So when I usually set my timer and start to meditate, I find that I'm very restless. I'm constantly looking at the time, how much time's left- is that restlessness, the outcome of some kind of becoming?

Ajaan Thanissaro 18:27

Well, you've been engaging in different kinds of becoming. And your mind is kind of bored with the becoming of meditation. And you'd like to have the meditation over as fast as possible. That's craving for non-becoming. In this case, since this is- and again, we're talking strategically here, the Buddha doesn't say just abandon all becoming- actually create a state of concentration- which would be a state of becoming, and learn how to say, "Okay, there's something desirable here, something I really like about this." This is why I have you focus on what kind of breathing feels really good. And then think of that whole body sensation of the breath flowing through the body. And when that does happen tell yourself- "This feels really good." Remember this the next time you don't want to meditate. See if that helps, and also turn the timer around!

Questioner 19:33

Could you speak more about going from noticing the drawbacks to the allure? So when you see allure, does the allure mean the same as the becoming and the non-becoming? Or are we trying to look at the underlying reason for that becoming?

Ajaan Thanissaro 19:50

We're trying to get to the reason underlying it, which is- what is it that you like about this? And here again, it's useful to think about the Committee of the mind because there may be parts of the mind that really don't like this, but there must be something someplace that either feels justified, feels pleased, feels whatever about going for that particular kind of thought. And then





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once you can figure out what that is, then it's a lot easier to see oh, this, this really is not worth it. When you can see the drawbacks of that, then you can let it go.

Questioner 20:26

And the drawbacks and the allure together would take us towards the dispassion?

Ajaan Thanissaro 20:30

Right, you compare the drawbacks to the allure and you realize the drawbacks really outweigh the allure. Then you say "I'm getting so little from this, and I'm spending so much." - Cost benefit analysis.

Questioner 20:46

I'm also curious about this topic. I've been reflecting less on the drawbacks recently, I can see the value in doing that as a kind of, like medicinal counterbalance to that. And it doesn't seem... is what you're suggesting that you do that so comprehensively and consistently that eventually, the allure never comes back? Or is it just that the path as far as you go, requires that that response is the most liberative thing you can do, and you just keep doing that forever?

Ajaan Thanissaro 21:31

It's more than... when the allure goes, it goes. I mean, think of a partner you've had in the past who cheated on you. And the idea of going back into that relationship. Yuck! It just has no appeal anymore. Because the drawbacks have made it so obvious. Now, one of the big problems is that many times the allure is so stupid, that you hide it from yourself. There's a part of you that really likes it. But it's afraid that if you really get exposed, then you'll see right through it, it's the kind that if you look at it, it goes away. And so you have to dig deep, because sometimes you say, okay, the allure is this, but these are the drawbacks. And the drawbacks obviously outweigh this allure, but it still doesn't work. Which means you really haven't seen the allure. So you have to ask yourself, Okay, what else could there be in there that I like about this?

Questioner 22:32

Thank you. I have a follow up question. When you spoke this morning about the point where you let go of the path, I have a hard time knowing what that is or means especially in the sense of that letting go of the five clinging aggregates, and what are the five clinging aggregates of the path?

Ajaan Thanissaro 23:02

Okay, in concentration, you've got the body, you've got the feeling of pleasure, you've got the perception that holds the mind on that topic, you've got the fabrication, directed thought and evaluation, or just the intention to stay. And then you've got the awareness of that. And you're holding on to that. And you keep holding on to that, so you can let go of other attachments. And finally, when you realize- the only attachment I have left is really to this. And you to begin to see, okay, this I really have to work at (I'm losing my voice) you're getting better and better at it. But still, there is an element of fabrication that's going on. And this is when the mind inclines to what is not fabricated. And we're talking a very advanced point of the path. So for the meantime, hold on. And then there'll come a time when you say okay, I have no more- no other attachments right now. This is the only thing and I'd like to find something better. Thank you. It's not like you say, "Okay, this weekend samatha, on Saturday, vipassana, on Sunday night, letting go of the path." Doesn't work that way.

Questioner 24:14

I was thinking Tuesday.



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Ajaan Thanissaro 24:21  
There's a question over here.

Questioner 24:26

So on a similar topic to what people have brought up, how do you work with thoughts where at least at a surface level, it feels like both the kind of the, sort of the attachment is sort of clear in terms of like, okay, this thought comes in, and it's like eating tasty pizza, right, just like a hit of pleasure. Right? And sort of also the corresponding downsides of those thoughts. Also, at least at a surface level feels clear, right, which is like it's very irritating and annoying to kind of constantly have these like stream of thoughts break what I do, like. How to work with that type of set of thoughts?

Ajaan Thanissaro 25:04

Okay. There is part of the mind that simply likes variety. And it will take anything new. And you have to ask yourself, "Well, where has this lead me in the past?" It's probably led you to do some really stupid things. So remember that. And then say, "If I don't get some control over this right now, I'll probably do more stupid things in the future." So that's one way you can think about that.

But it is, and tell yourself this is the nature of sensuality, you have one sensual pleasure, and you have it enough times you get sick of it. And then you need something else. And then after a while you get sick of that something else, then you go back to the first pleasure, you know- and ask, "How much can I trust this?"

You have to learn that not every voice in your mind, which sounds like you, really has your best interest at heart. Ajaan Lee has this great image where he says, "You know, you not only have you in your body, you have all these worms and germs and other things, in your intestines, in your bloodstream. As the germs go through your brain, they may just drop off a thought or two as they go past. And just because it's appearing in your brain doesn't mean this is something I really want to do. And then on top of that, they're the spirits of beings that you've harmed in the past. They may be hovering around and say, "Let's see him do something stupid." So the whole purpose of this is to get a sense of not-self around these thoughts.

Now the fact that something comes in and goes past, you just learn how to say, "I'm not going to get disturbed by that." You know, it's like, you're sitting in a large room, there's people over there in that corner talking, but you got work to do over here, you can pretty much shut them out. I remember, years back my brother and I were comparing notes about our childhood. He was five years older than I was. And my mother would have this habit when we were sitting reading something, she would come and start talking to us. And in both of our cases, we wanted to continue with the reading. But we learned pretty quickly how to listen to her tone of voice. So we'd say "mmm hmm" and then we'd continue reading. So learn how to have that split in your mind. Okay, these members of the committee can be chatty, but I just don't have to worry about them. That cuts through a lot of problems.

It's when they say, "Hey, we've got something really cool." And then you fall for that. The first question is, "Is attempting to develop a dispassion against the sensual fantasy means non-becoming?" No. Non-becoming is when you've got a state of... let me backup a bit... Non-becoming means you've got the sensual fantasy there, and you say, "For the time being, I will just go with craving for non-becoming. But I won't just sit there with a craving, I'll actually do something about it." Otherwise, every unskillful thought that comes in your mind lays claim- it says, "You can't chase me away, because that would be craving for non-becoming, ha ha ha!" No, that doesn't work. You say, "Okay, I will put up with non-becoming for a while in order to



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get rid of this unskillful stuff in my mind, because that's part of the fourth Noble Truth- The desire to get rid of unskillful mind states is part of right effort.

Okay, thank you. The next question is, "Is there a sutta precedent to this idea of playing with the breath as opposed to the path being an exclusively mental affair? Or is it that the breath as an experience is just as much a mental affair as any other khandha?" Well, the breath is actually part of form, which is the physical khandha. Now, your way of perceiving the breath- which would be the aggregate of perception- can change. And the Buddha talks about learning how to breathe in a way that is sensitive to pleasure and sensitive to rapture. Now, this pleasure and rapture are not going to happen on their own. You've got to do something to give rise to the sense of pleasure or give rise to the sense of Rapture. So the Buddha doesn't go into detail on that point. In fact, if you look at the 16 steps for breath meditation, it's almost like 16 questions that you have to learn to answer. How do you breathe aware of the whole body? How do you still bodily fabrication? How do you breathe sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure? Sensitive to mental fabrication, calming mental fabrication.

He doesn't give detailed instructions. There's another place where the Buddha says, "Okay when the sense of pleasure arises, allow it to spread to fill the whole body, a sense of rapture arises allow it to spread into the whole body." Does he say how? No. So playing with the breath is one way of filling in that blank.

Okay, thank you. The next one was repeating Isabel's question from this morning. "How can we distinguish the First and Second Noble Truths?" Because one is the first one is the second. No, this is going to be important because you ask yourself, "How am I feeding? Why am I feeding? There must be hunger somewhere." So look at the way... look at your mind's feeding habits. And of course, when you're sitting and eating a meal, it's different. Sometimes you can't tell which part is the hunger and which part is the actual eating. But you ask yourself, "Okay, if I stopped eating, which part of me would say- 'Hey, eat some more.'" That's how you can make a distinction.

Thank you. Next question. "I find myself in the state that when my mind doesn't want to stay in the meditation, I try to bring something interesting. Like I turn on some chanting or start doing metta meditation, or meditation in elements, body parts. Is it okay to bribe the mind in this way?" How else are you going to get it to behave? So yeah, go ahead and bribe it.

Ok, the next question, "Is the pleasure of jhāna the same as the delight that you referred to earlier this morning?" The pleasure of jhāna is basically the sense of real ease that you feel inside the body as the mind settles down. And then there's the ease that comes when the mind is allowed to rest. And the delight would be talking yourself, "Well isn't this cool?" You don't want to talk about how cool it is so much that you actually destroy it. But just kind of remind yourself that this is really, really nice. That would be the delight.

Thank you.

Question. "Feeling insecure and afraid can trigger craving for security, and searching for something that can make me feel safe and happy. Is that an example of becoming?" Okay, It depends on how you act on it or would be desiring a new state of becoming- a state which is more stable and more secure. That can either be skillful or unskillful. Depending on where you look for your security. If you look for your security and say "Okay, well the Buddha says if I'm actually going to be secure, I have to follow his path of practice." That's actually a skillful use of that state of becoming if you're trying to find security by bombing other countries that is that is very unskillful.





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Thank you. Is the identifying of oneself of having a disease or illness, the labeling as distinct from the awareness a becoming on the level of sensuality? Is it something to be overcome or just noticed? Run that past me again? Okay. Is the identifying of oneself -of having a disease or illness,- the labeling as distinct from the awareness- a becoming on the level of sensuality? Is that something to be overcome or just noticed? Okay, labeling yourself as diseased is not a helpful label. You have the actual disease, that would be the state of becoming you're in. But talking about saying, "Okay, that that's the totality of what I am." That's going to be an unskillful label. So remind yourself, okay, I have these other potentials as well, that are not diseased. Let's focus on those.

Okay, thank you. I have some questions here. One more on line, then we move back to the room.

Questioner 34:52

Hello. So there's some other bhikkhus who really emphasize enduring and they would say, at least my interpretation of their teaching they would interpret vitakka-vicāra as something more like directed attention. And so I just wonder what the interplay between khanti and these fabrications, as you talked about them are in the meditation.

Ajaan Thanissaro 35:23

What was the other word? Khanti. Oh, patient endurance. Yeah. Well, the trick to endurance is don't just sit there gritting your teeth, you're going to have to tell yourself that it's okay, this is worth doing this. And then you think about where are my strengths right now. I mean, if endurance gave you awakening, chickens would have awakened a long time ago. But it's the fact that you're enduring the pain but also realizing I don't have to make myself suffer because of this pain. The Buddha doesn't say that you should not...well he basically said the ideal relationship to pain is that it does not invade your mind and remain. Now why does it invade your mind? The pain itself is not invading your mind, your perceptions are going out to label the pain as mine and pulling it in. And you have to see that process. So that requires discernment.

Now, there's many ways that you can get the mind ready to apply discernment that way, and one of them is to give rise to a sense of pleasure. That you know, okay, if things get really bad with that pain, I don't have to suffer from it, I can step out for a while and rest. Because otherwise, you're just fighting, fighting, fighting, fighting, and in Ajaan Mahabua's analogy, you've got a knife and you keep cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting, and it gets dull. You gotta sharpen it, you gotta stop, sharpen it, and then come back and start cutting again. The stopping and sharpening would be the concentration there, and you've got to have that sense of well being to keep you going. And that's what allows the endurance to really endure.

Questioner 37:13

I've been having a problem lately, where things will really start to settle down. And the breath starts to feel really calm, and this feels good. But then there's this thoughts like, Hey, I'm finally doing it. And it's almost like, when I learned how to ride a bike, and I realized, Oh, I'm riding. Yeah, and then I just crashed.

Ajaan Thanissaro 37:37

Okay, you've got to learn how to say "That sentence went through my mind, I'm going to try to get... I'd let that sentence go. And go back to right where I was." Drop the sentence and then go back to where you were. One more question here. And then we've got to move on.

Questioner 38:05



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You mentioned earlier this cost benefit analysis, what is cost benefit analysis for long term retreats, especially multi week ones?

Ajaan Thanissaro 38:18  
Okay, well, you have I mean...

Questioner 38:21  
...you know, the cost increases proportionally to number of weeks, but what is the benefit?

Ajaan Thanissaro 38:26  
Oh, that kind of cost benefit analysis! Okay, I would say give yourself two weeks. And then get the mind settled down and then see if you can carry that back into your life. Because beyond that, you're getting the mind into kind of a hothouse environment where whatever blossoms in the mind is not going to survive the outside world. So you want to say I want to give the mind time enough to be by itself to get to know itself and then see how much I can carry that into daily life. If it starts falling apart, take another two week retreat, but these three month retreats- as you say the benefits go down as it progresses.

Okay, third noble truth is to abandon the three types of craving, which you do, as I said, by looking at the processes that would lead to becoming first you have to tackle craving for sensuality. A lot of people say well, why don't we just go straight through- gonna get rid of becoming and sensuality will take care of itself? Doesn't work that way. Partly because a lot of our craving for sensuality is based around becoming in a really latent form. I'll give you an example from the Pali canon. There was a famous verse in the Therīgāthā, where a nun who was a non-returner is going through the woods and this guy comes up to her and propositions her, says "Why are you wasting yourself as a nun? Come on, come with me." And he doesn't talk much about sex. What he talks about is, "What a beautiful woman you will be. I'll provide you all these clothings, I'll provide you with all these servants, I'll provide you with this wonderful house, you will be like a golden doll as you live in this beautiful environment." So he's talking about a state of becoming for her. And that is supposed to appeal to her. Now fortunately, she's a non-returner, and she sees right through it. What's interesting is there's a translation of this piece by Anne Waldman, in which he is a real klutz, comes up and says, "Hey, baby, you're really cool, let's go have sex!" And like, no woman in her right mind would go for that, right? What makes it interesting is that he's got the best poetic lines in the whole Pali canon. Talking about the beauty of the forest... "But the forest is a dangerous place, you know, and I can provide you with..." and then she describes all this stuff in a very, very poetic language. And the fact that she can see through that, that's what makes it really interesting, number one. Number two, she asked him, "Well, what is this in this ugly body that you see that's attractive?" And she goes through a kind of analysis of the unattractiveness of the body? He says, "Your eyes." And she says, "Oh, come on, this little ball of liquids, there's lots of mucus and all this other stuff you want that?" He says, "I just love your eyes." As she says, "Okay, have one!" And he says, "Oh! I'm sorry!" No, but, it shows the connection between becoming and sensuality, and you've got to attack sensuality first.

Okay, now, where was I? So we're abandoning the three kinds of craving. And so the Buddha's ascribe describes this as the remainderless dispassion, cessation, giving away, giving back release, lack of nostalgia for those cravings. In other words, you are totally dropping them. And you've seen through them, and they have no more appeal anymore, whatsoever. There's not even any nostalgia for the great pleasures you had in the past: I'm done. Now this is not just accepting things as they are, not being okay with craving. And sometimes you hear that- if you're okay with your cravings, then they don't cause suffering anymore. As if your only problems were your neurosis, no. It's that you realize there's no more craving for these things. It's also not identical with being in the knowing because that is a type of becoming. Also the



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goal is not identical with the path. So again, you totally lose interest in those forms of craving. You have to make a distinction between the realization and nibbāna, which has to be realized, and the nibbāna itself. Because the realization of nibbāna as a phenomenon is something that the mind knows as an object, but then it goes into nibbāna and there's no objects there at all. The realization of nibbāna is something should be done, nibbāna itself has no duties. You're totally beyond. This is a point that Ajaan Mun made and it's supported by the canon.

The Buddha often will use the image of fire. Back in those days, fire was considered to be this element that existed in all things, and to start a fire, you're actually were provoking the fire element. It's like poking it and the fire comes out. You take a fire stick and you rub, rub, rub, rub, rub, and then that provokes the fire element. When the fire element gets provoked, it latches on to its fuel. And the word actually they use is actually the same word for clinging, it clings to its fuel- feeds off the fuel- it's in a state of agitation and heat. When it goes out, it lets go. When it lets go then it's freed. So the analogy for the mind here, it's the fact that you are stuck on your aggregates, it's not that the aggregates are clinging to you, you're clinging to the aggregates and that's why you're not free. So you have to be the one to let go. Also, the Buddha says when a fire goes out like that, you can't describe it as having gone east, west, north, or south. The same way the person who has been released that way cannot be described as existing, non-existing, both or neither. That's because people are defined by their clings and their cravings. When they have no clings or cravings or attachments, you can't define them, when you can define them, you can't talk about them. But the image they give is being like the ocean- totally immeasurable. However, nibbāna is described. And it is. It exists. And it is, the Buddha says it's lies beyond the realm of language. It is described through metaphors and comparisons. It's got five qualities all together, the Buddha has many names for nibbāna, there are at least 20-some altogether, if not more. And what they all have in common is five characteristics. One is that it is a form of consciousness, you're not blanking out. And you don't go into nothingness. Because after all, the Buddha said, you can't be described as non-existing, it's consciousness without an object. The second, that's the first characteristic. The second characteristic is that it's true, it doesn't change. It's not deceptive. Three, it is blissful. Sometimes you hear the goal of the path is equanimity. That's not the case. Nibbāna is the highest, highest happiness. The quality that's most emphasized is a sense of freedom. In fact, that's what nibbāna basically means: unbound. And then fourth, fifth one is that it's hot stuff, it's really excellent. It's the best thing there is. So those are the comparisons that Buddha gives you to give you an idea of what nibbāna is. As I said, you can't really describe it through language because the language is fabricated, whereas nibbāna is not, but he wants to make sure that you have the sense that really is something very, very positive. If you have any idea that there's any regret for someone who's gone to nibbāna, or there's any suffering or any further, that's wrong view. It's total, total unadulterated bliss. So that's the third noble truth. Taken fast. Any questions?

Questioner 47:10

You just explained about nibbāna. How do you compare that to stream entry?

Ajaan Thanissaro 47:14

Okay, stream entry is your first taste of nibbāna. But you hit it, and there's a strong sense of delight and delight is what keeps you from totally experiencing it. Because you view it as an object and you cling to it. There's some passage in the kind of where the Buddha says, you know, if you let go the five aggregates, incline your mind to the Deathless, either you go to our arhantship, or there is some passion or delight for the Deathless, in which case, you don't fully go there.

Questioner 47:47

So that means you have some fetters, but you're dropped some fetters?



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Ajaan Thanissaro 47:51

What happens is after coming back from your first taste of the Deathless, you realize, one-there were no aggregates and that experience, two-you got there through your own efforts, and not through just...it was...and so you have to be very careful about what you do, because otherwise it's going to delay your full experience, which is why you're no longer clinging to precepts and practices. And then finally you have no doubt about what the Buddha taught. You say, This is it. You don't drop the fetters first, and then gain stream entry, you gain stream entry first and then the fetters get cut by that experience.

Questioner 48:32

So my question is hard to relate with nibbāna like how you described it, like how I try associate with the idea is like, if I can just let go in the moment and have like a very brief momentary nibbāna with whatever I was clinging to. So does that work for a layperson?

Ajaan Thanissaro 49:05

I wouldn't call it nibbāna. Okay, this is what's good about letting go. Maybe the time will come when I learn how to let go totally, it must be really, really good. But it's not a nibbāna yet, please.

Questioner 49:29

So related to nibbāna, would you then say that it's sort of the opposite of the three characteristics then, so that nibbāna is constant and peaceful right? No suffering. And what would be then the inverse of not-self?

Ajaan Thanissaro 49:56

The fact that neither self nor not-self applies. I see? Right. It's transcendent So that question just gets put aside. There was a controversy back in Thailand, back in the 1990's, there was kind of a cult that developed in Bangkok and they came out with the teaching that nibbāna is your true self, and then a lot of scholarly monks said "No, no, no ,no, its impossible, it's not your true self, nibbāna is not self." And it actually got into the newspapers. Can you imagine the San Francisco Chronicle running articles on whether is self or not self? Or the Austin Whatever? And so someone finally took the question to Ajaan Mahabua, "is nibbāna self or not self?" And he said, "Nibbāna is nibbāna." He says, "You try to call it self or not self it's like you've got something really pure and you're putting excrement all over it." He says, "You use the perception of not self to learn how to let go of things, but thats part of the path. When you hit nibbāna, you go beyond the path.

Questioner 51:13

I have two questions: Is it possible for a layperson to be completely free?

Ajaan Thanissaro 51:21

The texts say that if you're a layperson, you become an arahant, you have to become ordained within seven days or you die. Now this is the commentary.

Questioner 51:37

Beyond texts, I mean, I trust the texts, but I trust someone who's right in front of me. So what's your perception of it?

Ajaan Thanissaro 51:52

I mean, there are cases in the Canon where people become arahants, it does occur that they want to ordain, right away. The case of someone dying after seven days appears in the commentaries about the Buddha's father, he becomes an arahant, he's already sick. He's on



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his deathbed basically and dies a week later. Now, whether he died because he became an arhant or he died because he was sick. That I can't tell you.

Questioner 52:21

Thank you. And my other question, maybe it's related to second noble truth, which is, like, maybe it's second or third, I don't know. The thing is, sometimes when I look why I am hungry, or why I'm feeding, I feel a lot of time it's just pure boredom. And I feel like my concentration is not strong enough to get pleasure over there. And because I'm bored, I constantly keep on going again and back to my old habits. So is there something that I can do?

Ajaan Thanissaro 52:58

I would say try to work on your concentration. So what would feel really really good right now? Which spots in my body? are lacking breath energy? What kind of breath energy would they want? And see if I can provide that? So always have that question in mind, there's always something to do in the meditation so you don't get bored

Questioner 53:18

and same in real life like beyond meditation?

Ajaan Thanissaro 53:22

Okay, this is when you have to provide yourself with another topic of interest, because you know, if I go to this topic of interest, I'm gonna do something unskillful- so find an alternative topic of interest to keep yourself occupied. This is why meditation is not just being with the present moment or just being with the breath you can think about the qualities of the Buddha, the dhamma and the sangha. You can think about your generosity in the past you can think about your virtue in the past, you can think about death- that's a good that's a good conversation ender- your mind wants to start chattering say- "I could die! Do I want to die in the middle of this chatter?"

Questioner 54:06

Thank you, And it's okay to create a healthy sense of self in that way, thinking about all that?

Ajaan Thanissaro 54:11

Yeah, yeah. We have time for one question on online. Three noble truths in one hour is a little bit much but... This is from a few minutes ago. Attachment often seems to be within my body and less a function of thought. How I get there is often unclear, how can I meditate with this skillfully?

Okay, attachment really is a mental phenomenon, it may have its physical correlate in the sense of a certain feeling of dis-ease in the body that comes about as a result of the mental activity or there is a sense of discomfort in the body, and the mind immediately interprets in a certain way. I mean, this is how addiction comes about: I feel ill of sorts, I need a drug. So you've got this association that you will get out of that feeling through an unskillful means. So what you got to do is think, Okay, I've got this attachment here in the body, what would be a more skillful way of getting past it? This is where you have to expand your repertoire, and then also expand your imagination as to what you can do. Because a lot of addiction is just out of a lack of imagination. Thank you.

We've got to move on. Fourth Noble Truth. Okay, I can't go through all eight factors of the path in 20 minutes. But I will tell a few general things, the fourth Noble Truth is to be developed. The Buddha uses the image of the path because we're trying to get to something that is unfabricated, and you cannot cause the unfabricated. But you can get there- the image they use, not in the canon, but in the Milindapañha, is you have a mountain and you've got a road





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that goes to the mountain, now the road does not cause the mountain. And walking along the road does not cause the mountain- but walking along the road will get you there. This the image of the Buddha uses. And as I said earlier, the path is not the goal. I heard a dharma talk a couple of years back, or someone was saying "Well, the path is kind of like this path around a jetty, you go around and around around around around, you never arrive at an end." And I think this person's path is really bad. It does go someplace.

There are eight factors, the Buddha divides them into 3 main headings, there's the heading of discernment which is right view and right resolve. The heading of virtue, which is right speech, right action, right livelihood; and the heading of concentration, which is right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is a point that has to be emphasized, sometimes you hear in fact, I know someone actually said it, that there are two alternative paths. There's the six fold path of the first five factors plus right mindfulness. And then there's a seven fold path, the first five path factors plus right effort, right concentration; and that was not the Buddha. For him, you start with right effort, which is the effort to give rise to the desire to develop skillful qualities if they're not there. And then if they are there to try to develop them. The desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising or if they have arisen- the effort to get rid of them. And there has to be the desire to get rid of them, followed by the effort. That's the right effort.

Then when he defines right mindfulness, right mindfulness is two activities, one is keeping something in mind. And then the second activity is putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Now, the Buddha talks about this "keeping in mind", he will describe it describe it as keeping track of the body in and of itself, or keeping track of feelings or mind or mental qualities in and of themselves. The in and of themselves means looking at the body say, not in terms of its position in the world. In other words, "Do I look good to other people? Is my body is strong enough to do the work that has to be done in the world?" It's simply the body as you got it, you're experiencing it. Then you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. I mean, this is a description of concentration practice, you've got one topic, and you put aside all other thoughts. And then you bring three qualities to it. One is mindfulness, which is the ability to keep something in mind. Second is alertness- knowing what you're doing, why you're doing it, and also seeing the results you're getting from what you're doing. And then the third quality is ardency, which is basically right effort that brought insight, right mindfulness. And is passage where the Buddha says that the duty of right mindfulness is to keep in mind the fact that you want to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful qualities.

There's another passage where he talks about mindfulness as a governing principle in your mind, in which you are mindful to give rise to skillful qualities that are not there. And once they are there, you remember to try to develop them. So you're not just watching things coming and going. And there are certain things you want to make come. And to keep from going. This is what you keep in mind. When I talk about- there's the word Sampajañña- which I translated as alertness, the commentaries define that as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics, now this is not in the canon. In the canon, when they talk about alertness, it's just being aware of what you're doing while you're doing it. And you know when someone's giving an argument that is really weak, when they get snide. And the commentary gets snide on this point. And seeing the commentary snide is really ugly. It says, "It cannot possibly mean knowing what you're doing while you're doing it! Even babies sucking at their mother's breasts know what they're doing while they're doing it! Even jackals howling at the moon know what they're doing while they're doing it!" I say I don't think so. The canon describes it as knowing what you're doing while you're doing it. So mindfulness on its own is not necessarily skillful- alertness is not necessarily skillful. You can keep lots of things in mind, you can be alert to what you're doing all kinds of things. But what makes it skillful is the right effort, the ardency- trying to abandon whatever is unskillful there and trying to develop what's skillful. And it's in doing this, that you get the mind into right concentration. The Buddha says that these themes



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of the establishing of mindfulness, those are the themes of right concentration. And it's in the fourth jhana, that mindfulness has purified. So for him, it's not, they're not two really distinct practices- mindfulness, when it gets really, really good turns right into right concentration.

Now the path, as I said, has a duty- it turns out it has a double duty. First you develop it, then you abandon it. And the image of the Buddha gives is the raft. You take the raft across the river. And what is the raft made of? It's made out of trees on this side of the river, you're not waiting for the nibbāna Yacht to come pick you up. Otherwise, it's not like your innate nature is going to awaken you. You've got to put together what you got with the five aggregates that we've talked about- the form feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, or fabrications and consciousness. You put those together into your raft you hold on tight, so you don't get swept away by the river, and you make your way across, then when you've gotten across, you don't just dump the raft. You either sink it, or you put it on land- but the Buddha says, first you think about what a good raft this was, you appreciate it. But now that you don't need it anymore, you leave it. In case someone else needs it. Some of the misunderstandings you get about the path are: one- that the path must resemble the goal. In other words, the goal is effortless. So we will have an effortless path. The goal is equanimous, so we'll just practice equanimity. Someone actually called this the practice of being awake. You don't practice being awake. You practice the path, you've develop the path. Now, the Buddha lists two ways of developing the factors. One is sequentially- you start with right view and work through right resolve, right speech, right action, and so forth to the end of right concentration. The other way he describes it, is that for each factor of the path you have: right view, right mindfulness and right effort hovering around them. Right View is what recognizes what is the right version of that path factor and what is the wrong version of that path factor? Right Mindfulness is what keeps this in mind. And then right effort is actually what does the work to develop the right factor and let go the wrong factor. In both cases, right view comes first, because you have to have a good comprehension of why you're doing this. So you can do it well. So that's a quick tour of the Fourth Noble Truth. Any questions?

Questioner 1:03:42

Thanks. I listened to a previous talk that you gave here and you mentioned that you can attain stream entry from any jhāna which really surprised me because I would've thought, you know, your mind had to be very still in order to attain stream entry. So I guess how was it possible to attain stream entry from the first jhana, for instance?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:04:01

Okay, you'd have to have someone who was really, really, really, really sharp who was able to do that. Because the Buddha said, it could be through any of the jhānas or the formless states. Now, some people are really, really quick. You know, as they see the first jhāna and they realize, okay, I'm doing this fabrication here, this is a burden on the mind, and that let go the directed thought and evaluation, and instead of going into the second jhāna, you go to awakening. Other people have to go further up, before the mind is quiet enough. So it's not the case that you get to choose, "Hmmm, which door do I want?" You try this door, it's locked, and try this door, it's locked. You find the one that you can get through. Thanks so much. Question over there.

Questioner 1:04:52

I don't quite understand the terms I've heard before about a mundane path and a super-mundane path. Is there any real significant difference?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:05:00

Okay, the mundane path is what gets you to a good rebirth. And the super-mundane path is what gets you to the transcendent. Now the big difference is in right view and right resolve.



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Right view in the mundane path is basically the belief in skillful karma, unskillful karma, rebirth-those issues. Right view in the super-mundane path would be right view in terms of the Four Noble Truths. Right resolve in terms of the mundane path is resolving to get the mind free from sensuality, from ill will and from harmfulness. Right resolve on the super-mundane path is to get the mind into the first jhāna. Those are the differences.

Questioner 1:05:49

Is there a sutta that explains that?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:05:51

MN 117

Questioner 1:05:55

Okay, thank you.

Questioner 1:06:01

My question is about meditation practice. So, when the object of meditation is body sensations, then how does one practice sampajañña? Because the sensations are kind of happening on their own. And, yeah, I'm just trying to understand how...

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:06:23

Well, notice when the Buddha talks about sensation in the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta, he lists- first, there's pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain- and there's what he calls pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain, not of the flesh. Now, those are feelings that are actually actively cultivated. Pain, not of the flesh, is when you think to yourself about the fact that, ok, there is this path to the end of suffering- other people have gone all the way to the end of suffering, I'm not there yet. That's a pain. Pleasure, not of the flesh is the pleasures of the first, second and third jhana. Now when the Buddha talks about taking pleasure as an object of mindfulness, he has you base it on the breath. If you look at MN 118, he talks about when you're working with the breath, you've actually got all the other frames of reference there- feelings are there, mind states are there, mental qualities are there- stay rooted in the breath to make sure you're in the present moment. And then notice the coming and going and feelings. And you don't just say, feelings coming willy nilly, I'm trying to give rise to a sense of pleasure not of the flesh- or equanimity, not of the flesh. So think in those terms.

Questioner 1:07:52

So this is a lot of, like theoretical knowledge, in a way. And I've been, when you read the Thai Ajaans, they give like a really big emphasis to not get lost in the theoretical knowledge and not just practice with that. And I find that a lot of times, especially in meditation, sometimes I just get caught up in like, thinking about the concepts. And so when that happens, then I just kind of jump from meditation topic to meditation topic, and then throughout the day, it's just like a whole scattering, I get like scattered within dharma terms. And it's very easy for me to just be like, oh, you know, I was thinking about the dhamma. It's okay, but what's a good way of preventing that,

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:08:30

Okay, well remind yourself that when you're doing jhāna, the topic is not jhāna. The topic is the breath. And how you're relating to the breath. A lot of the theory is there in the background, so that when you come out, you can think to yourself, Well, where was I? What was I doing? If something was going wrong, what can I possibly be doing wrong? But we tend to think about the forest Ajaans as being kind of rough and ready with no theoretical background- they had a good theoretical background. It's just that they didn't wear it around all the time. But you know, when you're out in the forest alone, and something's going wrong with your mind, you've got to



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run through what you have already learned about the dharma to see, okay, could this possibly be wrong? Or is it right?

Questioner 1:09:15

It's kind of like asking questions about direct experience,

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:09:18

Right when I do this, and then I reflect. There's a passage where- and it's unfortunate it's a very obscure passage in the canon- where the Buddha says that the dharma is nourished through commitment and reflection, when you really commit to doing it, and then you come out from it and you say, "Okay, what were the results?" If the results were not satisfactory, "What could I change?" Now, when I was translating Ajaan Chah, I have to read all this stuff about Ajaan Chah, being just sort straight out of nature. And I was really struck by the number of Pāli terms he uses. He was well educated. Ajaan Lee even more so.

Questioner 1:10:05

Have you have you ever read Luang Por Thoon?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:10:10

Who do you think translated him? Never mind.

Questioner 1:10:16

I suppose my question was about the ñāṇadassana and the dassana ñāṇa that he always goes on about do you know? Like when...

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:10:29

Luang Por Dune or Ajaan Tan?....

Questioner 1:10:33

Oh Thoon Thoon. Yeah. At Wat San Fran, Do you know?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:10:38

Oh yeah, that's another issue entirely. Nevermind, thank you. Yes, take some online. Before we break. Question is: "Define slash describe clinging with example for the aggregates, please." Okay, clinging to a particular feeling, this means you want to have that feeling come back, back, back, back, back, back again. Again, again, again. Clinging to a particular perception would be: "Okay, I really like this perception regardless of whether it's getting me good results or not. I just really gotta hold on." Okay, thank you. The next question is, "Is concentration is practice essential? Does it work if we skip concentration practice and just observe what's happening in the six sense fields?" The Buddha said that right concentration is part of the path. And he said there was nothing extraneous and nothing lacking in the path. So you've got to have concentration. Now, the big issue is how concentration is defined. If you look at the canon, concentration is defined one way, you look at the commentaries and it's defined another way entirely. And it's in the commentaries where they say concentration, or jhāna is not necessary. But then their concentration is really really strong trance states. So they're right that that is not necessary. And so maybe there's some people who actually got into jhāna, didn't realize it was jhāna because they were suffering under the perceptions of the commentary. When you look at the suttas, what the Buddha describes in the suttas as concentration is necessary. Thank you. Question, "Could you please recap the key takeaway from the third truth?" The truth is the total abandoning of craving and it's not just watching craving come and go and saying, "Gee, wasn't that interesting, but now I'm past it." You have to figure out why you are attached to the craving so that you can give it no more room so that you will not be interested in it again.



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Questioner 1:13:02

Okay, thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:13:06

Question, "What is the feeling we feel in the body? Is it the feeling aggregate? If not, what is the difference between the feeling aggregate and the body feeling?" Okay? Feeling aggregate is a sense of pleasure pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Form aggregate would be the four elements of the body. So say you feel heat in the body. That would be the form. Now the pleasure or pain that you associated with that would be the feeling aggregate.

Okay, thank you. Question, "What is the aspect, if any, of the relationships in nibbāna? It sounds sort of lonely, being blissed out all alone? Can you communicate with others in nibbāna? Thanks." Well, for one thing, you're outside of space and time. So there is no time when you say, "Gee it's getting long in the tooth." There's no time there's no space. And the other thing is, what would you want to communicate? You'd say, "Hey, isn't this really cool?" I mean, that would be a delight. You don't need delight. It's so it's so totally satisfactory, that you don't need to comment to it to other people. Have any of you here read "Sirens of Titan"? Nobody's read Sirens of Titan? One or two people, that's it? Okay, I highly recommend this book. It's Kurt Vonnegut's best. And there's a scene in there where two of the characters are stuck on the planet Mercury. Vonnegut's vision of the planet Mercury: it's this big crystal, and it's got this honeycomb kind of crystal. And one side is constantly facing the sun and the other side is constantly facing outer space. So this is really hot, this is really cold. And so the crystal sings, they've got these little beings called harmoniums. And they're like little kites with suction cups on the ends of the corners. And they're kind of translucent. And they feed off of the vibrations. They don't feed off of one another feed off any other living being. Think about that for a bit. And it's all they do is they find a nice little spot with where their vibrations are really cool. And they just put their suction cups there. And then they have two messages that they send telepathically to one another. And the two messages are this: "Here I am Here I am. Here I am." And the other one is: "so glad you are so glad you are so glad you are." My feeling is, if God couldn't think of a place where we can live without feeding, why is it that Kurt Vonnegut can? But in nibbāna there's nothing lacking. There's no need to communicate. "Sirens of Titan" by Kurt Vonnegut. It's got a lot of really cool, cool things in that book.

Okay, the next question. "Could you please speak more about what should be our focus at the time of death?" Okay, you should focus on whatever state of concentration you've been able to attain so far. And if an issue comes up without were to be reborn, if you're not going to become an arahant, then the question is, can I be reborn in a place where I can continue practicing the dharma? And don't fall for the first thing that appears.

I had an electrocution experience one time. And it was just a brief- people saw it said it was just a split second, but for me, it was like five minutes. And all of a sudden these doors opened up in front of me where I could go through any of the doors. And I was telling myself, No, I don't want to go through any doors and then the electric current stopped. So I don't know what would have happened. But you may have some choices coming up so don't go for the first door that opens- One. Two, just because something looks attractive doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be good.

I'll end with two stories. One is how many of you saw Ice Age II? Now the reason I saw it was I was on a plane coming back from Thailand and the kid in the seat in front of me had the whole Ice Age series. And a plane from Thailand gives you enough time to see the whole thing. There's one really cool scene in Ice Age II where the characters are lost in this raft going through the fog. And all of a sudden they come to this brightly lit place. And there are





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mermaids and mermen sort of lounging around looking very attractive and very come-on-ish. And the male and female characters in the raft are kind of 'Ahhhhh.' But then they begin to notice- you look really carefully at mermaids and mermen, and every now and then these bursts of static go through their images. And if you look in the bursts of static, there are piranha fish- so be careful.

Second thing, suppose you were going to be reborn in Thailand in the 19th century, and you wanted to practice the dharma. And the alternative came up to you- you could either be born in the palace or you can be born in a peasant house out in the Northeast. Now at the first appearance, you might say, "Hmmm born in the palace I'll probably get a good education learn about the dhamma." Well, turns out that in the 19th century, in a palace and in most of Bangkok was really strong wrong view about nibbāna- nibbāna was closed, jhāna was closed, there was no chance that you were ever going to gain nibbāna. It was the peasants in the Northeast who actually found it and taught the path. So make sure that you're firm in your desire: "Okay, I want to practice and I want to go where I can practice the true dharma."

So we gotta break-break for 20 minutes? You may remember the framework I mentioned this morning. You start with the desire to understand suffering and looking for someone who can help you find a way out. The Buddha recommends to find a good teacher. There are ways of testing the teacher, if the teacher is the kind of person who would get people to do things that were not in their own best interest, would he or she claim to know things that he or she didn't know? Does the person actually have knowledge? When the person passed the test, you listen to the dharma. Basically, the Four Noble Truths, as we discussed it, then the next steps are how you go from listening to the dharma to awakening to the dhamma, and the Buddha lists, in MN 95, five steps. First, there's pondering what you've heard. Then there's desire, willingness, judgment, and then exertion. And it's through the exertion that you finally awaken to the truth.

I'd like to go over some of those steps. Pondering means basically, comparing what you've learned with views that you already have, and seeing where your pre-existing views might get in the way of the practice -and if there's a conflict between the two- okay, which set of views- the Buddha's views, or your previous views, which makes more sense? Which seems to induce more skillful behavior? and then ask, "Why would you hold on to them when the dharma promises the possibility of an ultimate happiness?" The Buddha gives you a couple examples. One is not believing in karma and rebirth. And here, the Buddha says, ask yourself, if you believed in karma and rebirth, would you be more likely or less likely to behave in a skillful way? Just holding the idea that there is a possibility of rebirth and it would be influenced by your actions, you would be more likely to want to do skillful things, right?

A couple of years back, it's gotten so I've forgotten how many years it's been now, I mentioned a comparison with those clubs that they have, they call it basically, "One year left to live"? "Year to live" Okay everybody gets together and says, "Assuming that you had only one year left to live, how would you change the way you live?" I was proposing that they have another set of clubs- "Believing in karma and rebirth. Suppose you really believed in karma and rebirth, how would it change the way you live?" And the following year, someone came up to me and said, "You know, when you said that, I really resisted it. And so I went back, and I looked into my resistance, and I realized it was because if I believe in karma and rebirth, I'd have to be a better person." It would be more demanding.

So there's another case where the Buddha mentioned, believing in the possible ending of becoming, as opposed to not believing that becoming could end says, "Since you really don't know yet, why choose the alternative that would close off the possibility of ultimate happiness? When ultimate happiness is a possibility, you're not sure about it yet, but take it on as a working hypothesis." He doesn't use the word "working hypothesis", but that's looking at what



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how he describes it. He said, "Let's try it on and see what happens as a result." So this is an aspect of pondering. There's also the aspect of listening to different dharma teachings. And you try to put them into the context of the Four Noble Truths. I've been reading the book, "Work, Pray Code", Have any of you read that? it's supposed to be about you all. It's about religion in Silicon Valley. And reading the various dharma teachings that this woman, Caroline Chen describes, you're exposed to all kinds of stuff here. So you have to have some way of making comparisons. So the Buddha would recommend you take the four noble truths as the context and then see how things would fit into the Four Noble Truths, whether they fit or not, and then how she gives you a basis for pondering which kind of path you want to follow.

When you finally arrived at the path you want to follow, then there has to be some desire to do it. Here this is the role of desire as right effort. You say, "I really want to do this and it means I'm gonna have to make some sacrifices, but it's going to be worth it." Again, it's kind of like psyching yourself up. And you remember that the definition for right effort starts with generating desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and generating desire to develop skillful qualities. It talks, it requires you to know how to motivate yourself. You can use thoughts of heedfulness that if I don't get my practice together, it's going to be for my long term harm. You think about compassion. If I practice and if I do practice, I will be a kinder person. At the very least people will be less subject to my greed, aversion and delusion. That's saying quite a lot right there. Whatever way you find of fostering desire. The Buddha has an interesting one. He says, "You know, there are people in the world who can read minds. suppose they're reading yours right now. Are there certain thoughts in your mind that you would be ashamed to have them see?" Think about how if they saw anything that you would be ashamed about, actually, they wouldn't be there to judge you. They'd be there to feel compassion. "Why is this person not seeing what would be for his or her best interest?" So whatever way works to foster desire in your path, motivate yourself, that's a useful part of the path.

Then there's a willingness to submit yourself to the Buddha's teachings, in other words, you're going to take the Buddhist teachings as your measure for what you should and shouldn't do. And then there's judgment, where you test yourself and test the dharma at the same time.

I'd like to make a short digression here, we hear so much about developing a non-judging, non-judgmental state of mind. And yet, so much of the Buddha's teachings are about developing skillful powers of judgment. The Buddha said that his primary responsibility as a teacher was to provide you with the basis for deciding what would be skillful and what would be unskillful to do. That's a judgment right there. Say "Yes, No" to the whatever is being proposed in the mind. You know, the very first sentence in his first teaching was, "These are the two extremes that should be avoided by someone who wants to follow the path of the homeless, follow the path of those gone beyond home. And there's judgments all the way through. So the question is where does the idea of Buddhism being portrayed as advocating non-judgment and come from?

One comes from our own cultural bias, there's a strong bias from the Romantics going through the transcendentalists, and through modern humanistic psychology, that passing judgment is unskillful thing. Secondly, there's a misunderstanding of the Satipatthana sutta. Sometimes you hear the Satipatthana sutta described as a complete description of mindfulness practice. But if you look very carefully at the sutta, it starts out with the full formula for mindfulness, which starts out saying- in the case of the body, keeping track of the body, in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. And then he gives the same formula for feelings, mind, mental qualities.

But the sutta itself then raises a series of questions which focus on only one point of that one part of that formula, which is- what does it mean to keep track of something? And it goes



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about different ways of keeping track of the body in and of itself, different ways of keeping track of feelings, mind, mental qualities in and of themselves. Says no questions about ardency, no questions about alertness, no questions about putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, it's giving only a partial description. When you read it, there are certain passages which could be read as "This arises, this passes away", and you're just aware of that fact. Which sounds like well, you don't do anything about it, you don't pass judgment.

There are other passages, though that even indicate there, without discussing the rest of the formula, that there's certain things that you want to develop and certain things that you don't. And if you look in the rest of the canon, when the Buddha talks about alertness, ardency, putting aside greed and distress, there's very active process to get rid of unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. So it's misreading the sutta, gets the idea that maybe the Buddha was telling you not to judge.

And then finally, there's an emphasis on equanimity in the passages. And again, the Buddha doesn't say, just be equanimous about whatever. There's what I call mindfulness, 1.0, which is his instructions to his seven year old son, which is: make your mind like Earth. People put disgusting things on the earth, the earth doesn't react, people pour perfume on the earth, the earth doesn't react, ok- you start out with a nonreactive state of mind, not to stay with a nonreactive state of mind, but just so you have a good solid basis for judging what you're doing. Your mind is stable enough so you can judge- this is good, this is bad. Without that stability, you tend to be reactive and make reactions too quickly, without really seeing things clearly.

And when the Buddha does talk about equanimity though, further on, he says there's basically household equanimity and renunciate equanimity. Household equanimity is basically telling yourself, "Okay, I'm not going to react." Renunciate equanimity comes when you have practiced jhāna or when you have developed insight, and there's a strong sense of joy that comes with that, from that joy, then you become equanimous about other things. So this is equanimity, not just based on willpower, but it's based on an experience of joy. In other words, your internal needs are being met. So you can be more equanimous about things happening outside, we were talking about earlier that, you know, there's someone in your office whose behavior has to change. Okay, as long as you're irritated by that person's behavior, you're going to do unskillful things. But when you realize, okay, I can be unaffected by that person's behavior, but I can still see that it's not skillful. That puts you in a stronger position. So you're not feeding off your irritation as you go after the other person. So the kind of equanimity the Buddha recommends is something that is based on joy.

In terms of judgment, I mean, just the fact that the Four Noble Truths say, "Hey, there's stress and there's not stress, there's a difference, one is better than the other!" And then he gives you the duties with regard to that. The three perceptions are basically perceptions of seeing why you don't want to latch on to something. Again, it's a part of a value judgment. I am always amazed when I hear people say, "Well, you know, these three characteristics, they're not judging things- they're just a statement of fact." You are passing judgment. Is this worth holding on to? Is it worth letting go? So it's a judgement.

And as we talked about that five step program for getting rid of defilements, you're finally coming to a value judgment comparing the allure with the drawbacks. You see the allure is not worth it. Again, you're passing judgment. In this particular case, you're passing judgment on the way you're already acting. And say how does this measure up to what the Buddha's standards are? Where do I have to change? And then the next step is to actually make the change. That's the exertion as you develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. So



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you don't just go through this series of pondering desire, willingness, judgment, exertion one time, it's a constant process.

So keep delighting in the results as you get results from the path. You know, say "Hey, I'm making some progress and this is a good thing." The idea that we should not make ourselves proud of our practice? Yes, and no. Don't let your pride get in the way of things. Firstly, don't compare yourself with other people. There's the "My jhāna is better than your jhāna" which is not, which is not skillful. But you can say, "Hey, my concentration is getting better from what it used to be." That's skillful, say, "I'm heading in the right direction." This strengthens your desire. And then you keep judging the results to fine tune the practice, as I said earlier, the Buddha said, the dhamma is nourished by commitment, and then reflection. And then you reflect on what you might do to change and then you commit yourself to that, and then reflect again on that and it keeps going back and forth like this. And this is basically what the Buddha means when he talks about the concept of appropriate attention. That you look at things in terms of the skill and lack of skill with which you are behaving. So you keep going through this process of desire and willingness, judgment and exertion.

And what are you going to learn from the practice, the Buddha talks about discernment coming in three levels, there's the discernment that comes from listening, The discernment that comes from thinking things through which would be the pondering here. Then finally, there's a discernment that comes from developing, developing the good qualities that he's talking about. So as you can experience in developing more, getting better at virtue of getting better at concentration getting better at discernment, you learn some things that are not there in the texts.

For existence, you learn about the role of clinging in the path. We talked about this earlier, that there are certain right views, right habits and practices, and a healthy sense of self. And these are actually an important part, you hold on to these things as part of the path. The views that the Buddha recommends ignore many of the questions about the world that people ordinarily ask, you know, "Did the world have a beginning does it not have a beginning? How far does the world go?" We're talking about Cosmos here. The Buddha says that's really not your issue. Your issue is what are you doing that's causing suffering, which is why the Buddha focuses on right view about karma, so that you can understand what the potential is for action. And also to understand that karma is not totally deterministic. Saying my meditation is bad because of my past karma. Well, maybe some extent, yes. But there's also, what are you doing right now? Focus on that.

The Buddha was very critical of people who taught that your present actions did not have an impact on your present experience. because otherwise, you would be a thief, you could be a robber, you could kill people based on past karma, which meant you couldn't do anything about it. And then, if you believe that there's no hope for the path, you'd have to believe that you have some role in shaping your present moment right now. That's the views. As for your sense of self, the Buddha never gives a full sense of what a healthy self would be aside from believing that you are capable of doing the path, you are responsible for it. In other words, nobody else can do it for you. And then that you will benefit from doing it. That's all you really need to believe about yourself.

And then finally, as to habits and practices, your learn details about how you practice concentration, how you bring your mind down, the Buddha's instructions are general instructions, but each of us is going to have his or her own difficulties in getting the mind to settle down. And you'll learn a lot about yourself. This is where a lot of insights starts coming. You don't wait to the end of concentration, and then do insight. I don't know how many times I get asked, How much concentration do I need before I can do insight? Or when do we switch



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the insight? This is not a Goenka retreat, okay. As you're getting the mind to settle down, you run into problems. And as you learn to work your way around the problem, you're gaining insight there. You see, oh, I have this particular this particular hang up, how do I work around that? You gain some insight into the mind. Another thing you learned from doing the practice is you see how the path targets the three types of clinging. It's the discernment group: Right View and Right Resolve. Use that to focus on events leading to becoming, in other words, we talked about earlier that you have to look back at what is the series of causes that lead up to becoming, you'll learn how to develop dispassion for them. So discernment is what focuses there to undercut craving for becoming.

The concentration group gives you, One: a new alternative to pain to gladden the mind along the path, so that you have energy to do it. So it's not just thinking, well, someday, someday down the line, I'm going to be really happy I did this. And then grit your teeth through it- the Buddha's giving you a source of well-being as you go along the path. And also remember it gives you an alternative to sensuality. Because there's so much temptation in sensuality. If you're really feeling starved, you come home at the end of the day, "I need some pleasure I need some way of relaxing"- comes on the video, comes on the music. How about... comes on first jhāna. It's a much more skillful alternative, don't know about you guys, but the other day, I was on the plane. And I saw a couple of videos people were looking at videos on the plane. And just seeing those images were with me for several days afterwards. Now if you're exposing yourself to that kind of thing every day, can you imagine the reverb that's going on in your minds. So it's good to get away from those kinds of things.

At the same time, when you're working on concentration, the concentration itself is made out of aggregates. So if you want to understand clinging aggregates, the best way to understand aggregates is to do something good with them. It's like learning about eggs, you can sit and learn about eggs, you can read about the different kinds of eggs. But the best way to know eggs just are trying to make omelets and trying to make soufflés and try to make steamed eggs, that kind of thing. And in that way, you really get to know the eggs very well. The same way you're trying to make your mind into a state of concentration. You really learn a lot about the aggregates because they're all involved. And then, of course, the steadiness that's provided by concentration enables you to see subtle movements in the mind that you wouldn't have seen otherwise. How the mind begins to go for craving or begins to go for sensuality or whatever. Ajaan Maha Bua talks about his practice in dealing with the unattractiveness of the body. He said he could get really quick at seeing any body as being unattractive. Just think about the skin coming off the different parts of the body falling apart. But he realized that I hadn't put an end to lust. So the question is, okay, what's the problem? He began to realize he hadn't been watching the state, the part of the mind that wants to make the body attractive. What is it there in the mind that wants to make it attractive? It's that desire. That's the problem. You can't really see that unless -one, the mind is really still and two- your reflection, powers of reflection are all around. So not just looking out there for the problem you're looking back in here, for the problem too. This will enable you- this is promoted when you use that five step program. Now that takes care of the discernment groups, and the concentration groups.

The virtue groups are there basically, to give a good solid foundation for the concentration. In other words, you're going to need to be really honest with yourself about the mind. And so the best way to learn to be honest about the mind is to start by being really honest about your behavior, and trying to be as harmless as possible, and that- those habits there develop a good solid foundation for the kind of concentration you can trust, and the kind of discernment that you can trust. So it's in this way that the different aggregates of the path, or the different factors of the path, work to undo your attachment to craving.





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As I said earlier, you develop the path to the point where you finally have to abandon it. And the question was, how do you do that? But one is, when an insight comes, you have to be really quick not to latch on to the insight. Ajaan Fuang's comment to me always was, "An insight arises in the practice, ask yourself, How can I apply this right now?" And if you don't see any application for it right now, drop it. Otherwise, you just spend your time collecting insights. But without any real use for them. And insights when you collect them, they're kind of like, you know, the golden eggs in fairy tales. You try to keep the gold- what happens? Turns into ashes and charcoal. So you're trying to maintain the state of mind that will give rise to the insights, the insight comes, can I use this insight now? If not drop it. That's one thing to keep on.

Secondly, just look at the state of mind that follows on the insight, if there's any pride; watch out. "Isn't that a cool insight that I got?" You got to drop that. Kenan the Yonne recommends that when an insight comes just watch for the state of mind that immediately follows it. And be quick to drop that, too. Ajaan Lee has an interesting thing, he says when you get an insight to ask yourself, "To what extent or the opposite be true?" One of the questions they keep asking the Pali Canon when they ask the Buddha to define terms is, "To what extent is this true?" as if any particular concept has a range. And not every concept has a range that's going to be applicable. And remember, the Buddha said only two things are true and useful across the board. Principle of developing skillful and abandoning unskillful behavior and the principle the Four Noble Truths. One of the big issues in Insight is going to be the three characteristics. Because it's very easy to misuse those three, three perceptions.

Give you an example. At the monastery where I was ordained, Wat Asokaram, has a large jetty. And a lot of people come to visit and I was sweeping up one afternoon around the jetty. And there was this one monk that I knew who had a hut facing the jetty. And there's just a lot of garbage in front of his hut. I mentioned this to him, "Why don't you sweep up the garbage every now and then"? He says, "Well, if I sweep it up, there's going to be more coming the next day, it's just anicca, it's inconstant, so why bother?" And that's a misuse of inconstancy.

Or when you say everything is not-self so you should learn how to not get worked up about it. Well, there are certain things you are responsible for. So again, when the Buddha- there's a passage where the Buddha says, there are some teachings that you take the teaching, and then you try to work out the implications, other teachings, you don't try to work out the implications, you just use them as they are. And the teachings of the three perceptions are in that second category.

Like there was the monk who said "Gee, if there's no self, if the aggregates are not-self then what self is going to be affected by the actions done by nobody's not-self?" Which is basically, "Hey, I can do anything I want, right? Who's going to be affected by it? And who's going to be responsible?" And the Buddha immediately reads his mind. He says, "There is some foolish man out there who might think this." I've got a note here to myself that I don't understand. So I'll just skip over it.

Finally, you awaken to the truth. We talked earlier about that. The paradox where the Buddha in some cases says, you know, the person who is awakened, is beyond true and false. But you also at the same time use true and false- concepts of true and false to get there. And it's basically, remember, the Four Noble Truths are truths with a social context, they're placed in language. They're taught to us by people, we as people practice them. And then once we've completed the practice, arrived at the goal then we put them down. The goal is something that is not in a social context. So we don't know, at that point, there's no- you don't even need concepts of true and false because you've got the reality at the end of suffering.



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So you go beyond clinging to views not through willing it, not telling yourself, well, I'm going to be a person of fluid views. You use the views until you get there, okay? The Raft has done its job, you're on the shore, then you can put the raft down, you achieve the reality. You have no need to get involved in the social issues around the truths expressed in words, aside from teaching the path to others.

Ajaan Suwat made a nice comment one time saying that when you walk along the path, you do everything you can to keep all the stones and obstacles out of the path. So there's nothing between you and the goal. When you get to the goal, as far as you're concerned. The weeds and the stones and other things can come back. But then you look back and you see other people are struggling on the path. So you do what you can to come back and sweep things off for them, make it easier.

I always found that there were times when his dhamma talks were getting kind of repetitive. So I mentioned to him, I said, "I just read some so and so said this, this about the second noble truth or this this about the dharma." That night, we get this really fine, fiery dharma talk. I remember one time a particular copy of inquiring mind arrived. I don't know if you remember that- it had the issue about enlightenment and passion. And the cover was this bust of a woman naked down to here. And then there were these sculpted hands surrounding her like this. And so that was back at the time when we would get the mail once a week, it'd be a Sunday at mealtime. So someone comes in and I open up the copy of inquiring mind, and Ajaan Suwat is right next to me- "What the.....!" Well he didn't say "What the...", but he said the Thai equivalent, which is "Ryewha?" I will give you a brief lesson in Thai, the Thais express their emotions through these little particles they put at the end of a sentence. And like, if you're talking to a little child, you say, "What?" you say, "Ryecha?" Which sounds kind of cute. And if you're talking to another adult, and you want to be nice to them, "Ryena?", "What was that? What did you say?" And if you say "Ryewha?" It's like "What the hell?" So that night, Wow, we got a dharma talk. So I said "This is a dharma magazine!" And we opened it up and there were pictures of Tibetan Buddhas, you know, with women crawling all over the Buddha, and boy did we get to talk that night.

So in practice, when we talk about abandoning the path, it means that some issues no longer hold any interest for you. You've learned that they're totally irrelevant to the end of suffering, and it's just not any interest to you. Two, you have appreciation for that raft and you leave it for others. Remember the Buddha after gaining awakening still would honor and revere the dharma that he awakened to, and the path that led there. So it doesn't mean that you lose appreciation for the path. It means simply, I don't need this anymore, but it was a good path.

So that's basically what context for the Four Noble Truths is- you start out with a question about "Is there anyone who knows a way to put an end to suffering? I'm bewildered by the suffering." The Buddha recommends you find a trustworthy, compassionate and knowledgeable person. You listen to that person's dharma, which would be expressed in terms of the Four Noble Truths. All of this is the social aspect of the practice. Then you ponder what you've learned. You develop a willingness, you use judgment. You exert yourself in terms of right effort. And then you finally awaken to the truth and in awakening to the truth, you get to the point where you are beyond the need for the words anymore. So that's the context for the Four Noble Truths. Any questions?

Questioner 1:50:36

Until one reaches nibbāna, would you apply this same process or cycle to each object, each person that you interact with? So for example, if I'm- I teach in a school- if I'm interacting with a fifth grader, I have not yet achieved nibbāna, I'm bewildered, this person may have- this person may have something to tell me that may enlighten me to some degree about the nature



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of suffering. And then at a certain point, I can let go of the conversation with this person because that condition has been met, is that the correct way to apply?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:51:14

But in this particular case, if you're suffering from your contact with your student, you have to ask "Why am I suffering? What am I clinging to? What am I craving? To what extent should I learn how to put that clinging and craving aside so I can actually focus on what I've got to do?" Now, you know they do say "The wisdom that comes from the mouths of babes." Prepare for that, that the kid will have some insight. You're not looking to the kid for the same kind of insight that you would get from a teacher. That's a different relationship. Thank you.

Questioner 1:51:53

You spoke a little bit about the corruption of the three perceptions into the three characteristics. And I think you indicated that it happened early on in the history of early Buddhism. Could you give us some details? Like did it pop up in the Abidhamma? Did it pop up in the Visudhimagga? Is it still present today in different meditation methods?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:52:20

Oh, it's very present today, it seems to have originated someplace in the time of the commentary. Because it's only there that you actually have the term three characteristics. One of the great things about having the canon available on CD ROM and digital versions of the canon, is you can check for this kind of stuff now which you couldn't do before. And you check for the term three characteristics. And it does come up once or twice, but it doesn't mean anything about these three things.

And the Buddha talks about these things, primarily as perceptions. And then as what he calls anupassanā, which means that you are keeping track of something, you decide, I'm going to look for the impermanence or the inconstancy in what's going on in this particular area or around me. And then you keep that thought in mind as you look for where the inconstancy is, and again for the stress and then for the not-self-ness.

So in the in the canon, there's no mention of three characteristics-there are three perceptions that you apply as part of the duty of comprehending stress and abandoning the cause. Now, the commentary brings it in and makes a big deal out of it, that this is what you're actually trying to see.

Now, part of this comes from a tendency you see across the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka, which is in the development of the universities, when you develop universities, you have to have curricula right? There has to be a syllabus. And if you're going to present Buddhist doctrine in a way that makes sense in terms of a syllabus, you have to figure out okay, where do we start? Then how do we proceed? And you see some of the textbooks that come from medieval India, and they start with the five aggregates and the three characteristics. In other words, this is the nature of reality, and reality is made out of five aggregates. And these five aggregates have three characteristics. The Four Noble Truths get placed quite a bit later.

So you're studying and you see this nowadays, like, I don't want to name names, but books on, say the eightfold path, it starts out with right view, and it mentions the Four Noble Truths. And, well, why are the Four Noble Truths true? Because all things are impermanent, stressful not-self. And it segues immediately into the three characteristics. Now what this means in practice is the idea that ignorance is not seeing things in terms of three characteristics. You don't see the reality that there is no self and this is this is what the not-self teaching has turned into as a result- there is no self and somehow if you saw that there was no self then you'd be okay.



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Or some people say, well, it's not that there is no self but there is no permanent self. Now, I don't see how the idea of a permanent self would be any less suffering? If you cling to that, wouldn't be any less suffering than clinging to the idea there's an impermanent self. If you have an impermanent self, you're gonna say "What can I do to maintain this self as long as I can?" And you hold on even stronger.

Questioner 1:55:21

Are there any current popular meditation techniques that sort of still embody the three characteristics as something that is a tool?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:55:32

As a tool? Well, again, primarily the forest tradition, talk about it as a tool, Ajaan Lee, I think more than anybody else talks about the dangers of jumping onto the three characteristics too quickly. But again, Ajaan Maha Bua talks about the perception of self, perception not-self, as tools that you get to, where you arrive. I have a student who got a PhD thesis comparing the Mahasi method of mindfulness to Ajaan Lee's method of mindfulness. And one of the interesting points of difference was that when Ajaan Lee defines awakening it's defined in terms of the Four Noble Truths. Mahasi defines awakening in terms of the three characteristics. But if you want to hear more about this, there's an article I wrote called First things first. And I put it in as the appendix to the book, Four Noble Truths.

Questioner 1:56:32

Hey, I was wondering about nibbāna. Once you're awakened, do you ever fall back asleep?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:56:39

Excuse me? What?

Questioner 1:56:40

Once when you awaken, do you ever fall back asleep?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:56:43

The body sleeps. But the mind once you've attained nibbāna, you've attained it. You don't lose it.

Questioner 1:56:51

And what happens after that?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:56:54

You step out of space and time, and there's no 'after' in space and time.

Questioner 1:56:59

So let's say somebody attained nibbāna yesterday or tomorrow, and then they got to go to work on Monday. What happens?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:57:09

What happens? Okay. They might, they might decide, to hell with this job. But when you're talking about what happens after nibbāna, the arahant who's still alive after nibbāna, they can choose to live their lives as, you know, in line with the fact that they no longer have any greed, aversion and delusion. And they would probably see working in Silicon Valley as lots of greed, aversion and delusion I'm out of here.

Questioner 1:57:44



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How Poppy a bodhisattva does that come up?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:57:48

Once you're an arahant, you're an arahant, It's not like you say "Gee, do I want to go for a postgraduate degree?" Thank you

Questioner 1:58:06

So there's a connection between the dhamma and dependent origination. I haven't actually heard you talk about dependent origination even though I think it's part of the second noble truth.

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:58:20

It's definitely a more detailed version, the second and the third noble truth. It traces back where does this craving for becoming come from, and you trace it back to ignorance. And then there are other passages though, when the Buddha says there is no point in time we can say there's a beginning of ignorance, but you can look at what is it- what is it that nourishes ignorance now, and that's the five hindrances. So that's where the work has to be done.

Questioner 1:58:51

So just to understand dependent origination, is it really the interplay between the clinging aggregates, one triggering the other?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:59:00

Well, you've got different aggregates appearing at different points in the process, and in some cases, you have some aggregates appear again and again and again, like feeling comes several times. Perception comes a couple of times.

Questioner 1:59:18

So, it's kind of an interplay, it feeds itself and you have a mental formation.

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:59:22

It's kind of like a nonlinear system with lots of feedback loops. And there's a book I wrote on this called the shape of suffering, you might want to look at it.

Questioner 1:59:39

How many- someone else asked a similar question, but I'm sort of doing a different version of it- How many lay people do you know who have attained stream entry? Personally?

Ajaan Thanissaro 1:59:53

I'm really convinced of two.

Questioner 1:59:57

Thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:00:06

One of them was an architect, the other was a housewife.

Questioner 2:00:11

So it's a high bar.

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:00:12

Yeah. I mean, sometimes you hear say "If you really see the things arise and pass away, that's it.", I say, no. I mean, the phrase that they say is the dharma eye, which is that everything that





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is subject to origination is subject to passing away. Now, to what state of mind with that thought just naturally occur, it would have to be someone who has experienced something that is not originated and doesn't pass away. And there's a phrase where- a place in the canon where Sariputta has gained the dharma eye, and he comes back to tell Moggallāna who is a friend of his from a long time and Moggallāna sees him coming, he says, "Your eyes are bright, your complexion is bright. Have you seen the deathless?" You know, it's not like, what kind of makeup are you wearing now? It's "Have you seen the deathless?"

And Sariputta says yes. So you see the deathless, and then you look at everything else you've experienced up to that point, you see, it was all subject to origination or subject to passing away, but this is not. And origination here doesn't mean just arising, but it means it's caused by some cause coming from the mind itself. But this, you saw something that this was not caused by anything coming out of the mind at all. And one of the radical insights you get is that all of your sensory experience has to have this input from your mind, going all the time. You're not just on the passive receiving end of things, but it's more active. When that active quality stops. Okay, that's when there's going to be an experience of the deathless. Thank you.

Questioner 2:01:56

So, kind of on the topic of different interpretations, maybe with the three characteristics, but generally, do you think there's fruit to be born in looking at kind of combinations of the dhamma? With I know, there's bhikkhu, who's have combined the dhamma with existentialist thinkers, or is this kind of a recipe for thicket of views to arise?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:02:20

Sometimes it's interesting if you try to connect what you've learned in the dharma with what you already knew. So you can see where it fits and where it doesn't fit. And then you decide, okay, given what I've learned from the dharma now, what was of value in what I've learned up to now? And then anything that doesn't pass the test, you just say, Okay, let's put it aside. Because sometimes, you know, a large part of the dharma has to do with which conversations you get involved in and which ones you don't. Which questions are worth asking and answering, which ones are not. And there's that passage in MN 2, where the Buddha says, you know, some of the questions that are not worth asking is, Who am I? What am I? How am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist? Do I have a self? Do I not have a self?

And then he says that some of the conclusions that you would come up with would be: I have a self, I don't have a self. I know what is not self by means of self, I know what is self by means of self. I know what is self by means of not-self. And you can map that on different philosophers and in European tradition, I know what is self by what is not-self That's Kant. I know self by means of self that would be Fichte. I know not-self by means of self that would be Leibniz. And the Buddha says all of this is thicket of views. So you look at your existentialists and see, okay, which questions are they asking that the Buddha would actually say are worth asking?

Questioner 2:04:02

Are you asking directly?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:04:03

No. But just that's the question you should hold in mind when you're thinking of comparing things in the west with things in the dharma.

Questioner 2:04:14

Thank you.



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Ajaan Thanissaro 2:04:17

And then we go for the online people.

Questioner 2:04:19

Tan Ajaan, one question, Okay. So the question that is occurring to me is- the big difference that seems to me between normal or not, maybe not normal, but usual causal connections that we know of, for example, hunger and feeding. If you're hungry for food, we want to feed on food. So it's the same thing that we have the craving for that we cling to Okay, but in the case of the Four Noble Truths, it seems to be slightly different. What we crave for is for these three things, sensuality, becoming, non-becoming, but what we cling to, are these five aggregates, it almost seems like we cling to the five aggregates for the sake of the becoming, the sensuality, and the non-becoming, is that how we should read this?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:05:26

We crave becoming and we realize that to get to becoming you have to hold on to the aggregates.

Questioner 2:05:31

So, in other words, we're holding on to the aggregates for the sake of becoming. Okay. So that means it's a kind of an addiction, if both of them are feeding off on each other, like we're kind of clinging to the craving itself. Okay. All right. Just a clarification. Thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:05:50

Online. Excuse me, I'm supposed to look at the camera when I answer your question. Okay. Well, the first question was, Do you have any plans to teach in Asia in the future? Yes, I will be in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. end of November, December. Okay, thank you. The next question, typically, how many years of practice are required for attaining jhānas/ stream entry? What are your tips to make best progress on the path? Well, the Buddha says if you do the practice, you know, seven days non-stop. I really haven't done a survey. All I can tell you that Ajaan Fuang would have some lay students to come and practice with him. And they would get into really strong states of concentration very fast. Others would come along and it'd be years before they get the mind to settle down. But he says in the cases when it's difficult, you have the advantage that once you finally do get it, you really understand it. People who find that the concentration is easy, don't really understand it necessarily so that there are times when it's difficult, and they can't get into it. Can I tell a funny story? Please. It's my day.

My teacher had one way of criticizing me. When he was frustrated with me and exasperated, he would say "Don't you understand human language?" In Thai, this would be "Khuṇ mī khēāci phās'ā mnuŕ'ý hē rx?" And there was one time when one of his students who was the wife of the second in command at the roads Bureau in Riang would come out every day to meditate at the monastery. And she had this chauffeur driven Landrover. And she would come in and she'd have it parked right next to my hut and then go up to the jetty and meditate and come back down and leave. And the thing was, her husband had built a road into the monastery up to the jetty and also a parking lot in front of the kitchen with lots of shade. And so instead of using the parking lot that her husband built over the road that her husband built, she'd come and park next to my hut. And this was killing the grass. And also, there's just the smell of the car right next to my hut, which I didn't like.

So I was trying to figure out what to do. And one day I was looking under the Sala for something else, and I found two big railroad ties. I said, okay, this is the solution. There was a narrow area where she had to drive through to get to my hut. So I just put the railroad ties there. And then next morning, she drove up, got the chauffeur to get out, move the railroad ties, drove in, parked. I went down, put the railroad ties back in place. That evening, she came



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down- railroad ties- so she had them moved again, drove out. So I put them back in place and I say okay, she's got the message. Next day she comes driving up is about to get her chauffeur to get out and move the railroad ties. I happen to be standing right there. I said "Don't you understand human language? Why are those railroad ties there?"

Questioner 2:07:13

Thank you.

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:09:11

She blew up. And she went up to Ajaan Fuang and complained. She says "I understand deva language in my meditation and he's saying I don't understand human language!" Now the thing was Ajaan Fuang knew where I got that, right? And the woman responsible for my ordination had to be sitting there at the time. And she said all Ajaan Fuang could do was laugh. I learned my lesson really well. Thank you. Well, I'm going to interject my own question- you had talked about we need to generate a desire to practice the path. Could you share with us how you generated a desire to start the path early in life? Well, problems in the family, strong sense of Samvega. And just looking for something- that life had gotten to a point where it just didn't seem to have much meaning anymore. And so, and then meeting Ajaan Fuang- here was somebody who seemed to know what he's talking about, and seemed to be really wise, really compassionate. I figured, okay, whatever he has, I want that. So that was my first sense of strong desire to practice. Great, thank you.

The next question was, you mentioned judgment as a vital part of the path. I'm also familiar with the typical don't judge mindset here in the West, I tend to think that the thing we want is really discernment. I've now heard you mentioned both. But how do you distinguish the two? Okay, there's a difference between being judgmental and being judicious. Judgmental is when you come to snap judgment without enough evidence without enough good standards. So what you need to do is develop good standards for judging what is skillful, what is not skillful. And be willing to take the time to look into something carefully to decide which is which in any particular case.

Thank you. You said I should be saying that to the camera.... I can't talk to a camera. I'm sorry. That's okay. I'm willing to channel the Zoom people. But the poor people out there are seeing me in profile. Yes, question. Could you please ask TAG about the housewife and architect? What were any standout features of them that could help other people, other lay people? Okay, Tan Ajaan Geoff. Okay, for one thing, they didn't talk about TAF- Tan Ajaan Fuang I knew the architect better than I knew the housewife. He was the sort of person who during his spare time would meditate. That was his, that was his entertainment. He had a wife and had a couple of kids, and he did his job as a father, and he did his job as a husband. But when he had spare time, it was devoted to the practice. And he was a very reflective sort of person thinking about his actions and the implications of his actions

Questioner 2:12:57

Were these people Thai? Yes. So the important thing you need to point out to everybody- they had a very good grounding in the religion.

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:13:06

Well, the interesting thing was about that architect was he told me that before he met Ajaan Fuang he never bowed down to any monk. So it's not the case that every Thai person just is born starry-eyed about monks. He was very critical of the monks he'd seen around him. In fact Ajaan Fuang had a lot of students who told me that that Ajaan Fuang was the first monk they bowed down to. Okay, I believe this is the last question, although I've been chided by one of the people for ignoring questions in the past, so I apologize. I'm doing the best that I can.



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Question. Is it interesting only two lay people you know have attained stream entry? If stream entry is so hard what about so many lay teachers in other traditions who seem to have profound awakening? Are they not enlightened? Don't ask. Okay, so that's the end of the online questions.

Questioner 2:14:24

Me? So, the question is, how shall we adapt the knowledge of the third noble truth and the context is now that we talked about, about so this is the definition of nibbāna and then also to me, when you talk about it, I automatically have the image of like a beach or like, sunset at the beach and, and I kind of like realize that oh, Okay, that's a thought. But maybe that's because I deep down a link that to the feeling of peaceful. And that can also create craving in me as well. So in general, there might also be question like So what is nibbāna really? Do we have to understand nibbāna? So would it be the best to just know that, okay, there is this mountain top that- just an assumption that most people never be there. And don't worry about what's up there, maybe there's a restroom or not like don't worry about it, but just try walking the path and convict not faith not fully believe until we said, just try to walk the path until at that point, we get it. So what would be what? What shall we do with this belief? Should we just just know that there it is, and then drop it down? And then the second question is along the path? How do we know then how do we keep us checked that we're still in the path? Is it that, like, maybe we less angry? Maybe we feel less mental suffering to things like? Oh, it depends, it really depends on...

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:16:20

In terms of the first question, comprehending nibbāna is not the duty, it's potentially realizing it- up to that point all you have to do is have a really positive image, you know, if you're positive image is a sunset at a beach, keep it in mind knowing that it's an inadequate image, okay? But it has good connotations. But it is useful in the sense of knowing that where we're going is something that is outside of space and time so that if you have experiences that are really impressive in the meditation, you have to ask yourself, Okay, does this fit with what the Buddha actually said? As kind of markers for judging whether you've arrived or not, because there are people who have experiences and say that this must be it.

But then they measure it against what they learned and eventually see, okay, I'm not there yet. So it's useful to have that concept in mind. Now, as far as progress in the path that can be measured in many ways, in terms of your reactions in day to day life, being less angry, being less reactive, your ability to get the mind into concentration gets better, or your ability to recover from distractions and concentration gets quicker. This kind of thing, the fact that you're more sensitive to what's going on in your mind, and you're better able to control where you're going to be thinking where you're going to be not thinking. That's how you would measure progress on the path.

Questioner 2:17:53

And next follow up question more for myself to prevent thinking too much on nibbāna, Have you seen an example of someone who's going so deep in maybe not just trying to figure it out, or trying to understand nibbāna, but just going so deep in thinking too much about the concept of what things are, but not really progress on the practice?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:18:18

I've seen cases like that. And again, the question is, focus on the duties of the path. And there's a lot of stuff that if you're thinking about something, but it's not really improving your practice, you say, maybe I'm better just leave that alone for the time being. I focus on what I what I can comprehend and work on getting that because a lot of things that you can comprehend really easily on the path that you're not getting done. And again, it's not the sort



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of thing that you're not trying to work your way to right view. You're trying to use whatever right views you have, and then they're going to get developed not by thinking things through but by actually putting things into practice. Like right view about right effort, there are some cases where you actually instead of just using a skillful mind state to get rid of an unskillful mind state, use a unskillful mind state that is not quite as serious as a more unskillful mindset to pull yourself out.

But there's an example in the canon. You know, you're angry at somebody, you can't bring yourself to think thoughts of goodwill for that person. But what you can think about is okay, if I act on my anger, I'm going to do something really stupid. And if I do something really stupid, my enemy is going to be pleased, do I want to please this person? So you're using spite to overcome anger, which is better than going for the anger

Questioner 2:19:49

and prevent like the action right. Last one is just get into a conversation with a friend recently he pondering what is the purpose in life. And I remember you talk about one of the things that inspire you to get into the path. Like, what's the meaning of life? I think, is asking at one point, maybe can I say that asking what the purpose of life is, it might not be the best skillful thing. But maybe it's can be an a question that can lead to skillful thing. And up to this day, if someone asks you, what's the purpose of life in terms of Buddhism?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:20:40

Okay, I'd say, ask yourself, what would be a really good purpose for my life? What purpose would I choose for my life that I would find satisfactory? Because it's not that it's written out there that this is the purpose of your life, you get to choose. So how would you choose wisely? Yes.

Questioner 2:21:10

Can I ask a question? My first one is to do with rebirth and karma. And so I'm, I feel like it's easier for me to believe in thinking of becoming as a rebirth. So every becoming is a rebirth. And just that as in, that is what rebirth is, would that be kind of misleading or inadequate?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:21:39

That's, that's the beginning. Or be open to the idea that it may actually go beyond this body. Be open to that possibility.

Questioner 2:21:50

Yeah, it helps. You don't have to take the second question seriously. But yeah, thinking in terms of rebirth helps me act better and see why it's actually a good thing to be a better person. But at the same time, if you're being reborn infinite number of times until you achieve nibbāna, it's not in maybe you don't need to do anything different.

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:22:18

If you don't do anything different, it's gonna be a lot longer- Don't the mathematicians have different scales of infinity? But it is not infinite. It might be a lot, but it's not infinite. And you don't want to do anything that would that would pull you down to a lower rebirth. Because this is the scary thing about rebirth. Some people say people believe in rebirth, because it's a nice consoling idea that death is not annihilation. But you realize, if until you reach stream entry you could be reborn in some pretty bad places. So, get your act together. One last question here and we have to break

Questioner 2:23:13





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So I do believe that there is a cessation of suffering at some point, but along the path, like there isn't any like cessation of suffering, it's just trading one suffering for another one?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:23:31

You learn how to go for things that cause less and less suffering. But the word cessation really means stopping. Yeah.

Questioner 2:23:40

So on the path is that, like would it be fair to say there's a transformation in our relationship to suffering or what we know of as suffering?

Ajaan Thanissaro 2:23:53

Your sense of suffering will get more and more subtle. At the same time, there's a sense of well being that comes from being on the path I mean, there's a joy in generosity itself. There's a joy in the act of virtue itself. There's a joy in concentration, there's a joy in discernment. So there's a certain amount of-and appreciating those joys your sensitivity to what is suffering what is not suffering is going to become more subtle, more refined. Okay, well thank you for your attention.