

Four Noble Truths: Samudaya (3 of 5) The Inconstancy of Suffering

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Four Noble Truths, buddha, suffering, Suzuki Roshi, talk, insight, deep, meditative, mind, sew, phenomena, sermon, experience, moment, priest, leading, teaches, liberating insight, concentration, ceasing, ants, arising, passing, first sermon, impermanence, quiet mind, today, tomorrow, yesterday, *samādhi*

Gil Fronsdal

Good day, everyone. Before I begin this talk, I want to mention that when I finished giving the morning talk yesterday, I thought that I didn't really have my words together well, or I wasn't quite as clear as I probably could have been. And maybe it was a little confusing the way I talked about conditionality. So I recorded it again, and hopefully it's improved and clear.

So, today is today. I'll take a little detour first. There was a Japanese priest in Japan Town in San Francisco in the early 1960s, from a sect of Japanese Buddhism that was different from Zen. But this young priest went to visit the Zen master, Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. Since he was a Buddhist priest and had studied Buddhism, at some point Suzuki Roshi asked him if he'd give a talk at his Zen temple in English. But the young priest said, "No, no – my English is not good enough."

The next time the priest came to listen to Suzuki Roshi give a Dharma talk, Suzuki Roshi's talk went like this:
Today is today. Today is not yesterday. Today is not tomorrow. Today is today.

Hu used just five words in English. That was the entire Dharma talk. The young priest was there. He told me that he believes Suzuki Roshi gave him an example of how to give a Dharma talk with very little English.

I say this today because of this way of letting each thing be discrete. Today is today, just today. Today is not yesterday. It's not tomorrow. This moment can be just this moment. It's not two minutes ago, two seconds ago, it's not two minutes in the future – the discreteness, the uniqueness of each moment. Of course, there is past and future. But there's a way in which the past and the future belong, or are reconstructed, in our memory, through our ideas, our stories. We sew it together. Once the present moment is gone, it exists as kind of a memory in ideas and stories to a great extent.

As the meditative mind becomes quieter, we're more and more living just in the present. And as the meditative mind stops the activity of making stories, it's more and more just the experience of the moment that happens. As we go deeper and deeper, at some point we start seeing that all the experiences we have, as experiences, are coming and going, appearing and disappearing – not because we're searching or looking for that, but because the mind is very quiet and still.

When instructing his monastics, the Buddha said:

Develop concentration – for those who have concentration will see things as they are. They will see suffering, the arising of suffering, the ceasing of suffering, and the practice of the ceasing of suffering.

So, that looks like wording that we're familiar with in the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the arising of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

What's interesting is that the Buddha begins by saying: "Develop concentration," which means *samādhi*, meditative mind. With a concentrated, clear, and quiet mind that's not sewing things together, constructing

things with thinking – then we'll see things as they are. We'll see the inconstant nature of phenomena, how things come and go, arise and pass. We'll see into the nature of impermanence, inconstancy – the changing nature of phenomena. The Buddha repeated this in many ways. He sometimes was explicit, saying:

Develop concentration; you'll see things as they are. Then you'll see inconstancy or impermanence – the coming and going of experience.

Develop concentration; then you'll see things as they are, you'll see things appear and disappear. But he also expressed it this way:

You'll see suffering, the arising, the ceasing, and the practice leading to the ceasing.

Hundreds of times in the *suttas*, the Buddha speaks about the insight, understanding, and deep knowledge of: the experience of suffering, its arising, its ceasing, and realizing the practice for the cessation of suffering.

This refers to seeing moment-to-moment – the discrete moments of experience – seeing how experiences come and go, arise and pass, and that nothing in our experience is constant. It might be continuous, in that it keeps reappearing. But it's like those ants that are discrete, each one.¹

With insight into whatever suffering, distress, or discomfort we have – in a meditative mind, we see the way it unfolds moment-to-moment before we overlay our ideas on top of it and sew it together. Our suffering is actually not so solid. It comes and goes, rises and passes. This, the Buddha described, is the insight that leads to liberation. So I call it liberating insight. He talks about this over and over and over again.

Generally, when people read the *suttas*, and the Buddha talks about, “suffering, the arising of suffering, the ceasing of it, and the practice leading to the ceasing of it” – most Buddhists assume he is talking about what we think of as the Four Noble Truths. There are all these talks about suffering and the aggregates of clinging. There's a cause for suffering, and that is craving. There's the cessation of suffering. And then there's the Eightfold Path, which is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. That's the common understanding.

The Four Noble Truths are thought to be the most central teaching of the Buddha. But in the ancient texts, the Buddha almost never taught the Four Noble Truths. If they were so central to his teaching, you'd expect him to teach this a lot. He explains the Four Noble Truths only five times in these ancient texts. Five times. And each time is different. Three of them are very similar – the differences are minor. But it's surprising how little the Buddha teaches this.

It's given pride of place because it's said to be the Buddha's first sermon. But really what's recorded as his first sermon couldn't have been – because he teaches these complex Buddhist ideas, using Buddhist words that would have been unfamiliar to people who were just brand new to Buddhism. So for this to have been his first sermon probably doesn't make sense.

Furthermore, it's also in a genre of writing that belongs to a period about 100 years after the Buddha died. So scholars genuinely believe that the so called “first sermon” doesn't really belong to the Buddha himself.

But what the Buddha did emphasize over and over and over again, was deep insight into impermanence – deep insight into seeing things come and go. This is liberating, because when we see things arise and pass in experience, then we have a much clearer sense of how we want to tie it together, how we want to hold on to it, or how we resist it.

We see, in the appearing and disappearing of things, that there is space around them. There are times when they're not there. They're unique phenomena. They are not anything to hold on to.

Seeing this supports the movement of the mind in meditation to not sew things together, to keep letting go, to keep allowing things to be there, and be there, and be there. And this cultivates very deep equanimity, deep

¹ Here, Gil is probably referring to a metaphor in the *Vammika Sutta* (MN 23), where the Buddha explains that our experience may seem like a conglomerate, but it's actually many fleeting moments. Rather than being like an ant-hill, our experience is more like a succession of thousands of discrete, individual ants continually moving around, appearing and disappearing.

non-reactivity to our experience. And this non-reactivity – just seeing the coming and going of phenomena – leads to the mind letting go in the deepest possible ways.

So, one of the interpretations or one of the understandings of what's called the Four Noble Truths is not about the cause of suffering, nor the conditions that lead to suffering, but rather it's a deep insight into the nature of suffering. Whatever it is that we call suffering or experience as suffering – the nature of this is a process of inconstancy, of change, of coming and going. And somehow, seeing into the nature of this is deeply liberating.

It doesn't require us to find the cause or the conditions of suffering. But there is a very deep letting go of clinging, letting go of craving, that does go on there. But this is not because we've understood that craving is the cause. What we've understood is the changing, inconstant, impermanent nature of suffering.

We realize that suffering is not an inherent part of the human experience, and that what we can do is to let go. This was the Buddha's big insight.

So what I'm offering here now, on the third day about the arising of suffering, is a variety of different understandings for the Four Noble Truths. All of these understandings are great. What we're doing is expanding the range of how we can use the framework of the Four Noble Truths to understand our lives in different ways. And in different circumstances, different ways are useful.

We are maturing, growing, and understanding our lives better in all the ways possible to interpret the Four Noble Truths. They are the central framework to organize our human experience on the path to freedom.

So thank you very much. Tomorrow I'm going to talk a bit about the classic explanation of the Four Noble Truths as found in the first sermon of the Buddha. And it's fascinating to see how this works out.

So thank you all very much. I look forward to our time tomorrow.