

The Four Noble Truths: Overview in Terms of Anxiety

Second Truth: Anxiety and Craving 5.26.21

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.**

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.

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**.

Two weeks ago, we explored the simple fact that there is indeed the suffering of anxiety: I feel it, you feel it, everyone feels it. And I covered various ways that simply understanding the actual experience of anxiety offers many ways to relieve it.

You might like to listen to the recording of that talk [link posted in Chat] as well as look at my notes [same link in Chat].

Tonight, we will focus on anxiety through the lens of the Second Noble Truth: aiming to abandon the craving that produces the suffering in anxiety.

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.

I'm going to cover a lot of ground directly and briskly. Remember that this is an overview and that we will come back to these themes again and again, and that you can listen to this talk and also read the notes for it. Please don't be anxious that you might be missing some of these teachings about anxiety!

What Is "Craving"?

The word in Pali that summarizes the Second Noble Truth is *tanha*. It's typically translated as "craving," but its meaning is much broader than the image it conjures up of a heroin addict desperately seeking a fix.

Its root meaning comes from "thirst." We thirst, in the simplest sense, when we don't have enough water: something is missing, something is wrong.

There is a deficit and/or disturbance in the meeting of an important need. Consequently, the body and mind move into a drive state of some kind to meet that need.

☐ This is the essence of all craving: a perceived problem that matters enough to mobilize the body and mind in stressful (suffering saturated) ways.

I will come back to these key ideas many times this year.

For example, a person craving water might crawl through burning desert sands to get to an oasis. A drowning person might crave air, as I did many years ago when I was trapped underwater in kelp in the Pacific Ocean.

But most of our craving, broadly defined, is much more subtle, often operating in the background semi-consciously or even unconsciously.

We can crave that something start or continue or stop. Wanting something to end is craving just as much as wanting something to begin.

What does craving feel like? It includes the sense of:

- Wanting, desiring, longing
- Needing
- Insisting, demanding, must, gotta have it
- Pressure
- Drivenness
- Forcing, grabbing, grasping
- Pushing away, resisting

Withdrawing, contracting
Avoiding, procrastinating

What does craving feel like for you? Especially its milder forms?

Anxiety and Craving

Craving Promotes Anxiety

Bring to mind a situation, past or present, in which you get intense, insistent, irritated, or driven . . . Can you find some anxiety in it?

For example, maybe you're trying to get another person to see it your way or change their behavior about something that's important to you. You've built up a real head of steam, and all mixed together is an underlying unease or fear about what will happen if they don't make a shift.

What happens when you recognize the fears that may be tangled up with your desires?

Anxiety Promotes Craving

Now let's look at it the other way. Imagine being worried about something:

- Let's say you're worried about an illness. What are the wants in this? Such as wanting to be healthy, wanting not to be in pain – ultimately, wanting not to die.
- Or worried about not finishing a project on time. What are the wants in this? Such as wanting approval or other rewards, and wanting to avoid letting others down.
- Or worried about someone getting mad at you. What are the wants in this? Such as wanting to be liked, wanting to avoid conflict, wanting to be praised instead of criticized.

Let's pause for a moment. Pick something you have anxiety about. Name to yourself one or more wants that are involved . . . You might feel an easing if you acknowledge the wants that are intertwined with the anxiety, and perhaps some insight into actions you could take, or a greater sense of perspective.

Anxiety functions as a signal, designed by evolution to alert us to something missing, something wrong. We might feel a pain . . . which triggers a fear . . . that triggers some kind of craving, some kind of drive state.

Let's pause another moment. Find an example that's real for you in which a fear or worry or even just subtle uneasiness is a signal to you of a threat of some kind.

If you are anxious about something, it is often extremely useful to query the anxiety:

What are you telling me?

What is the danger?

How big a threat is it, actually?

What actions should I take?

If I take these actions, will you stop being so worried?

Craving and Anxiety Promote Each Other

☐ While craving promotes the suffering of anxiety, the suffering of anxiety can also promote craving.

Stephen Batchelor has highlighted the ways that suffering and craving can promote each other. Including in vicious cycles.

This means that skillful efforts to reduce suffering directly are in the service of the great path of liberation from all craving! And resting in that highest happiness which is peace.

This means that improving worldly conditions that create suffering is thoroughly supportive of the Buddha Way, not just running in parallel alongside it.

And this means that self-help practices, coaching, even psychotherapy that directly reduce suffering are supportive of the Buddha Way, and not at odds with it – and that it is foolish to discount or dismiss such efforts.

Let's pause: is there one thing you could change, even a small one, that would bring you more well-being and less anxiety . . . and thus reduce your cravings?

What Causes Craving?

In addition to the ways that suffering itself – and anxiety in particular – generally promote craving, let's look more specifically at three key causes of craving.

I will explore this in more depth with you in the days ahead. You can also see more about this in my book, *Neurodharma*, and in the related online program.

For now, a summary.

The world around us bears down on us with its challenges and disturbances. Poverty, injustice, the person across the table, the leaking faucet keeping you awake at night these all have effects.

The same with the body: its illnesses, disabilities, pains, frailties . . . these affect us as well.

Then these environmental and bodily processes land on your *mind*. In your mind, there are three broad causes of craving:

1. **Conceptual:**

- Thinking that something will last when it's actually impermanent
- Thinking that something is "I, me, or mine" when "I, me, or mine" are actually empty of substance
- Thinking that a pleasure will provide lasting fulfillment when actually that's impossible

☐ This is not recognizing the "three marks of existence": *anicca, anatta, dukkha*

2. **Relational:**

- Having a background frame that you are separate, isolated, alone
- Having an underlying sense of being unloved

☐ These relational issues may be implied somewhat in the conceptual error of thinking that you are a separate self, but they are not usually emphasized in discussions of *anatta*. Further, these relational sources of craving are so sweeping and consequential that they deserve highlighting on their own terms.

3. **Visceral**, grounded in the needs and drives of the living body:

- Invasive sense of deficit or disturbance in meeting your need for safety – indicated by feelings of pain, threat, anger, helplessness . . . and especially anxiety
- Invasive sense of deficit or disturbance in meeting your need for satisfaction – indicated by feelings of frustration, loss, drivenness, disappointment, addiction . . . and often anxiety
- Invasive sense of deficit or disturbance in meeting your need for connection – indicated by feelings of hurt, shame, resentment, grievance, loneliness, inadequacy . . . and often anxiety

☐ The third need, for connection, has often been deemphasized in both Western and Buddhist psychology, which tend to reduce our complex motivations to a simple arithmetic of merely avoiding pain and approaching pleasure.

But as we will see over this year, we are a profoundly relational species. One example of this is how the evolution of our capacities for relationship has actually remodeled more ancient subcortical and brainstem regions of the brain – which indeed were focused on just pain or pleasure – for *social* purposes.

We don't just avoid and approach. We also *attach* – to others of our kind, and more broadly to non-human animals (such as pets) and even to nature and life and the whole wide world.

☐ The visceral sources of craving are primary, evolving long before the capacities for conceptual delusions or the sense of sociality. It is animals that crave, it is bodies that crave. Think of the visceral nature of *tanha*, of thirst.

Further, the effects of Conceptual and Relational factors are usually routed through our viscera, through how it affects the *body* when we don't recognize impermanence or when we feel separate and alone.

Yet in dharma circles there is usually little exploration of these sources of craving, and what we can do about them.

That is particularly odd in light of the emphasis on mindfulness of the body. The body is taken into account as a subjective *experience* . . . but not as an objective *fact* that is generating the primary causes of our craving and thus our suffering, and the harms we do to ourselves and to each other.

And also odd in light of all that we've learned over the past thousand years – and especially the last hundred – about biology and evolution and the brain. *Key causes and conditions of our minds are found in our bodies*, and it seems foolish and well as against the spirit of Buddhism – with its emphasis on the dependent arising of all phenomena and it's valuing of clear seeing – not to take these into account.

☐ I'll say much more about how to practice with craving in the days to come. For now I'll just point out two major ways to practice with our visceral sources of craving:

- Develop psychological resources such as grit and gratitude, mindfulness and emotional intelligence, to be able to *cope* with challenges and meet your needs without feeling stressed and upset about it.

As I've written and taught, you grow anything good in yourself by first experiencing it and second internalizing it to hardwire it into your brain. From *states* to *traits*.

- Repeatedly internalizing experiences of needs met enough, to gradually develop a background *mood* of basic peacefulness, contentment, and love

In this way, we can live in this world and meet our needs and those of others with an increasingly unshakable core of resilient well-being.

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

OK, any questions?