



Welcome to the third in the series "Engaging with the Truths of Suffering." My name is Reverend Liên Shutt. Last time we explored how we view, define, and learn to create or react to *dukkha*, hurt and harm, as largely being conditioned in the context we were raised in, in our families, in our culture, or systemically. At times the teaching tools were extreme and oppressive.

This week, we explore what I call liberatory agency. Classically, the third noble truth is stated as "The ending of *dukkha* (or suffering) is possible." With the engaged third noble truth, we focus on what, where, and how it is possible to have agency in the midst of harm and difficulty. Conditions can change and we can be a part of it. So what can we do, or how can we find choice? How can we be agents of change, both inside and externally?

Here's a quote from bell hooks: "For me, compassion and forgiveness are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed." What we think, say, and how we behave has an impact on our internal wellness and reverberates out in our interactions with our families, communities, nation, the world, and the earth itself. We can start on a healing journey by identifying how, where, and when we can respond differently, through unlearning and relearning. To return to our wholeness by knowing our agency, where can we be empowered, or uplifted to respond, individually and collectively? So the quality of our response is very important. The means of our aspiration is also equally important.

This week, let's go back to the net of Indra again. So remember that we're focusing on the net as the wholeness and oneness that we're trying to create or maintain. Again, it's not that we're trying to all be the same size jewel, we're not trying to all look alike and be alike, because it doesn't address that there's unevenness that's part of the current net.

So in the teaching, there's what's called *bodhicitta*, defined as the awakened heart-mind. So what are we awakening to? We're awaking to full awareness and sustaining this awareness. We're awaking to the trust and faith that our actions towards wholeness is knowable, and accessible to all. With *bodhicitta*, we awaken to the realization that we are stewards in the making, creating, and maintaining of Indra's net. This is the beginning of restoration. What strands were created that I inherited? What strands was I taught to tend to? Or to ignore, not tend to? What strands do I want to or am I able to tend to or spin for myself now?

Our practice is to become aware of how we harm and how we are contributing to the causes of harm. So the large challenge and the vulnerability of the work in this third step is to acknowledge how we also may have given up agency. Noticing harm is the beginning of our empowerment. Because by noticing it, we want to return to the wholeness, and so we're willing to investigate.



Then we see what condition brought about this fruition of the harm. And then we clarify and we interact with the harm of dukkha, so we can see where it can be changed and transformed. So we can redirect our conditioning to reduce or end the impact of reactive patterns, inside and out. It also shows how we have non-suffering, how to foster and be grounded in our non-harming and interconnected nature.

I'd like to share a story from when I lived at the Tassajara monastery to explicate this point. As I said before, Tassajara was in the Ventana wilderness, so it's in the forest. The Esselen Indians used it because it had a hot spring. In the 1900s it became a hotel and resort area, so most of the buildings are quite rustic and there are a lot of bugs in these cabins. Tassajara is a resort in the summer, and in the winter it's a monastery, and we all practice there.

So, as a practitioner, I was committed to non-harming and to not killing all these bugs, of course. And I'm really afraid of spiders. Whenever I found a spider in my cabin, I would try to put a clear lid I had on top of the spider then slide a card or a piece of paper underneath and take it outside the room into the forest. Now, I will say that spiders move fast, and so a lot of time I noticed that in putting the lid on it I would catch one or more of its legs. So I would harm the spider even though my intention was to care for it and not harm it. So as I practiced for a while, I made more and more commitment to being aware of this fear of a little spider.

One summer I noticed that a spider was building a web in the corner of my room right above my chair. Now we live in really small spaces. I was in a cabin that literally was a barn that they had converted into living quarters. So it was just the bed and the chair at the end, there wasn't a lot of room to move my furniture around. So I noticed the spider and its web, and it was a big spider, not a little spider! She was at least this big in my memory [gestures]. So my first impulse was to go get a broom and clear away the cobwebs.

But instead, I wanted to really practice with this reactive fear. My rational thought is that even a big spider is still much smaller than me. So what is this fear that I have? So I let the web keep on growing. I even made myself sit down under it to read a book—a dharma book, of course, on non-harming probably—and so as the summer went on, the web got bigger and bigger. I'm not exaggerating that it was like this big and thicker and thicker. I noticed that it was the wiggly movement that brought about fear in me. I asked myself, "why?", and it felt very reactive, as opposed to really understanding.

To know it rationally is useful, right? Most of us have an understanding from whatever system that we've been raised as values, to know that non-harming is a fundamental value of all beings. Yet why do we let these reactive patterns that are no longer serving us continue? So to meet our

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fear, our reactive fear, to sit in the midst of it—in my case, literally examining the strands of this web right of conditioning that I find myself in—to really investigate it fully. And then with this, to make more skillful, wise choices, in how we want to engage.

So thank you for joining me today. Next week, we'll explore how the path gives us very specific ways of responding to hurt and harm. Thank you for your attention. I wish you a return to fullness with peace and ease this week.