The Four Noble Truths: Overview in Terms of Anxiety

First Truth: Sometimes We Feel Anxious
5.12.21

Introduction
This year I’ll be exploring the heart of the Buddha’s teaching: the Four Noble Truths.

This is his very practical wisdom about why we become stressed and unhappy, and especially: what we can do about it.

As he said:
“I teach only about suffering and its end.”
Samyutta Nikaya, 22.86
adapted from translations by Thanissaro Bhikkhu
[https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.086.than.html] and
Thich Nhat Hanh [https://plumvillage.org/sutra/anuradha-discourse/]

To summarize:
There is suffering.
Our suffering has a deep source, which is craving.
We can end craving, and thus end suffering.
There is an effective path to the ending of our craving and suffering.

The Buddha encouraged us to understand suffering, to abandon craving, to realize the cessation of suffering, and to develop the path of ending suffering.

In future talks, I will get into the fundamentally good news in the details of these four truths, and their very useful applications to our daily life.

Over the next few weeks, as an introduction to the Four Noble Truths, I will explore them in terms of anxiety.

Tonight, we will focus on anxiety through the lens of the First Noble Truth: to understand this kind of suffering.

And I will preview a number of important ideas and methods that are generally applicable to the four noble truths and skillful practice of any kind. These are typically flagged with an arrow: ⚫.
It will help if you have a specific focus, on a particular kind of anxiety you are dealing with these days.

The Experience of Anxiety

Anxiety is a broad term, ranging from subtle uneasiness to terror, with a spectrum of worry, apprehension, foreboding, dread, fear, and panic in between.

Anxiety is uncomfortable. We don’t like it and would prefer not to have it. In the broadest sense, it is usually in the territory of the First Noble Truth.

To face what is painful is challenging, and so we need to draw upon resources inside us, and outside us. Inside like self-compassion, understanding, calming, and grit. Outside like friends and allies, refuges and teachers. We are not meant to face suffering alone.

This is true for practice in general: we need to identify and draw on and grow resources of various kinds, and this will be a key theme that I will return to again and again.

The translation of “Noble Truths” from Pali is “truths of the noble ones.” (“Noble” = virtuous, admirable, and worthy) When we tell the truth about suffering, in ourselves or others, there is a kind of nobility in it. It takes a certain inner nobility to face pain, and it ennobles you to do so with dignity and self-respect. In effect, we will be exploring The Four Ennobling Truths.

Anxiety, obviously, is an experience. It is a mental phenomenon. It is not tangible. Similarly, suffering of any kind is an experience. It is a personal psychological phenomenon.

The Buddha was focused on experiences (mainly those of humans, though he spoke of the experiences the non-human animals as well, for example in his call for compassion for all sentient beings, not just humans). He was practical and took into account the material world, notably the other people in it, but only in terms of the effects of events in the outer world on the inner one.

Anxiety Is Painful – But Doesn’t Have to Be Suffering

When we are anxious, it is unpleasant, and there is emotional pain.
When we resist our anxiety – suppressing it, shaming ourselves for it, denying it – then there is also suffering.

There is a difference between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional. We will all face pain, but we don’t have to suffer. Wow!

When we accept our painful experiences – letting them be, facing them, honoring them, telling the truth about them, not adding anything to them, not taking them personally – then they are simply unpleasant, and need not be suffering.

What happens you accept your own anxiety? When you soften around it, regard it with kindness and compassion, listen for whatever useful information might be in it? When you stop pushing it away and instead welcome it in? When you have it without being it . . . without identifying with the anxiety, but instead regarding it more impersonally: it’s there but do you have to make it “me”?

I will say more about this when we get to the Third Noble Truth, the fact that we can end our suffering.

Anxiety Is Made of Parts
As you face the truth of anxiety, like all experiences, it has parts or layers to it. For example, these elements:

- Thoughts – beliefs, assumptions, expectations, perspectives, ideas
- Emotions – feelings, moods
- Perceptions – sensations, sights, sounds, etc.
- Desires – wishes, longings, demands, goals, aims, purposes, values
- Actions – postures, facial expressions, movements, words, deeds

Any one of these could be a useful investigation for you. You might do a little exercise in which you take something you are worried about and unpack this experience into its parts.

Pay special attention to sensations: to the “felt sense,” the “somatic markers” of anxiety. These patterns of sensation and holding and tightness in the body typically anchor longstanding patterns of suffering. Try to be really aware of what it feels like in the body to be anxious.

All experiences are “compounded,” made up of parts. All experiences can be deconstructed into their elements. In Buddhism there are several ways to do this (other than my own structure above), and I will present them over the course of this
year. For now I will just point out the power of untangling the tight knot of our painful, upsetting, stressful experiences . . . loosening the threads . . . and letting in the two great traditional medicines: light and air.

Anxiety Occurs Due to Its Causes

In exploring the truth of any experience, including anxiety, you can also see ways that it arises, persists, and passes away due to a variety of causes. Fear about this, agitation about that, is because of something inside you or outside you or both. What is happening in this moment is the result of what was happening in previous moments.

I will say more about particular factors or causes of pain and suffering when I get to the Second Noble Truth.

A broad takeaway here is that nothing occurs on its own. All experiences occur dependently. In fact, all events in the material universe occur dependently as well. Even seemingly stable aspects of our universe such as the speed of light depend upon the conditions of the Big Bang. Everything is relational. Inside you and outside you, all phenomena are a local rippling in the vast tapestry of reality.

This is very hopeful! If anxiety or any other kind of suffering is occurring due to causes, then if you change those causes, you can change the suffering.

As a practical matter, you could investigate whatever it is – inside you or outside you – that is making you anxious. You could do this systematically. Not immediately trying to change anything, but to explore the truth of what is creating, maintaining, increasing, or blocking the ending of your anxiety.

Anxiety Keeps Changing

And as you understand the different aspects of the experience of anxiety and as you recognize how those parts occur due to their causes, you can see that this experience of anxiety – like all experiences – is continually changing. Even if the anxiety is mood-like and fairly stable, as you witness it you can see that it is still dynamic, vibrating, kind of fizzing in the mind. Even seemingly stable experiences like a chronic pain in your back have a certain dynamic changeableness to them because of the underlying variable activity and metabolism in the nervous system.

In a word, all experiences are impermanent. In fact, almost every aspect of the physical universe is also impermanent.

This means that we are not necessarily stuck with them!

And even if pain persists, we are not stuck with our relationship to it, we don’t have to keep adding our reactions to it!
So hopeful.

Observe your anxiety and see how it changes. Is there an insight, a bit of wisdom that occurs to you as you are mindful of anxiety?

**Anxiety Is “Empty”**

To sum up, the fact that all experiences are compounded, interdependent, and impermanent means that they are “empty” of solidity, empty of substance, empty of absolute self-causing inherent existence . . . and empty of mine-ness, me-ness, and even I-ness.

They are occurring, for sure . . . but emptily.

In much the same way, most if not all material phenomena are also compounded, interdependent, and impermanent . . . and thus empty in this sense. The wave in the ocean is certainly happening . . . emptily.

Emptiness is a deep profound radical idea – and more to the point, experience. It can occupy a lifetime of practice. Try to stay out of philosophizing about it and keep returning to direct observation of your own experience: this is where you will find transforming, liberating insight.

In practical terms, see what it’s like to regard your anxiety as more like a cloud than a brick. Occurring . . . emptily.

Same with your thoughts about the anxiety: they are there . . . emptily. Same with other reactions to it . . . such as the sense of self related to the anxiety: this sense of self – the perspective of “I,” “me,” or “mine” – is present in awareness . . . emptily.

You might find that as you understand the emptiness of painful, stressful, suffering experiences . . . they seem lighter, more bearable . . . less personal, less weighty.

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So let’s sit with all this for a minute and let it reverberate, and sink in.

OK, any questions?