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THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: THE CAUSE OF SUFFERING

Where does all this suffering come from? It comes from somewhere. Even if you say that it is natural, you can't say that everybody has the same suffering. Your experience of pain and my experience of pain differ. What accounts for this difference? Suffering doesn't just pop up, although it may look like it does. Sometimes, all of a sudden, it's right there, but the next minute, it is gone.

Pain is reality. I don't think we doubt that. You can even see it in young people. Look at young girls. When you see them, they are nicely made up, trying to show the best face they can, but then you see dissatisfaction between the cracks of the makeup, the pain of not fulfilling their desires. It all pops up. As a matter of fact, we all carry that dissatisfaction and pain year by year, and meanwhile we get more and more wrinkles!

Each and every one of us here knows people who have lost their lives. The older you get, the more people you lose. This is reality, true reality. The younger ones will experience this later. The older ones are experiencing it more today. In reality, when someone we know dies, we should dedicate our virtues to purifying all the negative karmas that person may be carrying. We should dedicate our virtues to fulfilling his or her wishes for a next wonderful human life—not only a human life, but a human life that meets with the teachings of the Buddha and of great Tsongkhapa, so that by doing so, that person can complete the path and become fully enlightened within that lifetime. Because we have a connection to that person, and the connection works, our efforts are not just simply praying. We do have that connection with our sangha members, so we dedicate and we pray.

If we could end our pain and suffering by death, we could all go easily, but it doesn't end there at all. As a matter of fact, death itself is pain, tremendous pain. Can you imagine the separation of the consciousness and its companion, the physical body? The physical body is like a rented apartment, and our consciousness is the occupant. It sits there and occupies the body. Death is like an eviction. You are being kicked out of your apartment.

Where I live in Michigan we sometimes see someone's belongings thrown on the curb, even if it's raining or snowing. Some friends may be able to come and pick up the belongings with a truck or something. Death is like that—an eviction. You have been kicked out of your house. Your physical body that you remained in for a whole lifetime has now kicked you out. That is pain, no doubt about it. People sometimes

say that death is so easy, so beautiful, so wonderful, blah, blah, blah. True on one hand, but on the other hand, not everybody goes that easily. There's a lot of pain.

Separation itself is very painful. How difficult it is when two human beings separate, especially if they have been together many years! No matter how much you may pretend that nothing has happened, that's not true. In reality, there is tremendous pain. That is separation after a few years, but at death there is separation after a whole life. Born together, our body and our consciousness are now separated. If you think there's no pain, you've got to be crazy. There has to be.

Buddhist teachings sometimes tell you how many hallucinations you suffer during death. In absolute reality, they may be hallucinations, but in relative reality, we really experience these hallucinations. We call them hallucinations, but for the person who's going through them, they are absolutely real. That person is going through mental and physical pains and miseries, and they are all absolutely real.

This way or that way, young or old, man or woman, human beings, animals, or the other living beings, we all suffer tremendously, all the time, constantly, continuously. If not one, then the other suffering gets us. If not ourselves, then it gets our family. If it's not the family, then it's me. If not me, it's my mother in-law. In addition to the obvious suffering of suffering, every day we are constantly getting older, sicker, and closer to dying. We are walking, almost running towards death.

A 17th century Amdo master said:

The moment we were born we do not have the right or freedom to sit for even a single minute.

We are running, running towards death, just like a galloping horse.

We call ourselves living being, but all of us are on the way to death.

Further he says,

How sad it is, no matter who you look at, yourself, your loved ones, or someone you hate, all of them are in that situation.

This is reality, the absolute truth. Nothing can reverse it. Life is always moving forward. That itself is pain, that itself is suffering. Physically you may look better today, worse tomorrow, better day after tomorrow, and worse the day after that, but the whole movement, if you look at it, is going from bad to worse, honestly. That is the reality.

On top of that, there are all our other sufferings. When one comes, it brings the others. They all come together. Some sufferings take you on a spiral, make you circle round, and push you deep down under the ground. All our emotional sufferings do that. I'm sure we all have experienced that. It doesn't have to be a really big thing,

even a tiny little thing, the way someone looks at you, what words they say to you, sometimes can trigger something and push you down that spiral, all the way down—seven layers below the earth where no one can get to you. Though it looks like there's no way out, it never ends there. You know the beauty of it: The good news is, whenever you go down, the end of going down is coming up! It has to be. This is the circle. This is our life is and how it functions. It goes down, and whatever goes down comes up, and whatever comes up has to go down. That's what it is

Is there an end to this? Is there something you can do, or do you just have to wait for millions of years for your chance, or your turn, or whatever it is? The answer that Buddha discovered is no, you don't have to wait. You can do it by yourself. But you have to deal with suffering at the causal level, not at the symptom level, which is the result. If you are sick, you have symptoms. From the symptoms, we know what is wrong with us. But we don't treat the symptoms; we treat what causes the symptoms.

Why do I have to acknowledge that my beautiful, youthful, cute, sweet face looks like a monkey now? Why do I have to know this? Because it's the truth, and by knowing, I can change it. I have a way of changing it. How can I change it? Do I have to go to a plastic surgeon? Plastic surgery will do no good. Maybe for a year or so, surgery will hold your eyelids up and make you look better, but they will come down again. So that's not the point, really.

The point is that we need to find out where these sufferings are coming from. Why are they happening? We have a tendency to say, "Oh, that is reality; that is life." But that's not the answer. Yes, it may be life, it may be reality, but why do we need to know about it? Because if we want to make changes, it does no good to make them at the symptom level, the result level; we have to make changes at the causal level. At the result level, the only changes you can make are like plastic surgery.

Change the cause. When you change the cause, you can change the result. In fact, the result can only be changed at the causal level. When Buddha first went out of that palace made especially for him, wherever he looked he saw miseries. Then he asked, "What can I do?" He wanted to get free himself, to help his family to get free, then also to free his subjects, and finally to free all living beings connected to him. Buddha realized that you can change all this only at the causal level.

If a third person could really create the cause [of suffering] for us, it would be terrible! Then you would have found a true enemy, one who really created suffering for you. If an enemy like that existed, then you would take hold of that enemy and do whatever you have to do, cut it, kill it, or whatever. But it's not anybody else! It's me. I did it. This is my responsibility. That's what it is all about.

Analytical Meditation and the Cause of Suffering

When you hear statements like this you may think, "What has that got to do with

meditation?” I am actually giving you the materials to meditate on. Without the materials, you cannot meditate. If you keep on meditating without the materials, you’re just sitting and watching.

When I arrived in the US in the mid 1980’s, I decided not to talk too much about meditation yet, because I thought people were not very familiar with it. But when it slipped from my mouth one time, I noticed that everybody started moving into meditation position. So people knew something about it, but for most, even now, meditation means just sitting and watching or counting your breaths. This form of meditation, called concentrated meditation is helpful, but it cannot challenge the ego at all. It does bring calm, quiet, and wonderful feelings, which are absolutely needed before we can challenge our ego. Right now our mind is not stable. It jumps around, like fleas on the fur of our pets. Our mind jumps even faster than fleas! Just to get used to meditating and settle the mind down a little bit, you need concentrated meditation.

But concentrated meditation alone is not going to give you much. No matter how long you sit, nothing will really change. You may sit like Mt. Everest, but that is not challenging your ego. Without doing that, you cannot challenge the cause of your suffering. At best, you can postpone your suffering for awhile, but that is not getting rid of it. The intellectual capacity is the one that really does the work. Many people think the holy thing to do is to sit there and think nothing. You want to look holy, fine, it does not matter, but that does not serve any purpose. Our goal is to cut suffering. In order to do that, we have to cut our negative emotions. Concentrated meditation can reduce or block out anger or obsession for a while, so it is a good thing. We can build up a little compassion and generosity, a little bit of morality and patience. That’s all great, no doubt about it, but it won’t get us very far.

Also, concentrated meditation can help you train your mind to be able to focus, which is very helpful. Our minds are extremely busy. So give the mind a little relaxation. On a regular basis at home, give yourself a little quiet time: make sure no one’s yapping at you and the television and radio are off. Just give yourself twenty minutes if you can, or even five minutes, and you’ll see the difference. It is best to do that in the morning and evening, but if you can’t do both, at least do it once a day so that you can see how you feel. Then you can extend it.

When you get a little relaxed, you can begin to meditate on how the mind works, how anger pops up. Remember how you got angry before and try to remember how it happened. You may recall, “I was very happy but then this person looked at me in a horrifying way, so I got angry.” Recognize that you are blaming the other person, but the reality is that some mood within you changed. Why did the mood change? Because your moods are impermanent, and they change!

All of that is very good, but can it get you out of suffering for good? Can it free you from the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering? I can clearly say, “No.”

[Concentrated] meditation gives your mind relaxation, mental peace, and harmony, but that's not going to liberate you from suffering at all. To be liberated from suffering, you have to have wisdom; without wisdom you cannot be liberated. Even compassion, no matter how good and wonderful it is, cannot liberate anyone from suffering. It can reduce the suffering, reduce the pain, reduce the cause of suffering, no doubt, but it is unable to liberate you.

The early Indian teacher Dharmakirti said:

Compassion, love, etc., is not the direct opponent of ego, which makes the individual suffer; therefore, kindness and compassion cannot cut the root of evil or samsara.

In other words, compassion cannot cut the suffering. That statement gives the experience of the earlier Indian Buddhist teachers, followed by all Tibetan masters. When you meditate, you need something to think about; otherwise it is simply sitting. It will not necessarily be a great form of practice or meditation.

We have to know how to handle our problems. How do we move forward on our spiritual path? What are the paths we are supposed to follow? Why should we follow them? What will make a difference to me and to all other beings? You have to know all of that. I don't mean you have to become a scholar, but you have to know what you're doing. If you don't know what you're doing, then you are like people who say, "The situation is under control" when it's not. It's as if water is going under the foundations of your house, and you keep sitting there saying, "The situation is under control." You do not know anything until the house collapses. If that happens, it is a terrible waste of your spiritual life.

This is very important, and this is why we talk here, instead of teaching you how to meditate. I am giving you a lot of information, so take this information and meditate by yourself. You know how to meditate. It is not something secret; it is very simple. [Analytical] meditation is thinking, processing, and analyzing, drawing a conclusion, and focusing on the point on which you have drawn the conclusion. In order to do that, you need to get the information to think about and analyze. That's why we are talking here.

I would like to say that every thought, even the jokes, is meant for you to meditate on. Everything is part of the meditation material. In addition, whatever we may be talking about—suffering, the cause of suffering, cessation, path, good, bad, virtue, non-virtue, all of them—are totally focused on one point and one point only: the result that we are looking for, freeing ourselves from suffering.

Honestly speaking we cannot go on praying to Buddha, "Oh, free me from suffering!" That never, never, never happens! You can go on praying for Buddha to free you, but Buddha can't free you from suffering. You have to free yourself from

suffering. Buddha himself said:

Buddhas cannot wash the negativities by pouring holy water . . .

You can pour holy water on your head, but you cannot wash away negativities. In Vajrayana we meditate on blessed nectars coming to us and purifying everything, but on the other hand, Buddha has clearly said:

Suffering cannot be removed by hand.

Getting free from suffering is not like a mechanical system where you just press a button. Mechanically, we can stick a needle into our vein and pull blood out by hand, but the sufferings we experience cannot be pulled out by the Buddha's or anybody's hands. Gradually, they can heal. Everything can be healed because everything is impermanent. You can heal it, but you cannot change it just like that. No way! Only knowing the truth through practicing and meditating can cut through the pain and deliver you to the joy that has never known suffering. That is the whole purpose of whatever we talk and joke about here. Never ever forget that!

When we talk about suffering, what are we doing? We are learning about suffering. Why learn about suffering? You may say it is because Buddha taught that the First Noble Truth is the truth of suffering. That's not right. We are learning about suffering because *we* suffer and *we* want to get out of it. Remind yourself: "I'm not learning to be a professor. I'm learning because I want to know how to handle my suffering. I would like to get over it. I would like to get rid of it. That's why I'm learning." The learning provides the materials and the tools; the actual work is meditation. That's how it works.

We have to use our beautiful, intelligent minds and make the best choices. You people should discuss among yourselves, form your opinions and challenge each other on these points. When you have debated them out, you will know clearly what's right and wrong. If you talk about it, read about it, discuss and debate, each and every action of every individual can be discussed. You don't have to ask or confess to each other, "I did this. Is it right or wrong?" No! You say, "If someone does this and that, is it a right action or a wrong action?" This is what the sangha is all about. The sangha discusses that and forms an opinion. Some people will contradict the opinion; other people will agree with it. Then you can see how far your logical power can lead you.

Whatever right conclusions you draw, that is what you meditate on, so that it becomes a part of you. That is how you go through the practice. Sitting down alone to meditate is a good thing, but what you meditate on has to be correct information. Whether it is correct or not will be decided by your intelligent mind and what you learn through reading. Then, after you pour the information in, you discuss it. When

you hear me talking or the instructors talking, that's one thing. When you are using your mind, analyzing and debating, that is another thing. Then finally you are meditating. Whatever you have analyzed, whatever has come out of the analysis, that's what you meditate on. That is how you make your practice perfect. If you just sit down and do nothing, it is not that great. Even the cows know how to sit down. If you say, "Keep silence!" the cows may say, "Mooo." Other than that, they will keep silent.

Easing Our Pain

Dharma means changing negative emotions and negative actions into positive ones. In Tibetan dharma is *chö*, the past tense of the verb "to correct." So *dharma* means "corrected." What has been corrected? Our negative addictions have been made into positive habits. That is dharma. That is not the translation from the scholarly, academic point of view, but from the practice point of view. When we say we are spiritual persons, the key is to make ourselves better persons.

When you meditate, analyze how your mind works. What does attachment do? What does anger do? You will see it. The cause [of negative emotions] is already there, and if the conditions arise, they will spark up. That is not a mystery. If you go deeper, you'll see that everything functions by the same mechanism. Finding the cause introduces you to the target—what you need to get rid of. By getting rid of it, what you hope to gain is nirvana, peace, joy and happiness. We know we don't want suffering, but if we know where suffering comes from, and we can get rid of the cause, we can get the result: nirvana. If you have to have an enemy, don't look in Iraq; look inside yourself.

We can have poetry; we can have music; we can have dharma. All those are there to contribute to easing our pain. Allen Ginsberg asked me once, "What is the purpose of poetry?" I said, "The purpose of poetry is to ease the pain of the people." If you read poetry, you will enjoy it and, at least for a minute, you'll forget about pain and suffering. Living is a little easier. Entertainment is all about that, anyway.

But, the spiritual path has to work in a different way than entertainment. It is supposed to end our pain forever. That is why each and every one of us puts energy into the spiritual path. Each and every one of us tries to be open-minded, and each and every one of us tries to be good, and each and every one of us tries not to hurt anyone else. That is what dharma is all about.

I would also like you to remember that suffering is not permanent, but impermanent. Even if you are flying in the air and are so happy, don't be overly happy, because happiness is impermanent, and you will fall down. Even if you are very deep down seven layers beneath the earth and suffering badly, still don't be so sad because that's impermanent, too. It is going to change, and you are going to go up. Recognize and acknowledge the suffering, but remember that it is impermanent

and that the solution is in your own hand and nobody else's. God will not make you suffer, that is not in God's job description. It is your own job description! You have got to change that job description.

Two Truths about the Cause of Suffering

A verse of praise to Buddha by the great master Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa or Yellow Hat tradition to which I belong, says:

*You are the one who really experienced, and whatever you experienced,
you expressed, and because of that I praise you, teacher without
equivalent!*

Tsongkhapa is saying, "You, teacher, are incomparable, not because you are holy but because you saw and experienced, and whatever you have seen and experienced, you have expressed. That is why you are great."

Looking at suffering and the cause of suffering from that point of view, the sufferings that we go through are real experiences. Even when we think what we are experiencing is joy, there is suffering within that joy. You get little picnic spots, something nice happens, and it's so great and wonderful. Some people get married, some people have a new girlfriend, some people have a new boyfriend, some people win Miss America, some people win the lottery, all this. But each and every one of these "joys" is attached to pain and causes pain, though when we are carried out with that new wave, we don't realize it. We think, "I'm great, I'm above the clouds, sleeping on the clouds!" You know those mattress ads, "sleeping on clouds," that is what we think.

The difference between a wise and a not-so-wise person comes in here, when you're sleeping on the cloud. Sure, you can enjoy the cloud. There's nothing wrong with that. However, you realize that you're on the cloud and that the cloud is moved by the wind and can break at any time. It can disappear at any time and you fall through the cracks. Sleeping on clouds is for only a short time, a few minutes. One who realizes that is, I believe, called wise. If you don't realize it, you carry on until suddenly you get into some kind of trouble. That pattern is common with many people. That is the truth about our life.

The trouble doesn't really have to be physical pain. It can also be mental or emotional pains. They're all real, absolutely real experiences. On the other hand, you can look at everything as impermanent by nature and to think that, therefore, it is all an illusion. You can look at everything in that way and cut through every event in life. But, on the other hand, everything is real.

Buddha says there are two truths: absolute and relative. Both are true. From the absolute truth point of view, we may all be living some kind of hallucination or

illusion. When you deeply look at anything, it's not real. Remember, a few years ago, when George Bush was trying to get the Iraq War going. Now we know that all the allegations about "weapons of mass destruction" turned out to be about nothing—a huge thing we had imagined. When you look through that angle, you see the emptiness behind it.

The emptiness of it all is the reality, in one way. On the other hand, what happens is real. In life we just run parallels between what is real and what is not. I don't want to say that what we experience is hallucination, but it is sort of "non-real." And yet, these events in our life are also real. You know death is real. It really happens. Sometimes you are prepared, and you expect it. You expect it when a sick old man dies. But then sometimes, when you're not prepared, a young person all of a sudden goes. The son of one of our friends just died in a car accident. He was twenty-two years old. You know, he had a good rebirth, no doubt, but twenty-two is a bit too short. He didn't have much time or opportunity to do anything. So sufferings come in like that. Whatever is happening—pains, misery, or joy—everything is real, though in absolute reality they are empty, and you have to handle both together.

So, in life we really have to take both the absolute and the relative together. They complement each other; they do not contradict each other. They are real things, real truths. They are where the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering come in. Every time the wind blows differently, we suffer tremendously. Buddha saw this and personally discovered this because he himself experienced the same things we do.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/MEDITATION

1. When in my life have I experienced the principle that "if you change the cause, you can change the result"?
2. When in my life have I become aware that even when I think am experiencing joy, there is suffering within that joy?
3. How can analytical and concentrated meditation help me to overcome the causes of suffering?