

Gesshin Greenwood

*The Dharmic Life*

Week Three: “Recognizing Delusion, Touching Enlightenment”

April 15, 2019



Hi, I'm Gesshin Greenwood, and this is “The Dharmic Life.” In this third section we're going to be talking about enlightenment, as well as the third noble truth. The third noble truth is that the cessation of suffering is possible, which is great to hear. It's the climax of the story.

In the Pali canon, when it talks about suffering, it reads, “What is the origin of suffering? It is this craving that leads to renewed existence. And what is the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-attachment.” This is the third noble truth, that there's a way out of suffering by non-attachment to our craving.

I spent many years confused about what this notion of craving was because I thought it was synonymous with desire. People often actually say it is synonymous with desire, so I think that contributed to my confusion. People say that Buddhism recognizes that desire leads to suffering, and it's partially true because desire and craving are related. But I think it's better to just throw out the idea that desire leads to suffering altogether because we can't live without desire. There would be no human race without desire, without people procreating, and without desire for food and other things. I think in many ways desire gives clarity and richness to our lives. It's that special spark that makes things interesting.

My teacher Aoyama Roshi taught there are two different kinds of desires in our life. There are wholesome desires to learn, to help others, and to practice. Then there are unwholesome desires like selfish desire, which is a whole other story. Obviously, we should try to get rid of selfish desires, whereas we should cultivate wholesome desire because it gives our life energy. These days I like to say that uprooting craving eliminates suffering, but desire teaches us who we are. For me, the craving the Buddha speaks of is more about delusion that leads to clinging than it is about desire.

There's something called the twelve links of dependent origination, which I think is really useful when we talk about craving. The way I like to think about it is the twelve links of dependent origination describe how we got into this mess. They describe what consciousness is and why we're suffering. The first link in this chain is ignorance or delusion, and ignorance gives rise to volitional formations, which give rise to consciousness, which gives rise to craving, and then clinging. The Buddha was talking about eliminating the delusion in our life that gives rise to

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problematic ways of being, thought processes, and emotional reactions. It's getting to the root of what is going to cause the clinging.

The third noble truth says that if we can get rid of craving then we can end our suffering. But again, I think it's more useful to say that it's not craving only, but also delusion that gives rise to craving, and then clinging. Because clinging is everything. It's anger, jealousy, and self-hatred. It's all of these negative emotional qualities that arise from ignorance. When I say ignorance I mean a misunderstanding of who we are. We're walking around with these ideas all the time, like, “I am this kind of person. This is what I'm about. This is my job. This is my role. This is what I deserve. This is what I don't deserve.” Any time anything gets in the way of these ideas, it's incredibly painful and confusing.

What the Buddha is saying is that if we can get to the root of this delusion, then we won't suffer as much, because we won't be clinging. What does this actually look like? There are many stories of people achieving earth-shattering enlightenment, with clouds opening and the whole universe turning upside-down, and the story of the Buddha's life is definitely told like this.

According to the legend, after the Buddha drank the milk, which we talked about previously, he sat under the Bodhi tree and looked into his mind. He decided that he would stay there until he understood the root and end of suffering. As soon as he did this, Mara, the god of illusion, knew what the Buddha was going to do and decided he had to stop him, because if Siddhartha did get enlightened, then that would help a whole lot of other people end their delusion. Mara came up to where Siddhartha was sitting and just messed with him. He started to throw arrows and spears at him. He made it rain on him. Then he became a really beautiful woman who tried to seduce him. Every time Mara came and tried to distract the Buddha, the Buddha would look at him and say, “I see you, Mara. I know it's you.” As soon as he recognized that it was Mara, Mara's powers would diminish and he would have to try again with something else. But the Buddha kept seeing it for what it was, which was an illusion. What this story says to me is that there are infinite forms of delusion.

In Zen we say, “Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them.” Mara shows up in my life in the form of self-hatred and self-criticism for me, and in fact, my friends and therapists have a name for it: it's my cruel brain. It's the voice that tells me that I am shit, I'm nothing, I'm terrible, and I'm ugly. Who am I to give a dharma talk? I'm only 32. I'm not even enlightened.



These are all the horrible things that I say to myself. It's really easy for me to live my life thinking that this is reality, but it's not. It's a delusion, and it's also a delusion to think, "I'm perfect, enlightened, and thin" or whatever the flip-side of that would be, because that's not true either. It's kind of like a Whack-a-Mole, like those games in the circus where you hit one thing down, and another pops up. That's what the cruel brain is like for me. I'll see it one time and then it'll just pop up again. If it's not that I'm ugly, it's that I'm unenlightened. You just have to keep trying to hit them down. It's been really crucial for me to get intimate with this voice and to know it when it comes up.

I've never had a big enlightenment experience like the ones in these stories. I've had little moments where I can let go of clinging, where I can see these things as they arise, and where I can open the hand of thought a little bit. For me, this is what the Buddha's talking about. It's talking about letting go of the thing that you're holding onto so tightly. Any time you're clinging to an idea, it's going to cause suffering. For me, enlightenment is relinquishing this idea of who I am and how I think things should be.

I'll give you a somewhat embarrassing personal example. My husband likes to make me coffee every morning. He'll set up the coffee machine the night before, put in grinds and water, and even set a timer. This means I have coffee in the morning, so it's a really nice thing for him to do. Quite early on he told me, "I'm pretty lazy and I will leave the coffee filter in forever." So he asked me, "It'd be really nice if you would just take the coffee filter out in the night so it's easier for me to put the coffee in for you." When he asked me to do this I was initially offended because I've been living my life for 20 years just leaving the coffee filter in for however long I wanted, and who was he to tell me what to do? It was him who wanted to make the coffee for me, so why should I have to change? I got all worked up about this and then he said, "It's just a nice thing that you could do for me to make my life easier." I had to think, "You know, Gesshin, this is kind of your job. This is your job to look at your habits and your patterns and to try to change them." So I thought maybe I could try emptying the coffee filter. I did it once, and I was really resistant to it and grumpy. But I kept doing it, and over time it shifted to not being a big thing. Now I'm kind of embarrassed that I was so upset about it.

But I think this is a good example of how we can and should change our relationships to the things that are causing ourselves and others to suffer. To me, this is what enlightenment is in the

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real world. Not all of us are going to be living in a monastery. The usefulness of this teaching is to recognize that these things are hard and cause us so much pain, but they don't have to. This recognition is applicable anywhere. The first step is to acknowledge what's happening like the Buddha did when he saw Mara and said “This is Mara. This is delusion.” You have plenty of opportunities to do that, because Mara keeps coming back. But eventually you get used to seeing the delusion.

For me and the coffee maker, at a certain point I thankfully recognized, “I'm being deluded. This is delusion. This idea I have is just an idea.” Acknowledgment is the first step, but it doesn't make things magically perfect. After you acknowledge the delusion, you pick it up and you work on it and you work with it. You try on a new way of relating and a new way of being and over time it gradually shifts. It takes practice, but in my experience, we can shift our relationship to the things that are causing us suffering and the things that we're holding onto so tightly. When you do, there's a tremendous sense of relief. It's like you realize, “Oh, God, I don't have to be angry anymore.”

Anyone who deals with anger knows that when you stop being angry it's a tremendous relief. No wonder they made a whole religion out of it! This very small, very simple moment where you realize *it's not so hard*. You don't have to be an asshole, and actually being an asshole is causing myself and others to suffer and I can just let that go. I can put that down. That was so groundbreaking for somebody to realize that twenty-five hundred years later we're still talking about it. We're still talking about this mystical, impossible, and elusive enlightenment experience called being a little bit kinder to the people around us. You don't have to carry your burden around all the time. You can put it down. For me, that's what enlightenment is, it's just putting our burdens down.

That was the third noble truth, and my version of enlightenment, which is seeing suffering and opening our hands a little bit. In the next talk, we'll be wrapping up by discussing the eightfold noble path and what comes next in the Buddha's life. Thanks for listening.