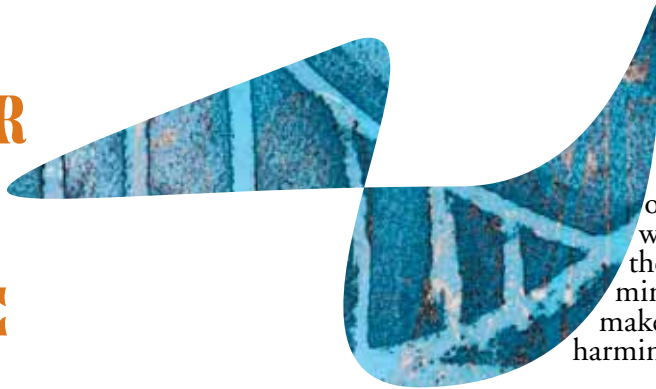


In this article, Ajahn Sumedho examines the three aspects of the traditional Pali formula for practicing with the first noble truth.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS: PART ONE



our opinions, about what I think and what you think about politics and religion, then we can get into wars. If you keep in mind our common bond of suffering, that makes you quite incapable of demonizing or harming another being.

What is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering: in short the five categories affected by clinging are suffering.

There is this Noble Truth of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

This Noble Truth must be penetrated by fully understanding suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

This Noble Truth has been penetrated by fully understanding suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.
[Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 11]

The First Noble Truth with its three aspects is: "There is suffering [dukkha]. Dukkha should be understood. Dukkha has been understood."

This is a very skilful teaching because it is expressed in a simple formula that is easy to remember, and it also applies to everything that you can possibly experience or do or think concerning the past, the present or the future.

Dukkha or suffering is the common bond we all share. Everybody everywhere suffers. Human beings suffered in the past, in ancient India; they suffer in modern Britain; and in the future, human beings will also suffer. What do we have in common with Queen Elizabeth? We suffer. With a "working woman" in Charing Cross, what do we have in common? Suffering. It includes all levels from the most privileged human beings to the most desperate and underprivileged ones, and all ranges in between. Everybody everywhere suffers. It is a bond we have with each other, something we all understand.

When we talk about our human suffering, it brings out our compassionate tendencies. But when we talk about

The first noble truth is not a dismal metaphysical statement saying that everything is suffering. Notice that there is a difference between a metaphysical doctrine in which you are making a statement about The Absolute and a Noble Truth which is a reflection. A "noble truth" is a truth to reflect upon; it is not an absolute; it is not The Absolute. You can see that the first noble truth is not an absolute statement because of the fourth noble truth, which is the way that ends suffering. You cannot have absolute suffering and then have a way out of it, can you? That doesn't make sense.

The Pali word, dukkha, means "incapable of satisfying" or "not able to bear or withstand anything": always changing, incapable of truly fulfilling us or making us happy. The sensual world is like that, a vibration in nature. It would, in fact, be terrible if we did find satisfaction in the sensory world because then we wouldn't search beyond it; we'd just be bound to it. However, as we awaken to this dukkha, we begin to find the way out so that we are no longer constantly trapped in sensory consciousness.

Suffering and Self-View

It is important to reflect upon the phrasing of the first noble truth. It is phrased in a very clear way: "There is suffering", rather than "I suffer". Psychologically, that reflection is a much more skilful way to put it. We tend to interpret our suffering as "I'm really suffering. I suffer a lot - and I don't want to suffer." This is the way our thinking mind is conditioned.

"I am suffering" always conveys the sense of "I am somebody who is suffering a lot. This suffering is mine; I've had a lot of suffering in my life." Then the whole process, the association with one's self and one's memory, takes off. You remember what happened when you were a baby...and so on.

But note, we are not saying there is someone who

has suffering. It is not personal suffering anymore when we see it as "There is suffering". It is not: "Oh poor me, why do I have to suffer so much? What did I do to deserve this? Why do I have to get old? Why do I have to have sorrow, pain, grief and despair? It is not fair! I do not want it. I only want happiness and security." This kind of thinking comes from ignorance, complicates everything, and results in personality problems.

To let go of suffering, we have to admit it into consciousness. But the admission in Buddhist meditation is not from a position of "I am suffering." Instead it comes from the position "There is the presence of suffering," because we are not trying to identify with the problem but simply acknowledge that there is one.

It is unskillful to think in terms of "I am an angry person; I get angry so easily; how do I get rid of it?" That kind of thinking triggers all the underlying assumptions of a self and it is very hard to get any perspective on that. It becomes very confused because the sense of my problems or my thoughts takes us very easily to suppression or to making judgments about it and criticizing ourselves. We tend to grasp and identify rather than to observe, witness and understand things as they are. When you are just admitting that there is this feeling of confusion, that there is this greed or anger, then there is an honest reflection on the way it is and you have taken out all the underlying assumptions—or at least undermined them.

So do not grasp these things as personal faults but keep contemplating these conditions as impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self. Keep reflecting, seeing them as they are. The tendency is to view life from the sense that these are my problems, and that one is being very honest and forthright in admitting this. Then our life tends to reaffirm that because we keep operating from that wrong assumption. But that very viewpoint is impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self.

DENIAL OF SUFFERING

Suffering is something we usually do not want to know; we just want to get rid of it. As soon as there is any inconvenience or annoyance, the tendency of an unawakened human being is to get rid of it or suppress it. One can see why modern society is so caught up in seeking pleasures and delights in what is new, exciting or romantic. We tend to emphasize the beauties and pleasures of youth while the ugly side of life—old age, sickness, death, boredom, despair and depression, are pushed aside. When we find ourselves with something we do not like, we try to get away from it to something we do like. If we feel boredom, we go to something interesting. If we feel frightened, we try to find safety. This is a perfectly natural thing to do. We are associated with that pleasure/pain principle of being attracted and repelled. So if the mind is not full and receptive, then it is selective - it selects what it likes and tries to suppress what it does not like. Much of our experience has to be suppressed because a lot of what we are inevitably involved with is unpleasant in some way.

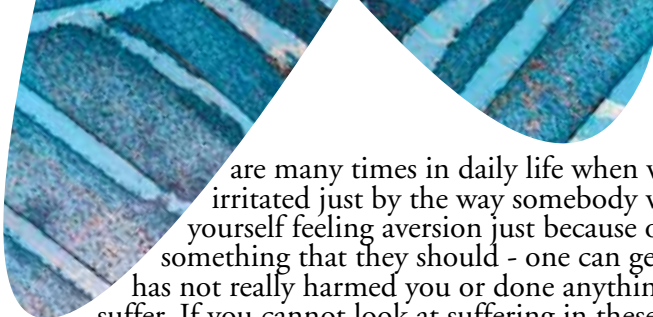
TO INVESTIGATE SUFFERING

I encourage you to try to understand dukkha: to really look at, stand under and accept your suffering. Try to understand it when you are feeling physical pain or despair and anguish or hatred and.

With the formula from the first noble truth, even if we have had a difficult life, what we are looking at is not that suffering which comes from out there, but what we create in our own minds around it. This is an awakening in a person, an awakening to the truth of suffering. And it is a "noble truth" because it is no longer blaming the suffering that we are experiencing on others. In the Buddhist approach, the emphasis is on the way out of suffering through wisdom, freedom from all delusion, rather than the attainment of some blissful state or union with something divine.

What we are pointing at with this teaching is our own reaction to life, or response to our suffering. If somebody is being nasty to you or deliberately and malevolently trying to cause you to suffer, and you think it is that person who is making you suffer, you still have not understood this first noble truth. Even if they are pulling out your fingernails or doing other terrible things to you, as long as you think that you are suffering because of that person, you have not understood this first noble truth. To understand suffering is to see clearly that it is our reaction to the person pulling out our fingernails, 'I hate you,' that is suffering. The actual pulling out of one's fingernails is painful, but the suffering involves "I hate you," and "How can you do this to me?"

However, don't wait for somebody to pull out your fingernails in order to practice with the first noble truth. Try it with little things, like somebody being insensitive or rude or ignoring you. If you are suffering because that person has slighted you or offended you in some way, you can work with that. There



are many times in daily life when we can be offended or upset. We can feel annoyed or irritated just by the way somebody walks or looks, at least I can. Sometimes you can notice yourself feeling aversion just because of the way somebody walks or because they don't do something that they should - one can get very upset and angry about things like that. The person has not really harmed you or done anything to you, like pulling out your fingernails, but you still suffer. If you cannot look at suffering in these simple cases, you will never be able to be so heroic as to do it if ever somebody does actually pull out your fingernails!

The same applies to unpleasant mind states. So when you are experiencing anger, rather than saying: "Oh, here I go: angry again!" we reflect: "There is anger". Just like with fear, if you start seeing it "my fear," then it becomes a sticky web and it becomes difficult to have any real understanding. Instead notice: "There is fear." It is just that. Pain is just pain, cold is just cold, anger is just anger. It is not mine but rather: "There is pain or cold or anger."

This is a skillful use of thinking that helps us to see things more clearly rather than reinforcing the personal view. Then as a result of recognizing the state of suffering, that there is suffering, the second insight of this first noble truth comes: "It should be understood." This suffering is to be investigated.

PLEASURE AND DISPLEASURE

We can investigate: Where has this hedonistic seeking of pleasure as an end in itself brought us? We've been doing it now for several decades but are we any happier as a result? It seems that we have been given the right and freedom to do anything we like with drugs, sex, travel and so on - anything goes; anything is allowed; nothing is forbidden. But has being able to follow our impulses made us any happier or more relaxed and contented?

When the sense of "what I want" and "what I think should and should not be" arises, and when we wish to delight in all the pleasures of life, we inevitably get upset because life everything seems to go wrong. And even when we get everything we want, we still think there is something missing. So even when life is at its best, there is still this sense of suffering, there is still a kind of doubt or fear haunting us.

For example, I've always liked beautiful scenery. Once during a retreat that I led in Switzerland, I was taken to some beautiful mountains and noticed that there was always a sense of anguish in my mind because there was so much beauty, a continual flow of beautiful sights. I had the feeling that I wanted to hold on to everything, that I had to keep alert all the time in order to consume everything with my eyes. It was really wearing me out! Now that was dukkha, wasn't it?

I find that if I do things heedlessly, even something quite harmless like looking at beautiful mountains, if I'm just reaching out and trying to hold on to something, it always brings an unpleasant feeling. How can you hold on to the beauty of a mountain like the Jungfrau or the Eiger? The best you can do is to take a picture of it, trying to capture everything on a piece of paper. That's dukkha; if you want to hold on to something which is beautiful because you don't want to be separated from it, that is suffering.

Having to be in situations we don't like is also suffering. For example, I never liked riding in the Underground in London. I'd complain about it: 'I don't want to go on the underground with those awful posters and dingy Underground stations. I don't want to be packed into those little trains under the ground.' I found it a totally unpleasant experience. But when I'd listen to this complaining, moaning voice of mine, I noticed the suffering of not wanting to be with something unpleasant. Then, having contemplated this, I stopped making anything of it so that I could be with the unpleasant and un-beautiful without suffering about it. I realized that it's just that way and it's all right.

We needn't make problems, either about being in a dingy Underground station or about looking at beautiful scenery. Things are as they are, and we can recognize and appreciate them in their changing forms without grasping. Grasping is wanting to hold on to something we like; wanting to get rid of something we don't like; or wanting to get something we don't have.

We can also suffer a lot because of how we see other people. I remember how I used to have quite negative thoughts about one of the monks at Wat Pah Pong monastery in Thailand. Then he'd do something and I'd think, "He shouldn't do that," or when he'd say something I'd think, "He shouldn't say that!" I'd carry this monk around in my mind and even if I went to some other place, I'd think of that monk; the perception of him would arise and the same reactions would come: I'd remember when he said this and when he did that and tell myself that he shouldn't have said this and he shouldn't have done that.

The same happens with people we like and admire. So when you find somebody that we really respect and love, there's the suffering of attachment. Inevitably, they will do or say something that we're not going to like or approve of, causing us some kind of doubt, and certain suffering.

INSIGHT INTO SITUATIONS

Sometimes insight arises at the most unexpected times. This happened to me while living at Wat Pah Pong. The Northeastern part of Thailand is not the most beautiful or desirable place in the world with its scrubby forests and flat plain; it also gets extremely hot during the hot season. We'd have to go out in the heat of the mid-afternoon before each of the Observance Days and sweep the leaves off the paths. There were vast areas to sweep. We would spend the whole afternoon in the hot sun, sweating and sweeping the leaves into piles with crude brooms; this was one of our duties. I didn't like doing this. I'd think, "I don't want to do this. I didn't come here to sweep the leaves off the ground; I came here to get enlightened and instead I'm sweeping leaves off the ground. Besides, it's hot and I have fair skin; I might get skin cancer!"

I was standing out there one afternoon, feeling really miserable, thinking, "What am I doing here? Why did I come here? Why am I staying here?" There I stood with my long crude broom and absolutely no energy, feeling sorry for myself and hating everything. Then Ajahn Chah came up, smiled at me and said, "Wat Pah Pong is a lot of suffering, isn't it?" and walked away.

So I thought, "Why did he say that?" and, "Actually, you know, it's not all that bad." He got me to contemplate: Is sweeping the leaves really that unpleasant? No, it wasn't. It was a neutral thing: you sweep the leaves, it's neither here nor there. Is sweating all that terrible? Is it really a miserable, humiliating experience? Is it really as bad as I am pretending it is? No, sweating is all right, it's a perfectly natural thing to be doing. And I don't have skin cancer and the people at Wat Pah Pong are very nice. The teacher is a very kind wise man. The monks have treated me well. The lay people come and give me food to eat, and—What am I complaining about?

Reflecting upon the actual experience of being there, I thought, "There's nothing really wrong with anything, except me; I'm making a problem out of it because I don't want to sweat and I don't want to sweep leaves." Then I had a very clear insight. I suddenly perceived something in me which was always complaining and criticizing, and which was preventing me from ever giving myself to anything or offering myself to any situation.

With mindfulness, we are willing to bear with the whole of life; with the excitement and the boredom, the hope and the despair, the pleasure and the pain, the fascination and the weariness, the beginning and the ending, the birth and the death. We are willing to accept the whole of it in the mind rather than absorb into just the pleasant and suppress the unpleasant. The process of insight is the going to dukkha, looking at dukkha, admitting dukkha, recognizing dukkha in all its forms. Then you are no longer just reacting in the habitual way of indulgence or suppression.

GO TO WHERE THE SUFFERING IS

These teachings are not outside our experience. They are, in fact, reflections of our actual experience and not complicated intellectual issues. So really put effort into development rather than just getting stuck in a rut.

How often do you have to feel guilty about the mistakes you have made in the past? Do you have to spend all your time just regurgitating the things that have happened to you in your life and indulging in endless speculation and analysis? Some people make themselves into such complicated personalities. If you just indulge in your memories and views and opinions, then you will always stay stuck in the world and never transcend it.

You can let go of this burden if you are willing to use the teachings skillfully. Tell yourself: "I'm not going to get caught in this anymore; I refuse to participate in this game. I'm not going to give in to this mood." Start putting yourself in the position of knowing: "There is dukkha." It's really important to make this resolution to go where the suffering is and then abide with it. It is only by examining and confronting suffering in this way that one can hope to have the tremendous insight: 'This suffering has been understood.'

So these are the three aspects of the first noble truth. This is the formula that we must use and apply in reflection on our lives. Whenever you feel suffering, first make the recognition: 'There is suffering', then: 'It should be understood', and finally: 'It has been understood'. This understanding of dukkha is the insight into the first noble truth.



Ajahn Sumedho is abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Centre in England and is the senior-most Western disciple of the late Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah.