The Four Noble Truths: Overview in Terms of *Anxiety*

Third Truth: *Anxiety and Its Cessation*  
6.2.21

**Introduction**

This year we’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.

These are more exactly translated as the *truths of the noble ones*: we are drawn to them by what is good and admirable within us, which is then developed further as we engage these truths sincerely in our practice. These are *Four Ennobling Truths*.

To summarize:

There is *suffering*.

Our suffering has a deep source, which is *craving*.

We can *cease* craving, and thus cease our suffering.

There is an effective *path* to the ending of our craving and suffering.

The Buddha said we should understand suffering, abandon craving, realize (experientially) their cessation, and develop the path that leads to (and embodies) this end.

In the months ahead, we will get into the details of these four truths, and their very useful applications to our daily life.

Currently, in four talks, as an introduction to these Ennobling Truths, I’m exploring them in terms of *anxiety*.

So far we have explored the first truth: 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.
We have also explored the second truth: a major source of the suffering in anxiety is *craving* (broadly defined): a drive state based on an underlying invasive sense of an unmet need: something is missing, something is wrong: a deficit or disturbance in the meeting of one or more of our primary needs for *safety, satisfaction, and connection*. I covered some ways to *abandon* or at least reduce craving, based on recognizing its own sources.

You might like to listen to the recordings of these two talks and/or look at my notes for them at this link: https://www.rickhanson.net/multimedia/audio/talks/buddhist-wisdom/.

Tonight, we will focus on anxiety through the lens of the Third Noble Truth: the actual cessation – the actual ending – of craving and suffering. I’ll present some key ways to realize, in your own life, this cessation (*nirodha*, in Pali).

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: →.

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!

**States and Traits**
It will help if you have a specific focus, on a particular kind of anxiety you are dealing with these days.

As a frame, for sure things out in the world and inside our bodies can affect us, and make us more anxious. These are worth dealing with! And – I’m going to focus on internal mental, psychological factors and experiences. But all the while, of course we should keep taking the world and the body into account.

As I’ve mentioned, we can experience anxiety in lots of ways, such as worry, uneasiness, foreboding, dread, unsettled, nervous, alarmed, fearful, phobic, panicky, terrified. Anxiety is a factor even if we aren’t feeling it at the time if we do various
things to avoid or bind it, such as procrastinating or obsessing or swerving away from doing things we know would be good for us.

Anxiety appears as both a *state* and a *trait*: both a passing experience, often related to a particular situation or threat, and a lasting kind of non-specific mood that is not about any particular thing.

→ States and traits foster each other in circular ways. Having a background trait of anxiety can intensify reactions – states – to particular people or activities. And experiences – states – of anxiety can get internalized to develop trait anxiety. This is a natural process of *learning*, and it is heightened by the brain’s evolved *negativity bias*.

→ In brief, over the 600 million year evolution of our nervous system, it promoted survival to have a kind of built-in bias that leads us today to routinely:

1. Look for bad news (both inside ourselves and around us),
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it,
4. Fast-track it into memory, especially emotional and somatic implicit memory,
5. While sensitizing the brain to the negative along the way.

I’ve written and taught extensively about the negativity bias, and you can see more at my website, www.RickHanson.net. In effect, *we have a brain that’s like Velcro for bad experiences but Teflon for good ones*.

Take a moment to reflect on your own worries, etc.

• Has there been any underlying predisposition – trait – toward anxiety?

• How has that been a factor in your situational experiences – states of anxiety?

• How has the negativity bias been a factor for you? *In what ways have you over-learned from your bad experiences and under-learned from your good ones?*

→ The takeaway implication from the fact of the negativity bias is that we should:

1. Deal with the bad, and
2. Turn to the good, and
3. Take in the good: hardwiring psychological strengths – including grit, gratitude, compassion, and yes happiness – into the fabric of our own nervous system.

**What Kind of Cessation?**

With this as a background, let’s consider two kinds of cessation.

**Incremental, Gradual**

First, there is incremental, bit by bit, slow but sure, gradual easing, diminishing, removing, and fading away of suffering and its causes.

Think about this could apply to your own anxiety, particularly to a specific example, as you gradually:

- Become less easily triggered
- Have less intense reactions to triggers
- Recover back to a healthy equilibrium more quickly

**Qualitative, Sudden**

Second, there is a rapid, marked shift to less anxiety. Suddenly, you’re just not nervous any more, or suddenly there is a dramatic reduction in fear about something. Maybe not a complete release, but definitely a marked change.

Can you think of an example of this?

**Meanwhile You Can Keep Coping**

As I’ve mentioned, just because there is a pain or threat or other challenge doesn’t mean we have to be anxious about it.

We can be alert, vigilant, wary, cautious, prudent, determined, and gritty all without feeling scared.

→ This speaks to the metaphor of the Buddha of the first and second darts of life: the first ones are inescapable, the second ones we throw ourselves: pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.
How much of your anxiety and other forms of suffering is based on an unnecessary over-reaction to something? Such as ruminating about things past the point that useful?

**A Special Kind of Cessation**
So far I have described cessations – incremental or qualitative – of psychological material or processes *while ordinary consciousness continues*, with its ongoing sense of self.

In the Pali Canon, though, the meaning of cessation – *nirodha* – is generally the *cessing of ordinary consciousness altogether, including the ceasing of any sense of self*. This cessation give access to *nibbana* (*nirvana* in Sanskrit). The root meaning of nibbana is to be “quenched” or “extinguished,” such as a candle flame that has used up its wax and thus ceased.

After a while, there is a gradual resumption of ordinary consciousness, which is revealed to be constructed – in effect, made up – as well as empty of self, which promotes non-attachment and the end of craving and thus suffering.

A recurring description in the Pali Canon of what is encountered through cessation is *unconditioned*, or *unfabricated*. In *Neurodharma*, in the chapter on Finding Timelessness, I explore different ways to understand “unconditioned” – including whether it involves “something” categorically distinct from the conditioned Big Bang universe – and I encourage you to investigate this profoundly important idea/experience/reality on your own.

**How Does Cessation Happen?**
Cessation – whether gradually or suddenly – occurs because of its causes, its sources, the factors that lead to or promote it. This applies both to the cessation of psychological material – my focus here – and to the utter remainderless cessation of consciousness and the self process.

Of course, before going further, we have to ask whether a person *wants* cessation (or at least reduction) of anxiety and other forms of suffering. You may have heard this lighthearted and still profound joke:

- Q: How many therapists does it take to change a lightbulb?
- A: Only one – but the lightbulb has to *want* to change!
It’s worth asking yourself, in terms of your own real motivations related to anxiety or any other issue:

- What functions does the anxiety serve?
- What are anxiety’s “pay-offs,” what “secondary gains” might it bring you?
- What might help you be even more committed to your own healing, training, purification, and awakening?

No praise, no blame, just an honest exploration of what it’s like to be you.

To continue . . . . how does cessation happen? A useful answer to this question comes from Bodhidharma, a semi-legendary person who is said to have brought Buddhism from India into China during the early part of the 5th century of the Common Era, about a thousand years after the Buddha lived.

To summarize and paraphrase and probably make some scholars (understandably) wince, he likened the process of awakening to a cart with two wheels, following two tracks.

**Developmental Change**

The first track is the process of developmental change, of healing, training, and purifying one’s mind. This is the building of the “three pillars of Buddhist practice:

- Virtue, morality, restraint, and wholesome acts of thought, word, and deed (*sīla*, in Pali)
- Mindfulness, stability of presence, quieting the mind, concentration, meditative absorption, and the jhanas (*samadhi*, in Pali)
- Better understanding of how the mind works, observing impermanence, realizing more and more deeply how suffering is constructed in real time, developing wise intentions, and accumulating wisdom (*panna*, in Pali)

In effect, we can cultivate capabilities and other inner strengths that reduce or end our anxiety and other suffering.
This process of developmental change must involve lasting changes in your body, notably in your brain. These physical changes of neural structure and function are the result of what is called “experience-dependent neuroplasticity.” In the saying from the work of the Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb, back in the 20th century: *neurons that fire together can wire together.*

Or in the traditional metaphor, your mind will take its shape from what it rests upon.

This process of developmental change is centered in what I semi-seriously call Original Buddhism, expressed in the Pali Canon. Then and now, many people have gotten enormous value from it, me included, and some of them have taken this approach all the way to enlightenment.

**Recognizing Original Nature**

And – as Bodhidharma pointed out, there is a second track, one that is much more foregrounded in the Mahayana traditions in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan, and now spreading throughout the West: recognizing the true nature of all phenomena . . . inside and outside, here and there, everywhere always. Staying in touch with the ultimate ground of being, recognizing the Absolute in the Relative.

As the Zen master Hakuin put it: “Pointing directly to the heart-mind, see your own nature and become Buddha.”

This true nature is beyond words, though of course we try to talk about it.

Henry Shukman wrote a beautiful book about it, *One Blade of Grass,* and he guest taught a month or so ago. He emphasizes its quality of love, certainly in the sense of the generous endless arising of all things:

> “Original love is the ocean, it’s been there all along.  
Finally there is no difference any more between us and it.  
And that is a great great blessing.”  
Henry Shukman

The Mahayana traditions generally do not ascribe theistic attributes to original nature.
In other traditions such as Christianity, some are explicit about this, such as Mother Julian of Norwich, "We are not just made by God. We are made of God."

Also in Hinduism, we find the core teaching of Tat Tvm Asi: Thou Art That: the union of the relative and the absolute.

You can find similar language in other traditions, such as nondual Advaita and other wisdom traditions around the world, including those of the indigenous first people. I highly recommend the writings and teachings of Adyashanti and John Prendergast.

There is often an emphasis on recognizing original nature in the present, in the "ordinary mind" of everyday life. You may have a recognition of the original nature of yourself in a dramatic episode, or you may have a simple sense of it in the space between thoughts, or in the airing out of the untangling of a knot of anxiety.

Both of These Tracks Support Both Kinds of Cessation

→ Key point:
  • The process of developmental change can lead to sudden qualitative shifts of consciousness . . . much as it can also lead to incremental, gradual growth.

  • Similarly, getting in touch with original nature can support gradual, incremental growth . . . much as it can also drop you into a sudden dramatic altered state, such as in kensho, satori, or what are called more generally self-transcendent experiences in which the sense of self falls away while all of reality shines forth in radiant perfection.

  • It is an error to equate the recognition of true nature with only sudden awakening, or to equate developmental change with only incremental healing and growth.

  • The two wheels of Bodhidharma’s cart support each other.

Is the cart of your own practice – your own engagement with healing and growing, with wisdom and love and happiness – resting on both wheels, or just one?

How might your own practice be more balanced? And perhaps tilt in the direction of one wheel for a while as a kind of correction?
If I may finish with a great Zen teacher, Dogen:

*Great is the matter of
Birth and death
Quickly passing, gone, gone
Awake each one, awaken
Don't waste this life*


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

OK, any questions?