

Complaining Rights

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That chant just now—the world is swept away, it does not endure, it offers no shelter; there's no one in charge; one has to pass on leaving everything behind: If you listen to it one way, it sounds like a series of complaints. But actually it's the answer that a young monk, Ven. Ratthapala, gave to a king who had asked him, "Why did you ordain?"

The king was familiar with people who had ordained because they had grown old or suffered loss in terms of their family, their wealth, or their health. But in Ven. Ratthapala's case, he was still young and healthy, his family was wealthy, his relatives were still alive, so the king wanted to know, "Why did you ordain?" The passage we just chanted is the list of reasons that Ven. Ratthapala gave to the king.

So in his case, these weren't complaints. They were just his way of noticing: These are the limitations that apply to most happiness in the world. His question was, is there something better?

He set out to find it what it might be.

The important point is that he didn't stop with the complaints. We all learn at an early age that if you complain, you get attention, you get sympathy. For many of us, that's the way we deal with our sufferings. There are even cases where people don't want to be told a way to solve the suffering. They just want the sympathy.

Our society is getting better and better at complaining, and we tend to fight over who has the right to complain. People complain about their situation, their status, the way they're treated by other people: There's a whole series of reasons that everybody has to complain about. It's almost like a contest: who has complaining rights, who doesn't have complaining rights. Ironically, the more comfortable things get, the more people complain. As your expectations rise, reality doesn't keep up with them. People can feel very sophisticated in that they can see things to complain about that other people don't see.

So complaining is a real art, and fighting over complaining rights would be something worth fighting over if complaining actually solved the problem of your suffering. But it doesn't. In fact, it actually gets in the way.

Now, it's not that we shouldn't notice the suffering. We should, in fact. As the Buddha said, that's one of the first things you want to learn: how to notice where genuine suffering, where genuine stress is. But you don't look for it just to complain about it. You look for it because you want to see the cause. The word for cause or origination there, *samudaya*, means something that arises together with the stress. If you spend your time complaining, you don't see what's arising together with the stress. The complaint has gotten in the way. So it's actually an obstacle on the path.

We have to get our duties straight here. As the Buddha said, you have to comprehend suffering or stress if you want to put an end to it. He called it a duty—the duty to comprehend stress—but it’s a duty that no one is imposing on you. The fact of suffering itself imposes the duty, but you’re free to say, “No I’m just going to continue to suffer. I have other issues, other things that are more important to me.” But if you agree with the Buddha that suffering is *the* big problem in life and you want to put an end to it, this is what you’ve got to do: You’ve got to comprehend it.

As for the cause, you’ve got to abandon it, so that you can realize the cessation of suffering. You can do that only by developing the path, because it’s only through the path—especially the factors of mindfulness and alertness, that get strengthened with your concentration—that you’ll be able to really comprehend the suffering, to see where it’s connected with the cause, and to see the cause in time.

A lot of the trick here lies in seeing the reality of this connection as it happens: Every time that particular cause comes—and it’s going to be craving of one kind or another—there’s going to be stress. The two are connected, but it’s difficult to see the connection, just as it’s difficult to comprehend suffering, because we want to get rid of it, and often times the craving—as Ratthapala noticed, the world is a slave to craving—is something we really like.

We’d prefer that there were no connection between the two so that we could hold on to the craving and get rid of the suffering. It’s like seeing a coyote run past. The coyote has been eating avocados, like the coyotes here at the monastery, and its tail is really nice and bushy. You like the tail, you want to grab the tail and shake the coyote off the tail, thinking that the connection between the coyote and the tail looks pretty weak. But, of course, the coyote is going to turn around and bite you. Still, you figure that the more you shake it, the more the coyote should be shaken loose from the tail. But it’s not going to happen. You have to see that if you grab the tail, you’re going to get bitten by the coyote.

And if you look carefully at the tail, you’re going to see that it’s really not worth all that much. It was just a flash that looked interesting as it ran past, but when you actually have a coyote tail, there’s nothing much you can do with it. You’ve got to see that these things are connected. You grab the tail, there’s going to be trouble, and there’s nothing much to show for the trouble.

We sometimes think that if we can get other people’s sympathy for our suffering or at least express our suffering to the world, then the suffering wouldn’t have been in vain. But, again, that desire to get the sympathy is going to stand in the way of your seeing, “This is what I’m actually doing that’s causing the suffering.” The doing is very subtle, which is why we have to get the mind really still when we practice concentration, because there are lot of little subtle movements in the mind that we otherwise tend to miss.

It's as if we're running around singing a song to ourselves and at the same time trying to listen for the sound of, say, mice in the wall. As long as you're singing the song, you can't hear the sound of mice. You've got to stop singing the song. You've got to get very quiet.

So you focus on the breath, try to make breath as smooth as silk, so that it feels good coming in, feels good going out, and there are not a lot of bumps or distractions, so that the mind can get used to being with something smooth and continuous—and so that it can get used to being smooth and continuous itself. It's not jumping around all the time.

Then, when the mind is still, you can start seeing things more clearly. In particular, you want to look for where there was a rise and fall in the level of stress, even in that concentration. At the same time, you also want to see, "What did I just do at the same time the stress rose? What did I stop doing when it fell?" You look for that again and again and again because it's going to take a while to see it.

One of the reasons we not only get the mind still but also make its awareness all-around is because sometimes the connection is not immediately obvious, or it's not right in the place where we thought we should look. But if you develop an all-around awareness in your concentration, you begin to see, "Oh. This little movement of the mind, which registered also as a little movement in the body energy someplace, may not be directly in the same spot as the stress but it arises at the same time and it passes away at the same time. Maybe there's a connection."

In particular, you want to look for perceptions, the little messages that the mind sends to itself, either visual images or words or a simple tone of voice. These are often the things that cause the stress—because you cling to a particular type of perception.

A perception comes up, you grab hold of it, there's stress. You let go of it, it goes, the stress is gone. You want to see that connection because that's the only way you're going to be able to abandon the cause. Otherwise, if you don't see things clearly, you don't know what to abandon. Instead of abandoning the cause, you're trying to abandon stress all the time, but that's like trying to abandon the coyote by shaking its tail and hoping that your shaking will detach the coyote from the tail.

So we're here to solve this one particular problem—which requires that we see it as really important. It's very easy to say that there are other things that are more important: There's the suffering of other people out there—who's going to help with that? Well, the people who've solved their own suffering are in much better position to help others solve theirs, because they've seen what's actually involved in solving the problem. They've seen what's required, so they can give accurate advice to other people on how to solve their own problems.

When you've reached that point, you've learned not to be the sort of person who complains in order to get other people's sympathy—which means that when you're helping them, you're not helping them for the sake of their sympathy, either. You're helping them because you see: This is what needs to be done. If they're receptive, you're happy for them. If they're not receptive, you've got to develop some equanimity. But you're operating from knowledge, rather than from a quid pro quo, thinking, "I sympathize with you; you'll sympathize with me."

Sympathy is not necessarily a bad thing, but our desire for it, our demand for it, can often get in the way of solving the problem of our suffering. Which means that when that complaining voice comes up in the mind, it's something you've got to drop. If the mind resists dropping it, you've got to be honest with yourself about why. You've got to learn how to cut through all the connections that keep you tied to it. Otherwise, you're going to be a slave to that craving. Then you'll be stuck in this world where nothing endures, there's no shelter, no one in charge, nothing of your own: in other words, a world of inconstancy, stress, and not-self.

The question sometimes arises: What's the connection between the four noble truths and the three characteristics? Which noble truth do they fall under?

Well, the three characteristics—they're actually three perceptions—are tools for performing the duties of the four noble truths. They don't come under any one particular truth. You apply them to the stress so that you can see the arising and falling of the stress. In that way, they help you comprehend stress. Then you apply them to the cause, and you see that that's arising and falling, too. In that way, these perceptions help you to abandon the cause. While you're on the path, you apply them to any idea that would divert you from the path, such as the distractions that would pull you out of concentration. In this way, they help you to develop the path. Eventually, when the path has done its work, you apply those perceptions to the path as well, and that's when you arrive at the full realization of the cessation of suffering. That's when you put everything aside, including those perceptions.

So these are our duties, and you want to make sure that your complaining doesn't get in the way of doing them. We're all very good at complaining, but it turns out that complaining is one of our skills that keeps us tied to suffering. So learn how to recognize that there's suffering but don't let the complaint get in the way of seeing the cause and letting go of the cause. These things happen very quickly, so the less baggage you carry around, the easier it's going to be to see them and have the strength to deal with them properly. And your habit of complaining very quickly and easily is part of the baggage you need to drop.