

30hh- Four Noble Truths

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thero

(A Summarised Transcription of a Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

“And what, bhikkhus, is the *majjhima paṭipada*/middle-way to which the Tathāgata has fully awakened, which is useful for *cakkhu-karani*/insight, *ñāṇa*/knowledge, *upasamāya*/calming, to *abhiññā*/understanding, to *sambodhi*/awakening, to *Nibbāna*? It is, bhikkhus, this *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*, that is to say: 1-*sammā-dīṭṭhi*, 2-*sammā-saṅkappa*, 3-*sammā-vācā*, 4-*sammā-kammanta*, 5-*sammā-ājīva*, 6-*sammā-vāyāma*, 7-*sammā-sati*, 8-*sammā-samādhi*. This, bhikkhus, is the middle way to which the Tathāgata has awakened, which is useful for vision, which produces knowledge, and leads to calming, to full understanding, to awakening, to *Nibbāna*.

Furthermore, bhikkhus, this is the *dukkha ariya-sacca*/noble truth of suffering:

- 1- *jāti*/birth is *dukkha*,
- 2- *jarā*/decaying is *dukkha*,
- 3- *maraṇa*/death is *dukkha*,
- 4- association with the disliked is *dukkha*,
- 5- separation from the liked is *dukkha*,
- 6- not getting what one wants is *dukkha*;
- 7- in short, the *pañcupādānakkhandhā*/ five assumed aggregates are *dukkha*.

Furthermore, bhikkhus, this is the *dukkha-samudaya ariya-sacca*/the noble truth of the origin of suffering:

- 1- *Taṇhā*/urge/inclination/craving/desire,
- 2- which perpetuates being,
- 3- connected with craving and passion,
- 4- finding delight here or there,
- 5- that is to say: *kāma-taṇhā*/sensual desire, *bhava-taṇhā*/desire for being and *vibhava-taṇhā*/desire for non-being.

Furthermore, bhikkhus, this is the *dukkha-nirodha ariya-sacca*/the noble truth of the cessation of suffering:

- 1- the complete *virāga*/dispassion,
- 2- *nirodha*/cessation,
- 3- *cāgo*/abandoning,
- 4- *paṭinissaggo*/giving up,
- 5- *mutti*/release and
- 6- *anālayo*/detachment from that very *taṇhā*.

Furthermore, bhikkhus, this is the *dukkha-nirodha-gāminī paṭipada ariya-sacca*/ the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering: just this *ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*/ noble eightfold path, that is to say:

- 1- *sammā-dīṭṭhi*/right view,
- 2- *sammā-saṅkappa*/right resolve,
- 3- *sammā-vācā*/right speech,
- 4- *sammā-kammanta*/right action,
- 5- *sammā-ājīva*/right livelihood,
- 6- *sammā-vāyāma*/right effort,
- 7- *sammā-sati*/ right recollection,
- 8- *sammā-samādhi*/ right composure.” - [Sn56.11](#)

Q: Ajahn, can you describe the Four Noble Truths - suffering, the origin, the cessation and the path to cessation?

Nm: First and foremost, those are four aspects of one insight, that insight being, freedom from suffering. If you're free from suffering, then it already implies the knowledge of what suffering is, the knowledge of what has been causing that suffering, the knowledge of freedom from suffering and knowledge of how that freedom from suffering is brought to fulfilment. It's not like 1-2-3-4 steps that a person needs to discern one by one, it's about understanding suffering and freedom from it.

The cause of suffering is nothing other than craving, which is something that people might just read over because it seems to make perfect sense. One might think that they perfectly understand what that means, but, in terms of the direct insight or understanding that 'craving is suffering', that should result in liberation from that suffering. 'Seeing/Understanding the craving as suffering' means 'abandoning the craving'. So the only reason you crave is because you don't really see it directly, you don't understand it, you haven't discerned that truth despite having read about it. The important aspect is to recognise that whenever there is suffering present (including the liability to suffer), you can induce correctly, that the craving must be present because the suffering is there.

When the suffering is present means it's because simultaneously with it, there is craving present. The absence of that craving simultaneously means the absence of that suffering, there is no delay. That's why you can have direct knowledge of freedom from suffering directly verified for yourself, "Oh, I cannot suffer amidst things that used to make me suffer, the mind cannot suffer now because there is no more craving in regard to those things."

*"He whom life no longer torments, who does not grieve at death,
If that immovable one is one who has seen the state of peace, in the midst of sorrow he does not
sorrow. For the monk who has cut off craving for being, whose mind is at peace,
Having totally destroyed the perpetuation of birth, for him there is no more being." - [Udāna 4.9](#)*

Q: How to abandon craving?

Nm: By developing virtue and sense restraint to the extent necessary, whereby you start discerning your mental intentions, whether they're rooted in wholesome or unwholesome, whether they're rooted in greed, aversion, delusion, and when you know that they are, you do not engage in them, you do not tolerate them, you do not entertain them, you do not proliferate or invest in them. That will enable the mind to then not resist the unpleasant feeling, to not indulge the pleasant feeling, to not try to distract yourself from a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling. And when the mind stops doing that, with the previous knowledge that it received from outside, through the Suttas or a wise teacher, with the previous knowledge of what craving is, you will be able to see, "This is the absence of craving", and you will be able to see right there, "There is no suffering", and then you will also be able to understand what that suffering was, even the suffering of the past, before you understood the way out. You wouldn't be suffering on account of that either. The same knowledge will be applied to the present, past and future.

Q: How to endure those painful feelings?

Nm: If you want to give into sensuality, ill-will, or distraction, you don't give in, that will result in you enduring them.

Q: Then how does one know that one is free from craving?

Nm: When there's no suffering amidst things that used to be suffering. There's no suffering because you cannot suffer, not because you're hiding away or just avoiding things. Avoiding things means you're afraid of something already. For example, say a person doesn't leave their house, because they don't want to talk to anyone, because it might annoy them, and then they'll suffer. They are not free from suffering, they're just protecting their precious environment of circumstantial non-disturbance, but the fact that they must protect it means that they are disturbed, which means they're not free from suffering but only hiding away from the greater extent of their suffering.

You need to have self honesty. So, if you know that you're not hiding away, not indulging in sensual pleasures, not covering anything up, then with that self honesty and restraint of the senses, seeing the danger in the slightest fault, moderation in eating, that will result in being mindful of your actions. Which means that the mind is already developing a certain perspective which is needed to discern the intentions behind your actions.

There is no craving without intention, but there is intention without craving. That's why an arahant can still intend, decide and choose, but he has no craving. In order for you to see that, you have to see the intentions, and most people are not even aware of their mental intentions. They think intention is an obvious choice. But it's not, it's a subtle inclination. Thoughts in themselves are already intentional. It's subtle and in order to reach that subtle level, sense restraint and virtue, moderation in eating and mindfulness is absolutely necessary. Paired with the right instruction, and the right way of looking (*yonisomanasikara*), that's where the practice is. Without the right instruction, it's just restraint, which is good, but it doesn't lead you to any knowledge. With the right instruction and that way of living (which brings about a greater perspective), that's all you need.

Sometimes people might think, "Restraint is not the Dhamma". That's true, and then they would think, "Okay, well, now I got the Dhamma. So now I don't have to restrain myself". No, Dhamma applies only where the restraint is. Yes, restraint is not the Dhamma, as in, the application of the Dhamma is not the same as the necessary basis for that application, but you wouldn't be able to apply it if there is no necessary basis.

If the mind practices like that, with self-transparency, then the inclination in the form of craving becomes more and more obvious. Why? Because you start recognising that in certain ways that you intend or incline, you suffer, you make yourself more liable to suffering, you feel too much, you become emotionally sensitive, you become too involved, you become exposed to future suffering, and by discerning those things, you stop intending like that, and by not intending like that, you're not perpetuating the craving.

Craving is always in relation to feelings. In a present agreeable feeling, you have to discern the inclination towards wanting more of it, wanting it to stay longer, wanting it to not go away too soon, wanting to increase it, to intensify it, to prolong it, any of those things. In a disagreeable feeling, be it a general disagreeable mood or something more specific, you have to discern the inclination towards resisting it, towards trying to find the justification for it, towards trying to find an explanation for it, towards psychologizing it. Any of those things are just mechanisms that you try to engage in, so to remove it, to get rid of it. And the subtlest of feelings is the neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant, when paired with craving, results in inclinations towards distraction, delusion, indolence, laziness, mental heedlessness.

If you don't incline towards a present feeling, in any of those three ways, you will no longer be feeding *taṇhā*/craving.

Q: One should then be aware of feelings?

Nm:...to the extent that they have arisen on their own. Feelings arise, and having arisen, they cease on their own. You have no say in that. That's what 'mindfulness of feeling' means 'discerning their nature', knowing that they have arisen on their own. For example, this present pleasant experience has arisen on its own. That's fine, so you don't have to try to get rid of it, thinking, "Arisen pleasure means craving!" No, it doesn't. Leaning towards that pleasure means craving. Leaning away from the displeasure means craving. Leaning towards forgetfulness and distraction when there is neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling, means craving.

Q: So really you have to be aware of those leanings?

Nm: Yes, that's a good way to start. You can't see craving directly, because craving is in your attitude of "leaning". You can bring it down so precisely whereby you can see, either the presence of suffering or the possibility to suffer. You can use that knowledge to see the 'leaning'.

Q: There's no method that can show you that?

Nm: No, because method is on the level of bodily action or bodily perceptions, where you're just perceiving or going through some motions. We're talking about the intentions behind your actions. So whatever meditation method/techniques or bodily act you do, you still have to look at the intention behind that, which means that a "meditation method" becomes redundant, which means the only necessary method is your *sila* and sense restraint. That is the closest to a right method as you can get.

Q: So it's not about doing a meditation of observing bodily-touch sensations or breathing techniques, etc. which will reveal the truth or remove my craving?

Nm: That's a completely misplaced effort, because you are looking in the wrong place. You're not seeing your intention to observe sensations. Your intention is not in the sense of bodily touch or in the movement of your breathing. Observing bodily sensations, audible sensations, visual sensations, etc, is an action which is already intended, which is already "leaned towards and away from" and you're not seeing that, by not seeing that, no amount of engaging in sense perceptions, will reveal its nature. Otherwise the Buddha would have given such a method and described it in the Suttas. When they did ask him about a direct method, he said, a young man develops faith and goes forth, leaving his household life, he lives restrained by the rules of *patimokkha*, practices sense restraint, sees the danger in the slightest fault, moderate in eating and devoted to wakefulness, mindful and aware, dispelling the hindrances, and practicing *jhana*.

I remember the first time I read that as a layman, I was also looking for a method. And I thought, "Well, this instruction is just too general, why wouldn't he just give you a particular recipe on how to become awakened?" because there isn't any, this is the most particular you can get. If you're not seeing it in a direct manner, it's just because of all of the wrong views you are looking with. You need to meet the Buddha's instruction halfway basically, or even two thirds of the way to start making sense of it. But if a person doesn't change their views and only adds to the top of their views and notions of what the practice is, that's when you get methods such as modern day vipassana, visualisation or concentration techniques.

You have to discern the intention behind your action and you can't concentrate on that because it's behind your act of concentration. You can only discern it, you can know it.

Q: You can't attend to or concentrate on your intention, you can only be aware of it.

Nm: You can be aware in a peripheral background manner, but attention or concentration in terms of techniques is not the same thing. People are not aware of the background, when they're doing meditation techniques, quite the opposite, they absorb into the foreground, trying to narrow things down. They're practising a focusing attention exercise on one thing or the other, which means that there's no general awareness there, and if they hear about 'general awareness', that becomes a thing which they try to focus on.

Your intentions can only be seen indirectly on the basis of sense restraint and sila. You can't see them indirectly if you're unrestrained or restrained and looking in the wrong place, such as focusing on objects of your attention. (In both cases your attention is leaning towards the foreground of senses objects and you are oblivious to the background) (In that sense common meditation techniques are redundant)

Having enough clarity generated to the point of being able to fully discern the background, will not come about if you are not restrained in virtue and a meditation technique cannot replace that. If you are restrained in virtue, you don't need a meditation technique, because your intentions will be clear enough for you to then start the work of bringing about the end of craving by no longer giving in to it.
