

Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind

Part 3. - Suffering

I. The First Noble Truth says the nature of unenlightened existence is in the nature of suffering. All these teachings give us more reason for taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and develop renunciation (safe direction), and abandon expectation that worldly concerns will give any lasting, satisfying happiness.

A. Eight Types of Suffering: ⁱ

1. Birth
2. Old Age
3. Sickness
4. Death
5. Suffering from encountering what is unpleasant
6. Suffering of separation from what is pleasant
7. The suffering of not getting what you want
8. The suffering of the five appropriated aggregates

B. Three kinds of suffering: ⁱⁱ

1. Suffering of Suffering - (Course appearances)

In these puny, soft bodies, we are in discomfort, or feel pain, get sick, feel bad, etc. These experienced are traced to specific events. Like all beings we suffer through the frailties of this form.

2. Suffering of Change.

This is more subtle and is the swing from one mild discomfort to another, opposite, which provides brief relief. We hunger, then eat, then feel full, etc. Notice times in your life when you have a brief relief, which transforms into a new kind of suffering, (attachment/aversion).

3. Compounded Pervasive Suffering.

Being under the control of karmic expressions, we suffer the results of that karma myriad ways such as clinging to appearances, circumstances and identities.

II. What are we to think about this predicament? That depends on where you are on the path.

A. Initial Scope practitioners will want to be rid of suffering and strive for a higher rebirth that doesn't have such suffering. This person works on their karma, and creates merit, tries to endure suffering. According to Shantideva in his chapter on Patience, "Happiness is obtained with great difficulty, whereas suffering occurs easily. Only through suffering is there release from the cycle of existence. Therefore, mind, be strong!" ⁱⁱⁱ

B. Medium Scope practitioner will want to be liberated from the cycle of existence and will work toward nirvana, for himself alone. This involves creating merit and the practices of Six Perfections, especially the Three Higher Trainings.^{iv} Again, the practice of Patience, or endurance, is essential. One looks beyond the cycle of life and death to see the true nature of existence – that there is no arising, no death, that is self-existent. Rather, these are appearances depending on causes and conditions. As such, they are empty of inherent existence. Liberation for one's self requires ethics, superior concentration and wisdom. The path to liberation is full of suffering the distractions and obstacles of one's own limitations.

C. Highest Scope practitioner will work for full enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. This means aspiring, cultivating, and realizing relative and ultimate Bodhicitta.^v With compassion as the primary motivation, we need to experience and contemplate suffering in order to properly empathize and understand the suffering of others. These sufferings become the teacher and we cultivate an understanding that all beings equally want happiness and don't want suffering. So how could we leave anyone behind? With such a bold aspiration, we must consider our potential and our Buddha Nature.^{vi}

III. Appearances of suffering

Cultivating perfect wisdom, or apprehending emptiness of self and phenomena, reveals that the appearances of suffering are dependent on causes and conditions and is not so solid, concrete or inevitable as it appears. To achieve this, we work with the power of concentration, (Shamatha), and then rest in the open questions of how things abide, (Vipassana). With the guidance of a teacher, we can progress on the nine stages of Shamatha, and also turn to the practice of mahamudra, (Great Seal), or looking directly at the mind's nature. Without examination and analysis, rest in a relaxed, free, uncontrived state.^{vii}

Seeing appearances like a dream, we are not taken in by the persuasive story lines associated with suffering. Divesting ourselves from the story, we can see that the mind's expressive power simply plays the scene that befits our karma and current conditions.

IV. Start where you are

In the short term, antidotes to our suffering can be found in meditation on impermanence, interdependence and the relative nature of appearances such as desire and revulsion. This takes some power out of the suffering. Tsong Khappa says in the Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path that we should, while striving for enlightenment, conduct ourselves with the virtue that results in higher rebirth, (human and god realms).^{viii}

"You need a body in a happy realm that is fully qualified, for even if you have achieved the path, you will make little progress with a body that is not completely qualified and only possesses good qualities to some extent."^{ix}

We go about our days as decent human beings. As the old Tibetan saying goes, "in public, watch your words, in private, watch your mind."

When we are in formal practice, we consider the pointlessness of the eight worldly concerns, (wanting Pleasure, Wealth, Reputation, Praise, and not wanting the lack of these). This helps develop a sense of renunciation for cyclic existence, and creates the conditions for a spiritual lifestyle to gain traction.

And then contemplating the suffering of others through the seven-point cause and effect or 11-point Giving and Taking instruction, we develop an aspirational Bodhicitta, practice compassion, and work on developing an understanding of emptiness.

ⁱ Tsong Khappa, *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, pages 261, 262.

ⁱⁱ Gampopa, *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, pages 95-109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shantideva, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, (Wallace) page 62.

^{iv} These are Generosity, Patience, Joyous Effort, Ethics, Concentration, Wisdom. The three higher trainings are the last three in this series.

^v Relative Bodhicitta means love and compassion, Ultimate means Wisdom realizing the nature of reality, or emptiness.

^{vi} B. Alan Wallace, spoken at Four Noble Truths retreat, 2013.

^{vii} Shang Rinpoche, *Mahamudra and Related Instructions*, page 76.

^{viii} Tsong Khappa, *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path*, pages 261, 262.

^{ix} Id.