



## The Four Noble Truths in Context: Morning Dharma Talk Ajaan Thanissaro

September 8, 2023

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 00:07

You may be wondering why we're revisiting the Four Noble Truths. For a lot of us, this was our first teaching we learned about Buddhism. In my case, that was the case, I was an exchange student in the Philippines one year. And on the plane coming back from the Philippines, there were the kids who had also been exchange students in Thailand, Malaysia, Laos, Singapore. And two guys from Thailand, had ordained as novices. And so they explained the four noble truths to me. And I said, this sounds interesting, a religion about suffering, seemed to be right on the topic. And so that was the beginning of my interest in Buddhism. And here I am now. Just briefly, the Four Noble Truths, the teaching: suffering, it's cause, it's cessation, and then what to do to bring about its cessation. The reason we're revisiting them, even though we may have heard about them many times is there's a lot of misunderstanding about them. Some of this comes from scholarly works; people with degrees can actually screw up the teachings more than people without degrees, sometimes. Also, from various practice traditions, there are some misunderstandings about the Truths. Also, I thought it'd be interesting to look at the Truths in the context of two of the Buddha's other teachings. One was his teaching on how we ordinarily respond to experience of pain and suffering. And then teachings on how you could take that original response, and you turn it into a path to lead you to the truth that takes you beyond suffering entirely. So I'd like to first talk about some of the misunderstandings about the the Truths and then we get into the Truths in the context of this issue of how we respond to suffering; the universal response to suffering. And then what the Buddha proposes is a good way to get out of that suffering, About some of the questions about the Four Noble Truths, I'll start this morning with some of the scholarly, interesting interpretations that come out. Basically, nobody can seem to agree on anything except the fact that there are four of them. The question, "Are they truths?" That's brought into question. "Are they noble?" That's also brought into question. And there is one scholar who even doubts the four.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 02:27

So, about the truths; first there's a question about the phrase itself: Four Noble Truths. There was a British scholar whose name was K.R. Norman, who wrote an article one time saying that the way this is expressed in Pāli is very strange, in terms of the grammar. And because it's strange, grammatically- it's a compound that has a masculine and neuter, and they're left in their masculine and neuter forms in some of the cases, which is odd. And he says, because this is linguistically odd, it must come later. Now, the assumption there, of course, is that languages start out regular, and then as they degenerate, they get irregular. I don't know any language where that's true. English starts out irregular, and then someone decides we have to standardize the language. And historically, you look at any language that isn't standardized. It's



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

either for one of two reasons. One is that someone has built a large empire, and they need a standardized language to run the Empire. And the other is that there's a body of literature that someone wants to get to an extensive audience. So they create a standardized language to fit that need. In the case of India, Sanskrit was standardized a couple of centuries after the Buddha because they needed a language to govern the entire subcontinent. As for inventing a language, or standardizing language, we have the case of Dante, who was faced with the fact that if he wrote his work in Tuscany, only people from Tuscany could understand it. So he invented Italian as a language. I think that that's the case of what happened in the case of the Pali canon. because prior to this, we don't have a standardized language in northern India, we have dialects ranging from the area where Calcutta is now all the way over to the West Coast, and there were many different dialects at that time. And when they wrote down the canon, it seems to me that they decided to have standardized versions of each of those languages going across the board. Now, in some cases, there would have been some phrases that were so distinctive of the how the Buddha expressed himself, that they didn't standardize those. And the Four Noble Truths would be one of them, because it would be something he talked about all the time. And then secondly, there are other passages where they actually left it in other dialects. So the question of the fact that it was later linguistically is like saying that Shakespeare could not have written those works in such sloppy English. Because, you know, a great writer had to write them in a pure language, the Buddha had to speak only a pure language, it doesn't make any sense. However, there are people who based on that argument say "Well, maybe the whole idea of the Four Noble Truths as a teaching was a later addition to the canon." Now if that's the case, we'd have to erase a lot of the canon. So that doesn't make any sense. A second question about the word "Truth", again, K.R. Norman, saying that the word truth can mean only statements about facts, it doesn't include facts themselves. And then you have this weird situation then, when the Buddha talks about abandoning the truth of suffering, or about abandoning the cause of suffering, he's saying, how do you abandon a phrase? How do you develop a phrase, and this, of course, is assuming that everybody agreed with the English, that truths can only refer to statements about reality, you look in the Pali canon and there are many cases where the Buddha talks about nibbāna as a truth. Now, nibbāna is not a word he's talking about, he's talking about the truth of the experience of nibbāna. So when you understand the truth has two meanings in Pāli- either the actual fact or a statement about the fact- that clears up a lot of confusion on the topic, because the second confusion has to do with the fact that there are seemingly conflicting statements in the canon about truth. Sometimes the teachings are said to be true, and they're described as truths. But then they talk about the awakened person being beyond holding to any assertions as true or false. And sometimes this was given an interpretation that we have a postmodern Buddha who realized that truths were only attempts to impose on other people, impose power to other people- or that the Buddha didn't have a nuanced view of truth. But for example, you have this statement: "Of what would the brahman say 'true' or 'false' disputing with whom equal or unequal, or not- those who dispute, taking hold of a view, saying "This and only this is true", those you can talk to, here there is nothing, no confrontation at the birth of disputes." But if you realize, again, that when the Buddha's talking about truth, it could be either a statement or a fact, he's trying to get you to the fact of the end of suffering, starting with suffering itself as a fact and trying to get you to the fact of the end of suffering, the truths that would get you there are words about those things. So when you're abandoning the truth of suffering, you're actually abandoning the reality of suffering. That clears up a lot of a lot of confusion.



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## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 07:48

Secondly, the question about whether the truths are noble. Somebody- a scholar- once said, "What's noble about suffering? What's noble about craving? What's noble about clinging?" And the quick answer is that these truths have you take a noble attitude towards clinging and craving. So when the Buddha says your suffering is your clinging, he's forcing you to look at things that you really like. You're suffering because of things you like, the things you hold on to most dearly. In order to step back from that attachment. It requires a noble attitude in the mind, a willingness to question your likes and dislikes, The same about craving. Also, the Buddha talks about what he calls the noble search. He says there are two kinds of search in life. There's the ignoble search when you yourself are subject to aging, illness and death and you're looking for your happiness in things that are subject to aging, illness and death. And then there's the noble search where you're looking for your happiness and things that don't age don't grow ill, don't die. In this particular case, then the Four Noble Truths would be truths that are part of that noble search. And as you take on that search, it is ennobling to you, which is one of the meanings of noble truths- it ennobles the person who adopts the truths. There's another meaning or other meanings that we have in English that also apply. The truths are preeminent. In other words, they are the most important truths in Buddhism. As Sariputta once said that all the other skillful teachings can be fit into into four noble truths in the same way that all the footprints of all the animals that walk on the earth can fit into the footprint of the elephant. As I said, also they they're noble and taking responsibility for your truth. You're not saying okay, I'm suffering, it's because of somebody else. You're saying, I'm suffering because of my own actions, I have to improve my own actions to get beyond the suffering. There's also that in Pāli, the word noble also means that it's universal. It's true for everybody across the board. He doesn't shy away from- the Buddha doesn't shy away from the idea that there are truths that are true for everyone. As for specific truths, there are lots of misunderstandings about each one of the four truths, which I'll treat later.

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 10:04

But for right now I'd like to point out one misunderstanding about the first noble truth that comes from scholarly literature. There is a modern Buddhist teacher who says the Buddha's teaching on the duty with regard to the first noble truth, which is to comprehend it, he retranslates that- he says you should embrace experience. Now, how do you get from comprehending suffering to embracing experience? While there is a story behind that there was a PhD thesis is written by a scholar named Sue Hamilton, in which she talks about how suffering is the five aggregates. Now, because the five aggregates are form feeling, perception, thought constructs and consciousness, cover all of experience, that maybe the word dukkha for suffering doesn't mean suffering, maybe it just means experience, In short. The problem is, she missed an important part of the definition. The Buddha never defined suffering as the five aggregates, he defined it as the five clinging aggregates, in other words, clinging to those five activities. The clinging there is what actually causes us suffering. Whoever reviewed her thesis was missing an important point. There's some PhD thesis out there that I think the world would be better off without them. And this is one of them. But at any rate, someone picked this up. It says, since the first Noble Truth is about experience, you know, what else do you do with experience? You embrace it. So that's where that particular misunderstanding came from. So those are some of



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the misunderstandings that are out there because of scholarly research. We'll get into other misunderstandings later on in the day.

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 11:52

But first, though, I would like to talk about the Buddha's idea about the context in which these truths function, he says, We all start out with a common reaction to suffering, which is twofold. One is we're bewildered by it. Why is there this suffering? You think of a little baby suffering from pain, nobody can explain anything to the baby, the baby has to figure this out on his or her own. And then secondly, our response is: "Is there somebody out there who knows a way to put an end to the suffering?" Now as children, the first thing, of course, is to run to our parents. But then as we get older, we still have the same reaction, when we're suffering, we want somebody else to help us with this. So that implies that we're already looking out into society for a solution to this problem. It's an interesting thing to think about. Suppose we didn't have any suffering at all, would we be interested in other people? Let's just think about that for a bit. Most of our need for other people has to do with the fact that we are suffering. And we're looking for a way to overcome that, see if anybody can help us with that issue. So the Buddha starts out by saying, Okay, you start with this common reaction to suffering. And then in one of his suttas, MN 95, if you're into that kind of thing. He starts out by saying, you start out by looking for somebody who is trustworthy, you want someone who is knowledgeable, trustworthy, compassionate. In other words, they really know about suffering, the cause, and how you can put an end to it. And secondly, you can trust them to tell the truth about what they know. And third is that they would have compassion for you. That's the kind of person you're looking for. And it gives tests for looking for that kind of person, which is, first you stay around that person for a while and see, would this person tell anybody else to do things that were not in that other person's real, real interest? In other words, trying to get that person to do something that would be harmful to that person? If so, go away, stay away from that person, or that teacher. Secondly, would that teacher claim to know things that he or she did not know. And if you catch them claiming things that they cannot know, go away, leave them alone. Third one is that you listen to their teaching, is it the kind of teaching that is deep and profound, and really gets to an understanding of what's going on inside you. Now, if a person meets these three characteristics, then the next step is to listen to that person's dhamma. Listen to what that person has to say. When you listen to it, then you're ask questions about it, make sure you understand. This is one of the distinctive things the Buddha said about his own teaching was he encouraged people to ask questions. He didn't talk about, you know, the interconnectedness of all beings and what a wonderful thing it was, because that's just way too vague. If you ask him, well, what's wonderful about the fact that, you know, people are eating other beings. That kind of question is usually discouraged in those contexts. He said, If you have questions about it, the teacher should be prepared to answer. Once you're clear on the teachings, you've thought them through, and then the next step is to give rise to a desire to actually practice them. Because the teachings all require action. You look at the four noble truths. They're a part of another teaching, which is even actually more basic, which is the fact that there are such things as skillful actions and unskillful actions. Skillful actions, the Buddha said should be developed unskillful action should be abandoned. And this is one of the few teachings that he says is categorical. In other words, true across the board for everybody, all times. And then based on that, when you apply that particular set of categories to the problem of suffering, okay, what am I doing that's causing suffering? What could I do to put an end to suffering? Suffering itself is something that should be comprehended, the cause



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should be abandoned, its cessation should be realized. And you do that by developing the path, which is the fourth truth. So the truths themselves, give imperatives, basically. Now, the Buddha's imperatives are not imposed on you. Basically, he says if you want to put it into suffering- big if- but it's usually pretty universal, then this is what you've gotta do. So they're not imposed on you, but that's kind of a statement of fact. So you realize, once you really listen to the dhamma, you realize this is something I have to act on. So you're trying to give rise to a desire to act on it. Then from that desire, you give a willingness to listen to the teachings and apply them to your own actions to see where your actions measure and don't measure up. And then there's an act of judgment. One of the biggest ironies about how Buddhism is explained in the West is that the Buddha wants you to have a non-judging attitude towards things- you're trying to develop a non-judging state of mind. From the first word the Buddha spoke to the last, it's all judgments: first sentence: "This is what should not be done by people who are looking for a Noble Path"- his last statement- his last word was an imperative. "Attain completion." He saw it as a teacher's duty to protect the student by giving the student a good basis for figuring out what should and should not be done. I mean, these are things you have to weigh. So judgment is an important part of the path. Once you judge your own actions and see where they're lacking, okay, then you give rise to... then you exert yourself, to follow the path. And it's through exerting yourself to follow the path that you arrive at awakening to the truth.

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 17:41

So that's the framework in terms of the Buddha's take on where you're starting with suffering and how you're going to end up by awakening to the truth. You start with your own personal reality of the experience of suffering, then you go out into society looking for some help. Then you take the lessons you get from reliable teachers, and then you bring them in to bring your own actions in line with what the Buddha had to say about how you could do this. I'll give you the other thing about what I want to talk about before we break for our first round of questions, is that when the Buddha started out his introduction to Buddhism, his teaching, he didn't start usually with the Four Noble Truths. Now there are a few cases where he did. In fact, his first dharma talk was -point blank- starts with the four noble truths with people he knew, people were already practicing. For other people, especially for lay people, he gave what was first called an *anupubbikathā*, or a step by step discourse. And this is part to establish- okay, that the person teaching you is reliable. He's going to be talking about... starts out with things that you know something about already. And then from there, he will take you to get your state of mind ready to accept the Four Noble Truths, because there are some things in the four noble truths that are counterintuitive. So the first step is he would... let me back up a bit. He gave this teaching to many, many people- everything from a king and his retinue to wealthy householders, men and women, wealthy housewives, down to a poor leper, and even to the assassin who was hired to kill him. Now I think that's one of the most fascinating passages in the Pali canon. King Ajatasattu has allowed Devadatta, who wants to take over the sangha to take some of his archers. Archer number one is to go in and shoot the Buddha. And then secondly, he is told to follow a different path to get away. Now there are the two other archers stationed at that path and they say kill the archer when he comes here, and then follow this path, and then that path- there are four other archers that are stationed there, kill the two archers gets to 8- 16. All the evidence is erased, right. And so here comes the poor Archer. And he approaches the Buddha and he starts freezing up. Shows that he has at least some goodness to him, he realizes that this is something he really shouldn't be doing. And so, the Buddha says, "Just put down your



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bow and arrow, come in, see me." So he does. And the Buddha teaches him this graduated discourse. And at the end of the discourse, he teaches the Four Noble Truths. The Archer becomes a stream enterer. Now, how many years have we all been meditating and we haven't got stream entry yet? And you come here with best intentions. It's one of the most amazing passages. And then the Buddha says, "Don't follow that route, okay? There's another way out." So the next two archers say, "When is this archer going to come? What happened?" So they come to see the Buddha, the Buddha teaches them, they become stream enterers. The four, the eight, the 16, big crowd of stream enterers by the end of this, and the Buddha survived.

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 21:07

Unfortunately, we don't have the text of what the Buddha taught in any of those graduated discourses, all we have are a list of topics. And I can understand why because you know, he probably tailored it to different needs. Like when he's teaching the poor leper, he was teaching one way, when he taught the king he was teaching another way, when he taught the assassins, it was another way, it's focused on different things. But the list of topics is really interesting. Remember, he's not teaching them Buddhism, he's teaching them how to meet with their need to put an end to suffering. That's an important point. And you have to think about why he taught this, what desire he's responding to, these people want to put an end to suffering. That story about the assassin reminds me of a short story I read one time, I forgotten the name of the author. But it's about a young kid who has joined a gang in the city. And in order to firm up his status within the gang, they've sent him back to steal from his mother. And he comes into the house. And he's walking into the kitchen, sneaking in the kitchen that night, he looks at the sink and he remembers all the times when he helped his mother in the past. And there's a real pang of regret. Now in his case, he actually goes through with the theft. But I can imagine the archer thinking "My gosh, here I've been hired to kill this great being." And in his case, he probably thinks of the good he'd done in the past. And that's what saved him basically. So the Buddha's responding to people's desire to put an end to suffering. And also he starts out with their sense of what is right and wrong in life. Because the topics are these: he starts with generosity, what's good about generosity, then he goes on to virtue, where you abstain from harming others. Then the third is the rewards of these two activities, both in this life and then on into the future lives, where he would talk about heaven. The fourth is when he talks about the drawbacks of sensual pleasures which are the rewards and then finally, to see renunciation as a good thing. And once you see renunciation as a good thing, then you're ready for the Four Noble Truths. So look at the dynamic here. He starts out, again, not with talking about the world out there or some being who's far away he's talking about- this is something you know, about we've all experienced when you give something on a voluntary basis. It's not because it was a birthday and not because you had to because it was Christmas or but what would the corresponding Jewish holiday be? Hanukkah. Did they do that? Do they give gifts on Hanukkah in the old days? Or was that a modern invention?

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 23:56

You're supposed to give very little gifts. The major celebration holidays in March is another holiday. You're commanded to get drunk actually on that holiday.

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 24:14

I was told you had to drink a little wine. I didn't think you were supposed to get drunk.



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

24:17

No, on Purim you're supposed to get as drunk as the evil person who tried to kill all the Jews. It's said you're supposed to get drunk until can't tell the difference between the good people and bad people.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 24:34

Yeah. That's like the time when I was in Thailand. And it was one of the first times when the cold season really was cold. And the cold wind was blowing down from the north. And it started making me homesick. And I mentioned that because we had been awfully hot most of the time. And I went to see Ajaan Fuang and I happened to mention to him, I said, "You know the cold wind makes me homesick." And he said, "Yeah, every culture has its weird customs doesn't it?"

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 25:01

At any rate, when the Buddha's talking about generosity, he's talking about voluntary giving, when you feel just out of the goodness of your heart, you want to give something to somebody else. And how good that is. The same with virtue, when you think about the times when you have principles that you wanted to hold to, and you were going to have to sacrifice something, in order to hold your principles, and you went ahead and you made the sacrifice. So he's talking about, not about things that are far away, but talking about how good these forms of goodness are. And this way, he's developing an attitude of trust for the teacher, right, the teacher is talking about things you know about, also, building on the fact that you do have potential, you've experienced goodness already. And then he'd go further than that. This is when he begins to get out of your immediate range of experience, he starts talking about the rewards that come from being generous, the rewards that come from being virtuous, including the fact that you get to go to the sensual heavens. Now, one of the weird things about the Pali canon, is that there's lots and lots of descriptions of hell, and they're quite descriptive and quite graphic. There are no graphic descriptions of heaven. Question why, I don't know, when I was trying to put together sort of reconstruction of this graduated discourse, there's only one or two little passages on heaven, no great descriptions. But then the Buddha says that there is what he calls, the drawbacks, and even the degradation of sensuality. And imagine, say you go to heaven, and you get used to having everything appear as you want it. But then you have to leave that; can you imagine what bad habits you develop in heaven? You get lazy. You get feeling entitled. And you've probably met people who are like this, you know, fresh recruits from Heaven, falling down to Earth, it's like samsāra is a sick joke, you do everything- you make all these sacrifices and being generous and being virtuous, and then you get the rewards and the rewards spoil you and send you back down. And so that's when you realize, ok, maybe it would be a good thing to get out of the cycle. And the Buddha says, okay, the way out of the cycle is renunciation. Now renunciation does not mean you are depriving yourself of pleasure, it means you have to look someplace else for your pleasure. And the primary place he talks about looking for pleasure is in the practice of concentration. Because that's a pleasure, he says, that doesn't have any drawbacks. Now, here again, this differs from a lot of what you probably heard in mindfulness circles, which is you can go get into jhāna, and you'll never get out. The Buddha says that it is the way out of your attachment to sensuality, because if we're not attached to our concentration, we're going to go back and be attached to our sensuality. Now, nobody has ever killed or stolen or had illicit sex or lied or taking intoxicants because of their attachment to concentration. Now



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that does happen because of our attachment to sensuality. So the real danger is there in the sensuality. Once your mind begins to see that the pleasures of a concentrated mind are really worth it. Then he says you are prepared to hear the Four Noble Truths. And what the Buddha is doing here is preparing both your head and your heart. Now in Pāli, they have one word for that which is *citta*- covers both sides. In terms of your head, he's introduced the principles of karma and rebirth, talking about how your actions do get results. You are responsible for your actions. You can choose and you have the power to choose what you want to do. And this will give rewards, not only in this lifetime, but also in future lifetimes. He's also talking about karma is not deterministic. And we have the power of choice in the present moment to counteract past bad karma and weaken its results.

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 29:12

And then it takes us into larger context of how these teachings fit into the search for the end of pain, starting with virtue and generosity. These are answers to a question that the Buddha said lies at the beginning of discernment, which is what would I do it will lead to my long term welfare and happiness? What will they do it will lead to my long term harm and pain? Now the wisdom or discernment in those questions starts with: one, you realize that pain and unhappiness are dependent on your actions. Secondly, there is such a thing as long term happiness. And two, it's better than short term. Sounds obvious right? Again, K. R. Norman translated a verse, translated the dhammapada. He gets to the one verse that says, "When you see that there is a greater happiness that comes as the result of abandoning a lesser happiness, the wise person will choose the greater happiness, will abandon the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater. K.R. Norman writes a footnote to this: "this cannot possibly be the meaning of this verse because it's just too obvious, too basic, we don't need the Buddha to tell us this." But then you look at the world. How many people are willing to sacrifice lesser happiness for the sake of the greater? We all want to win at chess and keep all our pieces. So that's the wisdom in this question. The Buddha is also affirming that the desire to end pain is a good thing. Sometimes in some teachings you're taught that you shouldn't be concerned about ending your own suffering, you should be more concerned about the suffering of others. But then, who are they supposed to be looking out for? They'd be happy to look out for you, right? But the question is, how many people can actually solve your problem of suffering because it does come from within, As the Buddha said, it's from your own lack of skill, and how you relate to your experiences around you- you cling to things and that causes you suffering, it's through your own lack of skill that the problem is caused- you have to develop your skills in order to put an end to it. Also, when the Buddha is talking about karma here, he's not- doesn't start with the issue of punishment, but he talks about the possibility of finding happiness through your own efforts. This is something that I think we should think about a little bit. Because for most of us, when we hear the first teaching on karma, think, "Oh my gosh, that thing I did back when I was young, it's going to come and get me. I don't like this teaching." But the Buddha, when he talks about karma, he starts out with generosity, he starts out with gratitude- it's because your actions are your own choice, that generosity is a good thing. And not just something that's forced on you. It's because other people have chosen to do good things for you. They had a choice not to. That's why you should have gratitude for the help they've given you. So for him, karma is what makes generosity and gratitude, valid activities, valid attitudes. And then finally, he's affirming the fact that your noble intentions are meaningful, your intention to help others your intention to be skillful in your own actions, these things do have meaning. Again, if the world were totally deterministic, if all things



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were predetermined by some outside force, our actions would not be meaningful, but the Buddha's saying you have the power of choice and your actions can be meaningful. That's the issue around the head, now around the heart and he starts with common everyday activities that are familiar to you. Not abstract principles, he is affirming the value of looking for happiness in ways that are socially mature. This is when we learn how to be more adult as we've learned how to be generous and learn how to be virtuous. And also the helps you develop trust in the person teaching you this- you know that he or she is a good person by affirming activities that you know are good. And he affirms the happiness of generosity virtue in heaven. The Buddha's no prude, in other words. He says heaven is a good place to be. He's saying being a miser is a stupid thing to be, you should have some ability to enjoy the pleasures that come from your wealth. So when he starts talking about the dangers of sensuality, you're more likely to trust him. And then, when he sees, when he talks about there is another way to find happiness and a non sensual way. So once your mind and heart have been sort of developed through following the Buddha through this introduction to the teachings, he says, looks like your mind and heart had been washed and now they're ready like a cloth that you find to dye. They're ready to receive the dye. So we'll stop there for a few minutes. See if there any questions? Start with live people first. Questions? No one has questions. Get the mic.

34:24

Okay, is this good? Can everybody hear? Okay? Um, at the end of meditations, you always say like, try to keep the breath with you throughout the day. And I've been trying to work on that for like, a while. And I'm really bad at it. So I like after I get out. I'm able to like check in throughout the day. And like, randomly like, Yeah, I'll check in and for 20 seconds, I'll be with the breath. But it's like very discreet rather than continuous. And yeah...

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 34:54

Discrete moments are better than nothing. But also, when you're trying to be with the breath as you go through the day and you're doing other activities, it's still a bit too much to ask you to be aware of when the breath is coming in, when it's going out. Just think about what's the quality of the energy in my body. And try to be sensitive. Like when you're listening to somebody or make it, make a particular task, like, Okay, today, while I'm listening to the people, I will be with my breath. Next day while I'm talking to other people, I will be with my breath. And then add more and more and more activities throughout the day. And you find that you actually can make it more continuous.

35:34

It makes sense. Thanks.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 35:37

Any other questions?

35:41

**Questioner**

A question online. What is the origin of clinging and craving? What is the cause for these things to come into the mind heart and touch it?



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**Ajaan Thanissaro** 35:54

The origin of clinging and craving is traced back to ignorance of the Four Noble Truths. (I guess I talk to the camera?) Okay. In other words, you don't realize that your own actions are leading to suffering. And so you see clinging and craving as a good thing.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 36:20

There's a lot... I remember when I was down in Brazil, talking about an issue about dispassion, first question, "What's wrong with passion?" And so the answer, of course, is, well, you do stupid things based on it. And as you do these things, because you don't see the connection between your actions and the suffering they're causing. Once you see that connection, then you will see the drawbacks of going for those kinds of activities. Question here?

37:04

**Questioner**

Yes. You talked about generosity. But often, women, especially in my culture, are often told to give all the time. So how do I know when to stop?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 37:23

Well, the Buddha says, to give where you feel inspired, but not to harm yourself, through giving. And there are two ways you can harm yourself through giving- one is you steal something to give. And the other is you give too much. So you have to realize, he would have you divide your wealth into four or five categories. One is looking after yourself. Second is looking after your family. And then the third is for gifts and offerings. And the fourth is to prepare for the future. Sort of divide your wealth up into those categories, it's up to you to decide which percentages you want to use. But always remember that you have to save some for your own sake. And there's nothing wrong with that.

38:05

Yeah. So my question is around clinging for like, you know, parents and householders, we have to look after like aging parents and like growing children. And sometimes, like their suffering is too much, you know, especially seeing your parents grow old and die. And if they have not learned dharma, then you know, helping them see life. So there is lot of suffering for us, you know, helping our children. Is that also clinging, we are trying to help them and...

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 38:41

Okay, you're going to have to help them. And there's a difference between having affection for people and clinging to the affection. And the word for clinging in Pāli- upādāna- can also mean to feed to what extent are you feeding off of that relationship? In other words, to what extent do you make your happiness dependent on that relationship. And the more you cling to somebody, actually, the more of a weight you're putting on them, hoping that they will provide for your need for happiness. If you learn more to look for your happiness inside, then you can still have affection for other people and help them but the fact that your happiness has a basis inside means that you don't suffer so much from the fact that they are leaving you or the fact that they're getting old. Or the fact that you know you've got a child and now you don't know when the child is going to get into danger. But if you have a sense of well being that's solidly inside, then you can live with these other people have affection for them, look after them. But it's not



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

going to cause you so much suffering. So ask yourself to what extent am I feeding off of this relationship and how much better the relationship would be for both sides if I don't feed off of it.

40:00

## Questioner

Can I sneak a question? Nora asks, Is it possible that someone experiences something that lays outside of the realm of the results of his karma?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 40:24

Some of the details... when the Buddha talks about karma he's talking about your experience of pleasure or pain, now the specific details, like the fact that some people in here are wearing clothing of strange colors that I don't like, I think it's beyond my karma. The question of whether I'm going to suffer from that or not, that's my karma. Thank you.

40:52

## Questioner

Another question from Bradley is: So is what you've covered so far, what the Buddha meant by comprehending these truths or the duties to be completed regarding these truths?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 41:12

No, there's a lot more. Particularly when we get into the discussion of the first noble truth- what the Buddha is talking about constitutes suffering. That's when you start getting into comprehending. This is just giving you a background.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 41:36

Stop after a few minutes, because I got some stuff I gotta cover.

41:40

## Questioner

We have another question from Mike. Another misconception I've read about four noble truths. For instance, in Wikipedia, is that four noble truths have been overly emphasized as the core of the teaching in modernity, whereas historically, this may not have been the case. Could you speak to why this is incorrect.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 42:05

It's incorrect because Wikipedia doesn't filter things enough. I mean, in the canon itself, it talks about the four noble truths in the Buddhist most interesting distinctive teaching there is- the teaching that covers everything else. And as I said earlier, the Buddha said only two of his teachings were categorical. In other words, true for everybody across the board. One is the teaching that skillful action should be developed and unskillful actions should be avoided. The second one is the Four Noble Truths. Now you get into the commentaries, and we have time for this a little bit in the afternoon, they put more emphasis on the three characteristics as being the Buddhist most important teaching. But in the Canon, it's very clear that you apply the three characteristics- or actually the three perceptions in the context of trying to comprehend suffering and abandoning its cause. So, four noble truths provide the context for everything else.



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

43:13

**Questioner**

Than Ajaan, this is going to be a technical question, perhaps, on the first point that you made about one of the misconceptions about the Four Noble Truths. You said the claim, at least is that the Pāli is strange, because it's a compound of a masculine and a neuter word. I'm kind of wondering which part of it you're talking about- the citta and ariya saccani- they're both neuter. Are you talking about the ariya saccani part?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 43:48

No I'm talking about the dukkha nirodha masculine ariya saccam neuter. And then the idan in front of it. That's also neuter. Okay. K.R. Norman makes a big deal out of this. And the same with sammudayo and saccam.

44:12

**Questioner**

Okay. But that itself is exactly what you were pointing out, that the saccam there may be the neuter, but that's basically only the statement of the truth. And not the...

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 44:29

well, he's saying just the fact that that particular phrase is grammatically weird, means it must be later and must be degenerate.

44:36

**Questioner**

But that's not necessary, right? It could be just that it's intentionally that way. Maybe? Probably because it is actually referring to the statement of the truth.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 44:48

No, it's more of the case that in the rest of the canon, you don't have that particular kind of construct.

44:59

**Questioner**

Really? Okay, I was I would have thought that that kind of a construct would be kind of common

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 45:06

Well, there is something called a syntactical compound and the irony of all this is that K.R. Norman himself is the one who wrote an article about this topic in which you would have dukkha nirodha ariya saccam perfectly okay. So I don't understand. I mean, one of the things about studying Pali Canon is that the Pāli grammar of the Vinaya and the Pāli grammar of the suttas are different.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 45:37

My feeling is that this is at a time where you didn't have standardized vocabulary, you didn't have the academy François saying to tell you this word is okay, and this word is not okay. You have... the people spoke what they've spoken. And they had their own sense of the grammar



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

and their own sense of the language. And the suttas are probably Ananda's sense of Pāli grammar and the vinaya is probably Upāli's sense of Pāli grammar. And there would be phrases that were so associated with the way that Buddha expressed things that you felt weird about trying to standardize them into your own expression. So it would allow him to speak in his own way. Okay. The whole argument is very, very odd.

46:22

## **Questioner**

Okay. I have three more questions. I don't know how many you want to take. Does karma from the previous life affect how well your meditation will progress in this life?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 46:42

Your meditation is a combination of present and past karma. And some people have some really heavy past karma. And they have to struggle a lot more than other people who have very light past karma. So that will have an impact. But the important thing is your present karma. It's what you're doing now.

47:07

## **Questioner**

Page asks: does one always use the whole body to breathe from, say the heart all day long?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 47:18

You can.

47:19

## **Questioner**

Okay, last question, comes from Vendami. I'm sorry, if I say that wrong: I'm suffering with the thought that I'm worth nothing and cannot listen to someone appreciating me. But I'm not able to drop this thought and have been suffering with this thought my whole life.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 47:52

You have to ask yourself where you got that thought, and what part of your mind feels that you have to believe it? It's good to think of the mind as being like a committee and you've got this really bad voice in the committee but you have other voices in the committee as well. And once you can get the other voices to come in and say: hey, wait a minute, this is ridiculous.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 48:18

Thank you.

48:29

## **Questioner**

Thank you. Sometimes as one practices, one becomes dispassionate about the same things that there was a lot of passion for and that internal shift causes suffering. And in that situation, is it skillful to just observe this as a change and stick with whatever's going on outside? Or is it skillful or not because then there's a sense of preference and then one should change the external conditions to respond to the inner shift?



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 49:17

It depends on what the shift is about. You have some responsibilities that whether you feel passion for them or don't feel passion for them, you've got to meet the responsibility. Other areas that you're not all that responsible and it's more a question of, "Do I like doing this or do I not like doing this?" So you look at your social duties, and you think "I'll stick with my social duties, I'm not going to abandon them." But in other areas where it's, you know, you used to like certain movies, and you don't like those movies anymore, and you say "Okay, that's fine with me, I don't need those movies again." Because when they talk about dispassion, it's not so much as seeing all of life as oatmeal, it's more like saying "I've outgrown that activity, it no longer holds any interest." Because what gives us interest in things is the fact that we can move into a situation and we can make a difference. And we enjoy that. We enjoy exercising our power there. But there's some times when you see, okay, this is a situation, I can see all the different ways that I could exercise and make a difference. But it just doesn't appeal to me anymore. It's like Tic Tac Toe. When you're a little kid, it's really interesting to how you're going to win that game. But then you get to a point where you realize, okay, I know how to start the game so at the very least, I never lose. There's no longer any interest. Because it doesn't give any range for your own creativity. There was a study that was done years back, this psychologist observing infants, and he said the thing that makes the infants happiest is when they realized they can do an action and get the same results. And they'll do it again. I mean, the thing that drives you crazy about infants, you know, nah, nah, naa. But that's what they enjoy. Because they realize, okay, I can do something and I know what the result is going to be. They have a sense of agency. And we enjoy our sense of agency, probably more than anything else. So we feel dispassion for areas where we say, "Okay, I could exercise my agency here, but it just doesn't hold any interest anymore." And in this case, you want to find some passion for the path and figure out okay, if my mind doesn't settle down, what can I do to make it settle down? And then do it again and do it again? Thank you. Question over here.

51:54

**Questioner**

Um, on that note, what would you say is the one maybe most important thing that a person could do to realize that they're clinging or what they're cleaning to in the present moment?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 52:13

Okay, ask yourself if I were to drop this, would I be okay? If I were to drop that? Would I be okay? And listen to the Committee of the mind. And something you're about to drop- "No, no, no, no, no, no, that's too much!" But that's a good segway into our next topic, which is the first noble truth.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 52:35

I'll talk a little bit about the Buddhist first discourse first, when the Buddha when gained awakening, he asked himself, you know, who do I teach? First, the question was, should I teach or not? And the commentaries get all tied up in knots about that- Here the Buddha has gone for all these many, many eons developing the virtues to become a Buddha. And then he might even think of not teaching at all. They said, What kind of compassionate Buddha is this? And so they come up with the theory that he was just playing coy, that he wanted somebody to invite him. I



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

think it's more expressive of the fact that when the Buddha gained awakening, he owed nothing to anybody. And so it's totally an act of generosity on his part that he taught at all. Once we establish that, then the Brahma comes down and invites him to teach, and the Buddha says, okay, then I can see that it would be worthwhile. Because you can imagine how tough it is being a Buddha. We get this picture, sometimes, you know, the Buddha kind of floats around on a lotus, and doesn't have any problems. But all you have to do is read the vinaya. And realize, okay, here he has set up the sangha. He's got all these monks and nuns and all they can do is think about ways of misbehaving. There's a story about the monk who had sex to please his mother, basically, she wanted an heir for the family. And then this one monk said, "Okay, the Buddha says, okay, no sex, okay?" And there's another monk who says, "Ok, when the Buddha said that he meant only human beings." So, I don't want to go into the details, they're pretty disgusting. But then the Buddha has to add, "Okay, including animals, okay?" And then the Vinaya, I mean, it's five volumes, and that's even shortened versions, and so here he has to spend all these years just dealing with this kind of stuff. And then on top of that, there were people who accused him of all kinds of horrible things. And so I think he foresaw that but okay, it really was an act of generosity on his part to say "Okay, I'll put up with the hardships of being a Buddha, established the teaching." First question, Who do you teach? First, he thought of two teachers who had taught him strong states of concentration before. But they had gone to the formless realms where they weren't in communication with anybody. You go into the form of infinite space, and you're just having a good time with infinite space, but you're not communicating with anybody. So then he thought about the five brethren. Now, the five brethren were five monks who had attended to him during his austerities. And then when he had given up his austerities, they left him in disgust, they said, "Ah, he's given up on his path, he's no longer practicing seriously." He said okay, they would be ready, they would understand." And so he goes to see them. And first he has to establish the fact that he's a reliable, knowledgeable person. He says, "Look, I found the Deathless, and I can teach you the way." And they said, "How could you have found that because you've been eating?" And he's like "Eating or (not) eating doesn't matter, I found the way. And so they say, they basically say, "No, we don't believe you" three times. And he finally said, "Look, have I ever made a claim like this before?" And they realized he is a very truthful person, okay, let's listen. So he teaches them- starts with the Four Noble Truths, ends up with- you may know that the talk is called the "Setting the Dharma Wheel in Motion." The question always is where's the wheel? The wheel back in those days was like, in a philosophical discourse or legal discourse, where you have two sets of... my English is failing me... two sets of variables, and you put the two sets to against each other, and then you go through each permutation. In English, we call that a table, right? In India, they call it a wheel, just go around around around. And so the wheel is when the Buddha talks about the Four Noble Truths, and three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth. First one is knowing the truth. Second one is knowing the duty with regard to that truth. And the third one is knowing that he had completed the duty. And as he said, when he completed all of that, that's when he knew he was awakened. So the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, the duty is, as I said, to comprehend it. Second Noble Truth, the duty is to abandon it, that's the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, the duty is to realize it, and with the path, the duty is to develop it. So, when he sets out the teaching, though, he starts with the path. The Four Noble Truths are the first factor in the path i.e. right view. And it makes the point that they're not the goal. Instead, they're instrumental. And this is a big issue in Buddhist discussions. Some people say we practice in order to arrive at right view. But the Buddha himself here is saying, No, you use right



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

view in order to arrive at awakening and awakening is going to be beyond the expression of right view. We're actually using right view, which is words, toward the reality of the end of suffering. Right view here is the first noble truth, because it's the truth of dukkha, which can be translated as pain, stress, or suffering. Now, sometimes you hear it translated as unsatisfactoriness. And I think that's a very unsatisfactory translation. It's as if, "Ehh, not good enough for me." And then the solution, of course, would be well, learn how to be satisfied with less, lower your expectations. That's not what the Buddha's saying. I mean, there really is pain, there really is stress there really is suffering. And also, sometimes you hear that the first Noble Truth is "Life is suffering", which is not the case, the Buddha never said that. If all life was suffering, the solution, of course would be to die. But that's not a solution. Another expression you sometimes hear is that "There is suffering." And I heard somebody made a really good comment about this was "Duh." It took the Buddha all that time to realize...

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 59:05

The teaching, he says, basically, he starts out with some familiar examples. Birth, aging, and death is suffering, not getting what you want, having to be with what you don't like, not getting what you want, having to be with what you don't like, being separated from what you do like. Sorrow, distress, despair, these things are all suffering. So he starts with familiar examples. Plato would hate this, right? Because Plato, for him for any decent definition is- you don't give examples you define the essence of something. The Buddha starts out with examples. And then he comes down to the common denominator among all the forms of suffering, which is the five clinging aggregates. It's not that the aggregates cling. It's just that you cling to the aggregates and there are five aggregates, and there are four ways of clinging. That sounds odd. But he actually is talking about something very intimate, the five aggregates are form, your sense of your body, feeling, feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. Perception, which is the labels you put on things by which you identify them or give them meaning. "Balaji", that's for me, that's a perception. "Elizabeth", "Steve", these are perceptions and the names we give to things. And then there are thought constructs or thought fabrications, where you put your perceptions together and make a full sentences out of them. And then finally, consciousness, which is your awareness of these things. Now, as I said, these are actually intimate things because they are related to our process of feeding, there was one point where the Buddha says this is what all beings have in common is they have to feed. Even the Devas have to feed, hell beings have to feed, hell beings don't get really good food, they get molten copper down their throats. But I'll just give you an example of feeding. Okay? First, you have form, you've got the body that needs the food in order to survive, and then you've got the material things out there that could or could not be the food that you're going to be feeding on. You've got the feeling of hunger, the pain, and you're looking for a feeling of satisfaction that comes when you've eaten enough. There is the perception. And this is the really important one is perceiving what things are edible and which things are not. And this is how we begin to navigate our way through the world. You know, a little baby comes across, crawling across the floor comes across something what is the first thing the baby does? Puts in his mouth to see whether it's edible or not. And this is how we begin to perceive things in the world. This is edible, that's not edible. And often also, there's the perception of what kind of hunger we have. You know, are we hungry for something salty, something sweet? There's a great line in "The Member of the Wedding", where the heroine of the story, a 13 year old girl, Carson McCullers takes a line of Dostoyevski "I feel like I've been stripped and I'm standing in the wind, sand blowing on me, what I need is a good ice



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

cream cone." That's perception. Then there's thought constructs, okay, you get the food, what do you do with it? You get a raw potato, you can't eat the raw potato, you have to fix it. And first you have to learn how to find the food to begin with. Okay, this is all your thinking processes, "How am I going to get the food, once I get the food, how do I prepare it?" Then you eat it. And then finally consciousness is of your awareness of all these things. So these are activities that are all very familiar to us. They're very, very basic to our relationship to the world. Now the Buddha says there are four ways of clinging to these activities. One is in terms of sensuality. Now for sensuality, what he means is not so much sensual pleasures, it's our fascination with thinking about and planning for sensual pleasures. Like right now you could be thinking about what am I gonna have for lunch? And you start thinking about whether it's this pizza place down the road, and then there's Starbucks and then you can start elaborating with the pizza place, what kind of toppings do the pizzas have? And you can think about that for quite a while. You get there and you how long does it take to eat the pizza? I asked that question one time in France and they said a good hour and a half.

## **Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:03:56

There actually was a time we went to a restaurant in France. And true noon in France in the summer is 1:30. We arrived at the restaurant at noon. And we asked the chef, can we finish the meal by 1:30. He said "Only if you order the plat du jour", I said we're living in a different world. Okay, you're here in America, we eat the pizza, and it's you know, five minutes, 10 minutes you're done, right? But you can think for a long time about how good the pizza is going to be and then afterwards how good the pizza was. That's sensuality. That's the first thing we cling to. The second thing we cling to are our views about the world. The world is like this, the world is like that. It can have to do with our views about the physics of the universe, our views about the politics of the society, but our views about the world in which were which we're engaged in. Those are all a way that we cling and we really hold fast to our views. Secondly, habits and practices is what you should do in order to engage the world. Sometimes it's translated as precepts and practices. Sometimes it's translated as rites and rituals, in which case people who have no rights or rituals, they'd already be free of that kind of clinging, but they still cling to certain ways of doing things that this has to be done this way has to be done that way. Sometimes it's right, sometimes it's wrong. And then there's you about yourself, are you negotiating with all these other forms of clinging? "Given that the world is this way, things should be done that way- but I want this." The I comes in there and says, "Oh, how do I negotiate this? Which of my desires do I have to sacrifice? Which my desires can I make mesh with the world? Or should I redefine my idea of the world so I can get more of what I want?" There's a lot of negotiation going on in there. And this is the role of the "me" in there, the self in there. The self in here, basically has three roles. There's the agent, there's the consumer, and there's the observer. These are all related to our desire for happiness. On the one hand, there's the agent, once you've decided that you want something, then the agent can decide, can I do this or not? And what would have to be done? Then there's the consumer: "Okay, when I attain this pleasure, I get to enjoy it." And then there's the observer saying, "Okay, you guys, what you're planning to do here is good or not good. It's working, or it's not working." I mean, this observer is in...these are all parts of our strategies for happiness. Which is why when people say there is no self, you may say, "Well, yeah, makes sense. But no, I'm not gonna let go." Because you're gonna feel you're gonna be deprived of your strategies for happiness. So we've cling to things in these four ways. That may seem like a like an odd list. But you think about Freud's analysis of



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

how the mind works. Sensuality would be your Id, the desires. Your fears about the world would be your sense of the reality principle. Your attachment to habits and practices, that would be your super ego, telling you what you should and should not do. And then self would be the ego that's trying to negotiate among these things. So this way of analyzing how the mind functions is as parallels in Western thought as well. Now, to comprehend suffering doesn't mean you simply witness the fact of stress and suffering, say, oh, there is suffering. You see, it's because I'm clinging to these things in these ways. That's the where the suffering is, and you want to observe that in action. That's how you comprehend the first Noble Truth. Questions.

1:08:02

## Questioner

That last point that you made. May I just try to maybe phrase it the way I understand that when you're saying that suffering, or the first Noble Truth is not that there is suffering or that life is suffering? It's that this clinging is suffering? Okay. So it's not that clinging is...it's not that suffering is because of clinging, it is the cleaning itself. How? I mean, normally, we don't think of it that way. We think that "I like to, I like this thing, I want to cling to this." What part of the mind comes to the point where it tells you okay, it's the clinging, it's the it's the feeding, it's the clinging to this that is painful? Is there some sense or some energy of pain that one kind of feels in the process of clinging at some subtle level that one can tell that,

## Ajaan Thanissaro 1:09:12

okay. This relates to what I was planning to say next, so I'll go ahead and do this right now. When the Buddha has you to comprehend these things, he doesn't have you just stop clinging. He first gives you good things to cling to, because otherwise you're not going to be able to function on the path. And so in terms of sensuality, that was the one thing he says you don't cling to at all, as part of the path, now he doesn't say you deny yourself of sensual pleasures, but you don't spend your time fantasizing about the pizza or whatever else. In terms of views, okay. Your view about the world is that the world does function according to action. And your own actions are the things that give rise to suffering- that constitute the suffering- your unskillful actions actually are suffering. Other cravings actually cause you to do that. So there's things about the views about karma, views about the fact of rebirth, he says you adopt those as skillful views and then they're the views that would come in that would be antithetical to that, you have to learn how to drop them. Now you begin to realize that there are certain views I have about the world that don't fit in with that. But if you realize okay, by holding on to these things I am suffering. So the Buddha gives you something better to hold on to so you begin to see okay, holding on to this, this kind of stuff I am suffering. So it's selectively letting go. In terms about habits and practices, the Eightfold Noble Path is habits and practices that you want to follow. Sila, pañña, sila would be the precept part, pañña would be the mindfulness concentration part. And then sense of self, okay, you as the person who's doing the path who is responsible for doing the path, and will benefit from doing the path, and is observing what you're doing as you're on the path. All those three functions do function as part of the being on the path. Just this morning, I was looking at a book on what's wrong with mindfulness, written from the Zen perspective. And that was their main complaint, that there's too much "I" doing things. And, well, if you don't do it, who's going to do it, the path doesn't happen on its own, you get to exercise your sense of agency by doing the path in these ways. Now, what you're going to run up to are parts of your committee of the mind that don't like this. And if you can see- "If I hold on to this



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

way of doing things, as opposed to that way of doing things, I'm suffering less. So I should be able to know, but it's in my best interest to let go of those old ways." That's how you begin to see oh, yeah, that is the clinging, the clinging is the suffering.

1:12:10

## Questioner

It's that part, what there was the clinging? What there was the suffering? Sorry,

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:12:16

The clinging to these other things is causing you to suffer- is your suffering, you see that the act of clinging to these things is in and of itself- there's suffering there. If I learn how to let go of those things, I'm not going to suffer.

1:12:27

## Questioner

But isn't there a sense of you can say, a sense of control that you get to when you know, okay, for example, if you have, if you cling to the the view of right view, for example, you get a sense of control that, okay, if I'm generous, then I can get happiness, hopefully in the future. So you get a sense of that. You can say control, quote, unquote, that okay, I can be generous right now, so that I will be happy in the future. So isn't that kind of relieving to a certain extent, instead of actually, further more burdensome?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:13:09

Well, the part of you that's holding on to that object says- "I don't want to give that away." Just realize, okay, as long as I'm holding on to that object, I'm going to suffer. So you're making choices- okay- which way of acting is going to involve less suffering, eventually get to the point where the only thing you're holding on to are the path. And then you realize, okay, this holding on to the path, there's still some suffering there. That's what I have to let go of that too.

1:13:40

## Questioner

That's exactly the part that's a little confusing, because it's almost like there is a part, at least from this perspective, from here, it appears, maybe because it's too advanced to see that the path itself is suffering, but it appears very much like it's a little bit of a relief, because you kind of get some freedom from all the other things that you could be doing and getting into more pain. So, you would want to cling to this, and there is a certain level up to which you would want to see this as the antithesis of clinging, or of suffering like this clinging is not suffering, whereas this other clinging is suffering. Isn't there that distinction?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:14:28

in the beginning there is yeah, this is less suffering than that. But then when you let go of that, you begin to realize, "Okay, still not good enough. I'm still not totally free of stress." Here it's going to be subtle. But there is some suffering, there is some stress there.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:14:47



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

that moment is when- and again at this point, you're not talking about my suffering, just the fact of activity, the fact of suffering. Let's try to stop this activity.

1:14:58

**Questioner**

And all of that has to be done for stream entry? Even realizing that the path itself as

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:15:09

and the fact that you can actually let go of it and not just go back to your old ways.

1:15:14

**Questioner**

Wow. Okay. Thank you.

1:15:20

Hello. Good morning. I've often heard that clinging and craving, used somewhat interchangeably. And it seems to me I'd like some clarification, if you don't mind, that we ultimately need to realize that, you know, there's clinging that is occurring in our lives. And, but sort of proceeding that once you have that realization, it's also important to understand that it stems from a particular type of craving. And, and so we're encouraged to also understand you know, why is it that we are craving or desiring you know, these things, and then a part of the path tells us to replace or squelch that craving, with something that is, you know, more desirable, or that leads to genuine as you've said before, true happiness? Am I on target there, understanding that?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:16:41

In Pāli the word for clinging, as I said earlier, was related to feeding. The word for craving is thirst. Okay, we've feed because we're hungry. And this is one of the reasons why nirvāna is said to be Freedom from Hunger. Yes, so why do I hunger for these things? What where's the lack that I feel that I need to feel can be fulfilled by holding on to this holding on to that. So in the beginning, I was just saying to Balaji you, you give yourself the path to follow and you cling to that and you crave that. And then there's a passage in the canon which says, Okay, you hold to this craving to get to the end of the path. And when you finally arrive, that's when you can let it go. Right. Ok. Thank you.

1:17:35

**Questioner**

Hi, we do have a couple 100 people that are on Zoom. So our questions are piling up. I wanted to go to Tierra, who asked in the Buddha's progressive discourse, how would you present the aspect of the rewards of heaven to people who don't believe in rebirth/samsāra, or even an afterlife.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:18:07

I've never given the graduated discourse. I imagine that when the Buddha was giving it, he had a more impressive personality. It wasn't the case that everybody in India believed in it. But I



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

think he was willing to, he was interested in talking to people who are open minded enough to say it could be a possibility.

1:18:32

## **Questioner**

This is a rather long question. I gather from your teachings and translations that the aggregate of consciousness takes the six senses as objects and that consciousness without surface has no objects. But what is the element or property of consciousness?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:18:55

Okay, the Buddha tends to use the word consciousness in many different ways in the canon. In terms of the six senses conscious would be just simply the fact that you are registering the input from the senses. But there are other passages where the Buddha talks about consciousness as actually holding on to things and grasping things, and it's a more active principle. And there's even one place where it talks about consciousness being released. So consciousness without surface, the image the Buddha gives is of a light beam. Sun rises in the East goes through a window on the east side of this house. And where does it land? Well, it lands on the west wall. If there's no wall, where does it land, it lands on the ground. If there's no ground, where does it land, it lands on the water. If there's no water, it doesn't land. In other words, this will be conscious without an object, not even itself as an object.

1:19:54

## **Questioner**

The question goes on, are the terms element and property of consciousness synonymous? If so, is the Element Property of consciousness the same thing as the infinitude of consciousness that takes consciousness itself as its object? Or is infinitude of consciousness really just the aggregate of consciousness and the Element Property of consciousness? Another way of saying consciousness without surface.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:20:33

The Last part,

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:20:33

What was that last one?

1:20:40

## **Questioner**

another way of saying consciousness without surface.

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:20:46

No, the infinitude of consciousness has consciousness as its object as a perception, whereas conscious without conscious without surface has no object at all. The Buddha never lays out, okay, this is how the property of consciousness is related to the aggregate of consciousness and these other things, I think what he does though, is he's talking to people who have different backgrounds, and different senses of the language and so he would adapt his teachings to fit



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

that particular audience. But he never lays out the relationship between the aggregates and the properties. That's all I can say. Get one more than that, that was your question. Okay. Okay.

1:21:40

**Questioner**

Jonathan asks, could not believe in the Four Noble Truths be seen as a fixed view?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:21:48

Not believing? The Buddha never says that fixed views are bad. But that particular view would be very bad.

1:22:06

**Questioner**

One more, one more. Since life is suffering is mistranslation, can you suggest a better translation

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:22:16

Clinging to the five aggregates is suffering. It's the best translation I know of. More questions here?

1:22:37

**Questioner**

So in the pizza example, was that an example of like clinging to the fourth aggregate of thoughts?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:22:45

It'd be clinging to perceptions and thought fabrications. Yeah.

1:22:49

**Questioner**

Okay. And do you have examples of clinging for the other aggregates?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:22:54

Well, clinging to a sense of form- you're sitting here meditating. And it just feels really good. Okay. I'm clinging to a sense of my body right now. Clinging to feelings- okay, there are certain feelings that are really pleasurable, when you cling to those. Clinging to consciousness is a fear of going unconscious. or fear of not having an object for your consciousness to land on because sensory consciousness has to come with an object. So the fear of not having anything to know would also be clinging to consciousness. Question over here.

1:23:41

**Questioner**

Thanks. I think you spoke about political beliefs as potentially a form of clinging. And I wonder if you could also speak about ways in which political beliefs could not be a form of clinging could be a form of generosity. If one believes, for example, that there could be enormous destruction if



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

a particular political thing were to happen. What then become the skillful means that one should employ,

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:24:16

Okay, you would have to say, as things appeared to me, this is what would be the case. Always keeping in mind, this is how things appear to me. And there's a lot of stuff that comes- unexpected stuff- that comes, you know, X happens. And it looks like it's going to be a good thing. So you work for x, but also turns out when x happens, Y happens and you don't want that. If not x happens, that would be a bad thing, but maybe something good happens when not x happens. So you have to be open to that possibility. And then you decide, but still I'd like to see x and this is where you decide this is going to be my form of generosity. I'm going to work for X. And that means putting it in the category of generosity, the Buddha says you know, you don't harm yourself you don't harm others. Harming yourself would be breaking the precepts and also giving so much that it's depleting you- you have to realize when you're burning out, but from that point on, the Buddha says give where you feel inspired

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:25:28

question back there

1:25:40

**Questioner**

Thank you. So somebody asked about tanhā versus clinging and so I'm a little confused I thought the first Noble Truth was about tanhā, but it's not. It's clinging. I keep hearing different things

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:26:00

Yeah, the craving is the cause tanhā is the cause, which we'll get to- I guess it'll be after lunch. But um, the clinging is the actual suffering the holding on- and again, your mind doesn't have a hand that grasps things it's just there's an activity that you do over and over and over again, like the baby who's Waa Waa Waa. There are certain activities that the mind keeps repeatedly doing because it doesn't feel comfortable not doing them.

1:26:54

**Questioner**

What does non-clinging feel like moment to moment in daily life?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:27:01

Okay, in daily life, there is going to be some clinging and the question is- what to cling to? Learning how to let go of certain things, like you're holding on, you're like holding on to your view that if I let go of x I will be better off even though parts of the mind want to hang on to x. So in this case, you would hold to the view which would be that letting go there would be better so it's like choosing what you're going to hang on to and try to hang on to the best things you can.

1:27:33

**Questioner**

How can we distinguish the first and second noble truths.



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:27:38

Okay, they're awfully close. But when we get to the second noble truth then we can ask that question again.

1:27:52

**Questioner**

Andrew asks, How important is an understanding of reincarnation, comprehending it feels challenging. Is there a consistent "I" that translocates between forms? Are these even skillful contemplations?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:28:11

Okay, the Buddha never answered the question of what it is that gets reborn. For him, it's just a question, what's the process? How does it happen? Because you're not responsible for the what, but you are responsible for the how. because that's something you do. And so if you can learn how to say, Okay, I'm just gonna learn how to get rid of this craving for becoming, or craving for sensuality, or craving for non-becoming, work on those. And once you get the process under control, then you don't have to worry about the what.

1:28:48

**Questioner**

Fernando asks, I feel a deep hole in my chest thinking of the repercussions of unskillful actions. I've been unskillful in the past, and even though I'm changing that, there is a fear that I may fall again or that I will do something unskillful again, and feel those repercussions. I feel a fear can be skillful, but I may take it to an unhealthy extreme, thoughts?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:29:21

Okay, the Buddha says recognizing mistake as a mistake is an important first step to not doing it again. And what's called the word- I translate it as compunction- ottappa- fear of doing evil is fear to be cultivated, but it has to be combined with Goodwill for yourself, Goodwill for others. And when you see you're making yourself suffer unnecessarily over this and recognizing what's unnecessary. There's part of you that thinks "Only if I beat myself up enough, will I not do this anymore, that's not helpful. Because there comes a point when you say "I can't beat myself up anymore. This is crazy." And then you go back to your old ways instead have goodwill for yourself, compassion for yourself, empathetic joy for the times when you are skillful, and equanimity about what's happened in the past, and then spread those same emotions to other people as well- same attitudes to other people.

1:30:20

**Questioner**

Have one last question from Ashish, how to give more respect to the outcome which comes from feeding the mind with breath, and doing skillful activities, after getting used to the state of mind for some time, I tend to take it for granted and do something unskillful leading to undesirable outcome, then the cycle of being more mindful and skillful action starts till I do something unskillful.



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**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:30:52

Okay, you really got to talk to yourself- "This is a great thing, this breath is really, really good!" And then just keep reminding yourself of what it was like before you were in touch with the breath. The Buddha talks about how delight can be a cause for suffering, but he also recommends that you have delight in practicing. And delight is just this: the way you hype actions, activities and experiences to yourself by thinking about the pizza- "Boy, that pizza place down the road is really, really good. Yeah, that's really good." And then afterwards, "That was really worth it. Yes, it was worth it!" That's delight. And so you go "What a great breath! And that was another great breath!" Just learn how to just keep reminding yourself, if I don't learn how to appreciate these things, if I start taking them for granted, I'm gonna start slipping again. So I got to do whatever I can to appreciate this. That kind of hype is okay.

1:31:50

**Questioner**

I had a question about the clinging aggregates? Um, I'm just wondering, is there- what's the distinction between form and feeling? And the second part of this question is, are we, in some cases clinging to the five different aggregates like simultaneously?

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:32:22

Okay, the difference between form and feeling is form is made up of this sense of either solidity, coolness, warmth, or energy. The feeling is basically pleasure or pain. And those are two very different things. In fact, that's going to be an important part of your meditation. Because there's often a sense, okay, the feeling and the sense of the body are the same thing, especially when there's a pain someplace there. Like, if you feel like the pain is the same thing as your experience of the knee, then you have to keep reminding yourself- well, no they're different things. And one way of doing that is to ask yourself, Okay, when there is a pain, where is the sharpest point of the pain, and you begin to realize it keeps moving around, moving around, moving around, and you begin to see that it's momentarily coming and going, coming and going. And then you ask yourself, when it comes, is it coming at me? Or is it going away from me, I find this a really useful perception to have, it's actually going away. There was a time when I was in Singapore, one time when I was being treated for back pain. And the Chinese doctor started rubbing oil on my back. And first it felt really good. And he's rubbing harder and harder and harder, and it's getting kind of raw. Then he pulls out these bamboo whisks. And he starts beating me on the back. And my first thought was, oh, my gosh, what bad karma do I have? And it didn't seem like he was going to let up at any time. So I said, I've got to work on this. And so I began to see- when he hits, that pain is actually going away, not coming at me, but it's going away. It's like sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons with a seat facing back and you're going down the road. And as soon as something comes into your range of vision it's going away. And I found that it seemed like the pain and my sense of the body actually separated out. Because that's what you want to work on. To see that they really are separate. But this is one common misperception we have are when there's pain in the knee, that the knee is pain. But they actually are separate things. And analogy you can think of is you know, if you have a radio here, and you're tuned into a station in San Francisco, if you want to tune in to San Francisco station in San Jose, you don't have to move to another spot. You just change the frequency. They're in the same spot but they're different. question right here.



# Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

1:34:49

## Questioner

Could you speak on the elements as they pertain to this first Noble Truth? You've spoken about the elements in some of your books and I always have trouble grasping...

**Ajaan Thanissaro** 1:35:01

Okay, there are elementary types of sensation or elementary experiences of having this body. Like there's a sense of solidity or weight, that would be Earth. In a lot of scholarly work, when they talked about the element of water, they talked about cohesion. I don't know how you experience cohesion, but I know how you experience coolness, that would be the water. The heat would be the element of fire, and then the energy would be the breath or the wind. And you can actually, when the breath settles down, and it gets really, really still, then you can think about, okay, where's the warmest spot in the body, focus on that. And then, "Can I spread the warmth throughout the body?" And as long as you hold on to that perception of warmth, you begin to realize though, you can make more of the body feel warm. And you can do the same thing with coolness and solidity. If we had a little bit more time, I can tell you a story. I'll go ahead and tell it anyhow. My teacher had a student whose powers of concentration were really strong. And after she got the breath still in her body, he said, okay, think about fire- the element of fire- her body would become very hot. He said, Okay, then she left the meditation. But her problem was that many times she'd get these perceptions and part of her mind would hold on. So she's going through the day, she still felt really, really hot. Now you don't want it to feel hot in Bangkok. And especially she was an English professor at a very exclusive private school. And you don't want to sweat in front of the students. So she didn't like this. So she came back the next evening and said, I don't like fire. And then Ajaan Fuang said "If you don't like fire, try water." Okay, fire cooled down, her body felt cool. But then she started to think about the water in her body. And it was blood and lymph and all these other disgusting things. And she got this sense of the smell of her body, didn't like that. But again, she was stuck that way. For the whole day. She came back, saying "I don't know what kind of meditation you're teaching here." This is a woman who had had visions that she had been Ajaan Fuang's daughter in a previous lifetime. So she felt confident that she could criticize him. So he said, "If you don't like water, try earth" Well, earth was worse. One, it was very heavy, and two, all she had was this vision of herself as walking cesspool just full of excrement going through the day. So she came back and complained again. And he said, Okay, if you don't like earth, there's space. And as he said space, she started grasping around because she'd lost her sense of the body. I mean, her powers of perception and concentration were that strong. I don't recommend doing it that intensely. But what he would have you do then was that you take the different elements and you sort of put them back together again. So everything comes down to normal, not too heavy, not too light, not too cold, not too hot, not too hot. And you begin to see that your perception of what's going on here and your sense of the form of the body does have a huge influence over what you're actually going to experience.

So it's time to break for lunch.