

The Third Noble Truth: Part II

Based on a talk given by Rev. angel kyodo williams on February 16, 2006 at the Center for Urban Peace/New Dharma Meditation Center in Oakland, California.

This talk is the third in a series on the Four Noble Truths, specifically addressing the meaning behind the Third Noble Truth. It will be given here in two parts. This is part two. Look for part one in our April 2011 issue.

The Four Noble Truths

- *Suffering exists*
- *Suffering arises from attachment to desires*
- *Suffering ceases when attachment to desires ceases*
- *Freedom from suffering is possible by following the Eightfold Path*

There are lots of discourses about the Awakened mind, the *bodhicitta*, the mind that aspires to Awakening. And it's beautiful and it's sweet and it fills us with a kind of warmth, because it's like, Oh, I have *bodhicitta*; I aspire to be Awake. I aspire to Awakening for all beings. It fits so well with our culture of life-affirming, positive truth and that makes us feel good. But I want to tell you in my experience, I don't know anyone, and I don't know *of* anyone, and I haven't heard of anyone that has even *peered* at the cessation of anguish, even glimpsed it, glanced at it, caught a whiff of it without having experienced the emotion or state that is called *samvega*.

Samvega is a very complex term. It's in the *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, and in the *yoga sutras* they talk about *samvega yoga*. And what they say is that the results will be quick. They will be fast; they will turn everything in your life around and everything will be apparent to you if you have the fire of *samvega*. And what *samvega* is not is your run of the mill desire to change: I want my life to change, so I'm going to meditate. I want things to be different, so I'm going to offer gifts to my guru, my teacher.

Samvega is the burning quality of coming into utter awareness in a shocking way about the experience of life and just how messy it is—and on top of that, how asleep you have been. It's when things fall apart. The meaning that you had associated with life caves in on itself. Crumbles. And you have an intensity to do anything to move through that. You are willing to defy—because you must—all of the social norms because it's so apparent to you how meaningless they are. It's nothing short of devastating. One must be devastated by the truth of anguish before you can get any where near cessation—they don't put this in self-help books. Nobody wants to buy that.

It is an unequivocal intensity. It's something that burns you up. It literally burns all of your beliefs about how things are—spew! in smoke. Gone. In an

instant. Now, almost every single one of us has experienced that; I believe we all have. But it's so painful; it's so debilitating that we try to put a little Band-Aid on it and cover it up. Instead, keep that alive. That is the doorway out. Angst is a slim shadow of what I'm talking about. Angst is very nice and proper. People like to use that word, because it keeps things contained, but what I'm talking about is so much more messy than angst. It's so much more uncontainable than angst. It needs to be balanced with another quality, which is called...*pasada*. *Pasada* is the clear knowing that makes it possible to negotiate this situation/devastation.

It doesn't mean you know **how** to negotiate it; it doesn't mean you know **when** it's going to happen. It doesn't even mean you know **what** to do. It means you have tapped into a crystal clear...our Judeo-Christian framework would say FAITH. But it's a *seeing* into which is what keeps *samvega* from having us just go and slit our wrists somewhere, because we could just do that. We could just decide, it's all messy and we can't do anything about it.

So you have to have both of these things together, one followed by the other. A classic Buddhist text actually talks about the Buddha having this quality as a result, this *pasada* as a result of having clear seeing. Imagine what it was like when he came out of his palace: Old age. Never saw *that* before. What is that about? Whoa! He's grey, wrinkled—what's happening there? Sickness—and you know sickness wasn't the pretty kind of sickness. These were folks that were on the street with real ugly stuff. Your body seizes up to see that kind of sickness and death.

He had the devastation of experiencing all of that and not knowing what to do with it. The utter perfection that was the Buddha's lifestyle fell to pieces. Lying at his feet were all his belief systems just in a heap. All of us have had that happen to us, if not about our entire belief system, at least about our belief about a person, a thing, a situation.... We've all had that happen where something just falls apart and is lying at our feet, and we feel like we're lost hanging out in the wind, because we have nothing else to hold onto.

After the Buddha saw these three individuals that represented old age, sickness, and death, he saw a fourth individual who was a wandering mendicant, a monk—a wandering beggar is more like it—and seeing that person transmitted to the Buddha, to Gautama, at the time, *There's something in that*.

Each of you has *pasada*, because you're here. You're sitting here, so you have something, even though it's not fully cultivated, of the clear seeing that has taken you away from whatever it is you could be doing tonight so that instead you're sitting here moving along a path in whatever way you're doing it.

But in order for there to be cessation, in order to experience the freedom of the burning away, the extinction, to experience *nirvana*—not the magic *nirvana* in the sky, but *nirvana* in this life, on this plane, in this place—in order to experience the extinction of **that** anguish, the constant anguish and stress you must have a connection with your *samvega*. And no one will appreciate it—your society, your family, most of your friends they're not going to say, Cool, keep that. That's a great attitude to have. They're going to say, You are trippin'! It's okay, they'll tell you; it'll be all right. Just do this; just do that.

But if you are truly practicing the **truth**, the First Noble Truth of the anguish, of the stress, of the suffering, you will not heed **that**. You will instead go off to the places of rebels and revolutionaries who will not be satisfied with following the normal way. You will follow your heart to the very, very end, because it knows deeply the completely unsatisfactoriness of this way that we are. And if you cultivate *samvega*, imbalanced with a clear sense that it is possible to **work with**, that's the bright side. We need a little dark, little light, little moon, little sun—we need them both. If you cultivate it, you will not be swayed. You will not be lulled. You will not be put back to sleep. You will not be sucked into, Come. Feel better. Be comfortable. It'll be all right. You'll know, it already is—*all* right. If you don't already deeply know that, don't let anybody tell you that it's true.

You have to know it for yourself.

You have to step into that on your own.

You have to walk through this place of intensity.

You have to carry this fire with you until no one has to tell you that it will be all right, because the cessation is without doubt.

Words fail at these moments, because there's just no way to say it. Without doubt is without doubt. It is completely unshakeable. No one can bring anything to you, anymore ever, that will suggest to you for one moment that you are not perfect. No one will ever be able to convince you that you are not simply in a divine place at all moments in time. And most important, you yourself will not waiver a bit; you will be unshakeable.

It's not a belief. I want that to be clear. So in some ways the saying of this is useless, but maybe it will spark some urgency.

Unshakeable.

Without a doubt.

This anguish, this stress is stoppable, and it is up to each of you to cultivate the quality of a mind of urgency, of intention, of defiance to actually experience that cessation.

I can take maybe one question.

Speaker One: How do we cultivate our Way-seeking mind?

aKw: The Way-seeking mind. You know, it's like going to the gym; you just work the muscle. You just work it, really, with all attention on the muscle that keeps you facing your experience *as it is*. If you, even for one full day—I believe this—if you can go through one entire day fully experiencing your life and everything that comes up—I don't mean pick a day when you're going to see your mama, and she's going to wear you out, don't go looking for some pain—but otherwise, choose any random day, and if you allow yourself to see what *is* then you will cultivate that Way-seeking mind. Because you will so deeply experience the truth of this suffering, this angst, this anguish everywhere you go even if you hide yourself in a little box and pretend not to see anybody. If you allow every bit of the experience that is your life for one full day, you will have all the fire that you need to say, I have got to do something [about my life].

You will see that the way that this has been happening is *not* the way.

What we do instead is dull out, turn our attention down, lower the volume—bring it down a little bit, constantly, constantly... We do it with no awareness whatsoever that that's what we're doing. We shut it out. We say:

Go away. Not now. I can't take that. Too busy. I'm working on *this* right now, not *that* emotion. I'll take that one, but not that one. Too much of that. Put that away. I'll deal with that later....

So we have to flex our capacity to **stand**, to just stand in the presence of what is.

Speaker One: Do we need practice? I mean, a formal meditation, in order to do that?

aKw: You know, we could use that. But most people come to a practice because they've had a glimpse of that, but then shut it out. So what we end up doing with practice, with formal practice, is spending time trying to pry that little opening back open again—just so we can open it up and say, Oh, that's what I ran away and hid from! And then I went and sat on a cushion and used the cushion as a place to hide. Everyone is catapulted into a practice, because they have that experience that blows them away. Everyone. That's what happens. You get your skirt blown, and you're reaction becomes, Wooh-who, can't handle that! And I need to find some way to deal. But then we use meditation, just like everything else—everything can be used as a delusion—we use our practice as a way to feel comfortable again. I'm taking care of it; I'm a meditator. Look at me; I'm so great. While in fact we use it to avoid.

Speaker One: So how do we employ using practice as a way of avoiding?

aKw: One place that happens is in spiritual practice communities. We get in this together and we're all say Oh, let's make each other feel good. And that isn't what practice is about. Instead, let them suffer. Let them be in it. Don't fix it for them. Don't stroke their heads. Don't hand them a tissue. Don't tell them, It'll be okay. Let them be with it. It's okay, just the way that it is; it's perfect.

So we get out of the way. First of all, we mind our business. **First:** stop watching everybody else. Fixing everyone else. Figuring out, We'll she's doing this and that's triggering me. Well, just, whatever, mind your business. Shut up! Pay attention! It's really simple. That's all there is to do. We complicate it. We make it something big. But we don't have to learn anything. We have to *unlearn*. There are two words in practice: sit. stay.

We're like puppies. Sit. Stay. Sit doesn't necessarily mean sit on the cushion; it means sit in the truth of your experience. Sit in this moment right now. Don't grab after the next moment, don't push away from the last moment. Sit here. Stay. Unlearn all of the habits of hiding from your own experience.

Someone said to me today, Well, I don't know how to stop. I said, Don't be ridiculous. You know how to stop! You need to learn to let go of continuing! We all know how to stop. Stopping is natural. Sitting and staying are natural. The habit is to keep going and going and going. That's just a habit. That's why we say we're coming back to our true selves. It is most natural to be in the truth of our experience. Everything else is something we have layered on, grafted on to our most fundamental nature, which is to be in harmony just like a tree—not getting up and going anywhere, wishing it were different, just staying with the presence of this moment, and that's it.

May you go well.