

CHAPTER TWO

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

PART ONE

The Buddha's first insight was his complete opening to the reality of suffering. He saw with the clear vision-eye of Dharma that suffering is not caused by some aberration of birth or circumstances. It is not caused by bad karma, nor is it something from which we can escape if we just play our cards carefully. Dukkha is hard-wired into our brains. The Buddha's followers called this the First Noble Truth. After this first insight, he looked into the cause of suffering. We suffer because we desire - pure and simple. This became known as the Buddha's Second Noble Truth.

How can one live without desire? In *At The Feet Of The Master*, the young Krishnamurti says that "desirelessness" is one of the fundamental and necessary elements of a spiritual practice. He says:

There are many for whom the Qualification of Desirelessness is a difficult one, for they feel that they ARE their desires - that if their distinctive desires, their likings and dislikings, are taken away from them, there will be no self left.

Is it wrong to want to help others? Isn't human love, as it is expressed by most people, even platonic love, a form of desire? Is it unskillful to desire unity with God, or to be free from suffering through the liberation of Insight? Even the bodhisattva ideal of practicing for the sake of all beings is a form of desire, is it not?

While this question of desirelessness as the ultimate aim of our spiritual journey is ancient and can only be answered in the silence of each heart, the Buddha's Second Noble Truth has a much more narrow focus. His second insight refers to a specific type of desire. No one has ever put it more clearly than Gallway Kinnell in *The Still Time*:

I remember those summer nights
when I was young and empty,
when I lay through the darkness

wanting, wanting,
knowing
I would have nothing of anything I wanted –
that total craving
that hollows the heart out irreversibly.

Tanha is the Pali word for that total craving that hollows our heart out irreversibly. It is the “itch that makes us scratch,” to use Nisargadatta's marvelous pointer. Who among us has not suffered from the ache of desperately wanting what we can never have? God knows, I remember summer nights when I felt young and empty. The Buddha taught that tanha is the cause of suffering, and this is known as the Second Noble Truth. Tanha is not simple desire, be it healthy or unhealthy. It is desire that has become habitual. It is desire that has metastasized and become ravenous.

Words such as “ravenous” or “craving” may seem too extreme for those of us who have carved out normal functioning lives, who have created self-soothing patterns – safe stepping stones – that walk us through our days and get us safely to bed at night. But the Buddha's penetrating eye looked far beneath the surface of human patterns. Twenty five hundred years before Nisargadatta made his illuminating statement, the Buddha saw that we live with an itch that keeps us constantly scratching: a subtle restlessness that causes us to seek whatever self-soothing mechanism we can find, from reading a book to taking a sleeping pill in order to knock out our poor monkey brain.

In the previous chapter, the quote from Houston Smith nailed dukkha precisely. He called it “a pain that seeps at some level into all finite existence.” Smith continues with his description of tanha, calling it:

... a specific kind of desire, the desire to pull apart from the rest of life and seek fulfillment through those bottled-up segments of being we call ourselves. (It is) a desire for self at the expense, if necessary, of all other forms of life.

If dukkha is like a bone that has slipped out of joint, or a wheel that is off-center with its axle, tanha is the force that pulls the bone out of its joint. Christian myth tells us that Satan was a prince of the angels in Heaven. Some force or urge compelled him to separate from unity with all the angels to become Lord of his own kingdom in Hell. His urge to separate

“to pull apart from the rest of life” and to self-enclose was motivated by the insatiable desire of *tanha*.

The English word that comes closest to describing *tanha* is craving, but I also like Joseph Goldstein’s description of *tanha* as an “unquenchable thirst.”

The Buddha asks:

What is the origin of suffering? It is the craving which finds fresh delight in pleasure and lust. Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind are delightful and pleasurable: there this craving arises and takes root.

Forms, sounds, smells, tastes, bodily touches and ideas are delightful and pleasurable: there this craving arises and takes root.
Consciousness, sense contact, the feeling born of sense contact, perception, will, craving, thinking and reflecting are delightful and pleasurable: there this craving arises and takes root.

We think of our world as something existing “out there” that we inhabit, but the Buddha presents a radically different perspective. He says that *you* are the world. It is your mind that creates the world. Here is the way Hsueh Feng, an ancient Chinese teacher, described it: “Pick up the whole great earth in your fingers, and it’s as big as a grain of rice.”

Our own poets have understood this. Emily Dickinson says that your boundaries are as narrow or wide as your mind:

The brain is wider than the sky
For, put them side by side,
The one the other will include
With ease, and you beside.

The brain is deeper than the sea,
For, hold them, blue to blue,
The one the other will absorb,
As sponges, buckets do.
The brain is just the weight of God
For, lift them pound for pound,
And they will differ, if they do,

As syllable from sound.

The physical boundary of our world is experienced through sense contact and the feelings that arise from sense contact. The outposts of sense contact are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Through decades – the Buddhists say lifetimes – of forgetfulness, we have lost contact with the reality of the actual world that we inhabit. Through forgetfulness we have become prisoners of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind, all of which relentlessly seek a world that is, after all, completely colored, created and perceived by the mind in the first place. The inevitable and hungry child of forgetfulness is *tanha*. But there is an even darker side to that total craving that hollows the heart out irreversibly:

Due to sensuous craving, kings fight with kings, princes with princes, priests with priests, citizens with citizens; the mother quarrels with the son, the son with the mother, the father with the son, the son with the father; brother quarrels with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend.

Unquenchable desire causes us to take what does not belong to us. It whispers softly in our ear, “You deserve this because you have been cheated and left behind.” It also causes us to protect what belongs to us even if that means we have to kill the intruder. Unrequited desire is a slow-growing tumor that leads us to hate those who seem to have the universe on their side, and when it is left to grow in the dark garden of forgetfulness, *tanha* inevitably turns into envy. Understanding craving is the key to understanding the enmity that divides families, friends and countries. It is this enmity that leads to hatred and war. Who needs Satan in a world constantly scratching from the itch of *tanha*?

Sensual thirst

The Buddha divided *tanha* into three realms: sensual, temporal, and spiritual. Of the three, surely we understand sensual thirst most intimately. Our eyes are constantly wandering from object to object, comparing and contrasting. Some of us look for pleasant things that cause us delight: the beauty of a sunset, a painting, a photograph, the wondrous face of a child or the wise face of someone who has clearly lived life to its fullest. Others look for any object that proves that they are lacking or unworthy, “She is so thin! I am fat and ugly.” All this from eyes left unguarded.

As strange as it may seem, it is literally true that our eyes have a mind of their own. This, by the way, is one of the most helpful of the Buddha's insights. We constantly "fall" out of our eyes, fusing with visible objects. We *become* what we see, and if you doubt that, just spend a few moments noticing the activity of seeing. We either like what we see, dislike what we see, or more often than not, we are simply indifferent to it. Life lived solely on the sensual plane is described most darkly in a short poem I read in Miss Henry Roger's high school English class, over fifty years ago:

Too many people come into this world
And know no reason why they are born
Save only to consume the corn
The flesh and fish
And leave behind an empty dish.

We want to hear pleasant things: a pleasing voice, the lilting tones of a Native American flute, the soothing sounds of a waterfall. Remember the last time you were on a five hour flight with two screaming babies wailing and screaming murder? It sets the teeth on edge. We desperately want to push the offending object away. Our minds constrict in anger and, too often, some minds react in deadly rage. We want to taste delicious things, and we instantly cringe at horrible tasting food. We love to smell pleasant things, and we can become nauseated at certain smells. We love to be touched in sensuous ways, and yet the brush of a stranger's arm on the street can cause a violent reaction. Zen teachers speak, sardonically, of "this pleasure palace" which is made of eyes, ears, tongue, nose, body and mind.

The sixth outpost of our world-boundary is the mind itself. More than seeing, tasting, touching, hearing or feeling, we are addicted to our thoughts. The Buddha says that our ideas are delightful and pleasurable, and from this delight comes craving. How many of us are willing to admit how captivated we are by our thoughts? We will even cling to negative thoughts, regardless of how profoundly they hurt us, although we would prefer to think good thoughts about ourselves and others. One hundred times over, we are convinced that our thoughts are who we are. The idea that we can be free from the addiction of thinking is for most humans just this side of absurd, and yet one single thought can be a doorway to profound insight. The great Ch'an master Wumen says:

In an instant of thought, survey measureless eons;

The affairs of measureless eons are the very present.
Right now see through this instant of thought,
And you see through the person now seeing.

Beyond all cravings is the thirst for life itself. This is the thirst that connects every living form. Buddhism teaches us that a craving for existence is what brought us into human form in the first place. Most of us in the West tend to view our existence as an accidental event in nature, the result of the union of our earthly parents. Buddhism teaches that our birth is entirely non-accidental. We are here because some force or energy hungered, deeply, for physical existence. That something that craved incarnation existed eons before you and I found parents to provide us with this human vehicle. We will closely examine that something when we turn to the Buddha's profound teaching of the Twelve Nidanas. A fuller understanding of tanha also develops as we study the Twelve Nidanas.

From an amoeba to a dog, a fig tree to a dolphin, every living form craves existence. What life force does not cling to existence once it has found physical form? Years ago, I spent a few months in a small seaside village on the island of Crete and was amazed at the tenacity of the olive trees that grew on the mountain sides. They seemed to thrive in the most inhospitable terrain imaginable, taking root in the crags and crevices of solid rock. The gnarled olive trees grew almost perpendicular to the ground, but still they survived and bore fruit. How much the olive trees remind one of all sentient life. Everything struggles for its day in the sunlight.

Temporal thirst

In a sense, temporal thirst, the desire for everything that is worldly, is a step up the evolutionary food chain. In one who has gained the psychological capacity for delayed gratification – beyond consuming the corn – desire turns in the direction of the big ticket items of fame, money and power.

What would we not sacrifice, if only we had the chance to be famous? *American Idol* is the most viewed program on American television, and perhaps that says it all. In one short television season, a man or woman can go from complete obscurity to a recording contract and a successful singing career. In this age, where one appearance on *Oprah* can make you a world famous therapist, we witness time and time again the overpowering

drive of craving for public fame and success. No aphrodisiac compares with the adulation of a world at our feet.

Imagine having the money to fly in your own plane to your home in Aspen or your penthouse in New York City. Imagine never having to stand in line at a busy checkout lane in a packed supermarket because you can pay someone to do that, as well as having someone plan and prepare your meals. People with wealth live this way and think nothing about it.

For some, power is the most delicious fruit hanging from the tanha tree. It comes to those with the ability to wait patiently with unbroken intention. There is a picture of a high school student attending Boy's Nation in Washington D.C. He is standing in the White House Rose Garden, looking admiringly at President John F. Kennedy. Who is that young man? William Jefferson Clinton. Craving for power, money and fame can lead to fantastic worldly rewards, as we have witnessed in the many tragic stories of Hollywood stars who have lost their way, or politicians who have fallen so far. Worldly rewards do not compensate for the inevitable suffering caused by sacrificing one's soul at the altar of greed and craving.

Spiritual thirst

Krishnamurti says, "But there are some who forsake the pursuit of earthly aims only in order to gain heaven, or to attain personal liberation from rebirth." The very idea that there is something called spiritual thirst is a little surprising, isn't it? In truth, spiritual thirst sits at the top of tanha's food chain. Spiritual thirst is a craving for the rewards of the *other* world – profound calm, deep insight, and beyond that, immortality.

In Sanskrit, the word *siddhis* refers to spiritual powers, and the Indian scriptures warn against the trap that is inherent in developing siddhis such as the psychic ability to read the thoughts of others or to see into the future. Spiritual craving is the most subtle of the three thirsts and probably the most devious trap. This is why the Buddha wisely placed spiritual craving as the sixth and seventh fetter of the ten fetters that chain us to samsara. We get addicted to the fruits of meditation and stop the journey from the unreal to the Real.

Even Presidents and others with money, fame and power bow down before great preachers and spiritual teachers. Wise ones who become

teachers or masters, take a seat on an elevated stage and address large gatherings of adoring devotees. Imagine how awake one must be not to be caught in tanha's most subtle trap.

One of the great paradoxes in Eastern religion is the teaching that complete and total annihilation of craving for immortality is necessary for awakening. Our very desire for enlightenment creates the illusion that the awakened mind exists somewhere other than right here, in this very moment. If the desire for enlightenment is not spiritual craving, what is it? There is an Indian metaphor that resolves this dilemma. When you have a thorn in your hand, sometimes you need to use a thorn in order to remove the embedded one. You can then throw both away.

Carl Jung believed that each of us has an intrinsic urge for wholeness. Dr. James S. Grotstein, a psychoanalyst from Los Angeles, posits another hypothesis. He suggests that there is an urge for truth within the human psychological structure. Surely, if anyone ever manifested an urge for truth, it was the Buddha! But spiritual craving occurs when the truth urge, or Jung's wholeness urge, has been subverted by a deluded ego seeking even greater power for itself under the guise of attaining spiritual perfection.

Sometimes, I confuse spiritual thirst with sensual and temporal craving. It's easy to do. For example, at the time of his crucifixion, Jesus owned only the cloak on his back. As for the Buddha, he made daily rounds for alms. In contrast, consider the scarlet-capped, all male, Roman Catholic Cardinals who don their lavish robes and gather in magnificent palaces of glittering splendor. A visitor from another planet would be amazed and confused to witness the celebration of Christmas live on television from the Vatican. The contrast of a small babe lying in simple manger, surrounded by the opulence of a palace rich beyond imagination is mind-boggling. One would be remiss not to mention the ornate temples in Asia, filled with golden statues of Buddhas and thousands of monks in ochre robes, all male, in the midst of people barely able to feed their families.

And then there are the Protestant ministers, male and female, standing before a television audience of millions, waving their arms in the air while asking for and receiving mountains of money. These folks seem to be living proof that you can have your cake and eat it too. You can be

holy and still drive a BMW. This is not spiritual thirst at all – it is plain old sensual and temporal greed.

Psychological thirst

There is no word for psychology in Sanskrit or Pali, a fact that we must carefully consider. Consequently, it was impossible for the Buddha to speak or even think in a psychological language. Perhaps, for those of us who do speak in the language of psychology, it is necessary to add a fourth limb to the tree of tanha: the limb of psychological craving.

W.D. Winnicott, the brilliant English psychiatrist, sat with, played with, and came to deeply understand the heart of children. He saw that every child needs to be seen and heard. When a child looks into her mother's eyes and sees not herself, but a reflection of her mother's need, that little girl is locked in a room with no mirrors. That child will grow up constantly seeking a mirror to reflect her own existence. Winnicott says of the child looking into her mother's eyes:

When I look I am seen, so I exist.
I can now afford to look and see.

In today's world, self-reference is a universal condition. We mention the fact that we have a cold, and our friend has the flu; we say that we are busy, and they have twice as much to do. Sometimes two people conversing sound like two monologues dueling for supremacy, and, as the song goes, "Anything you can do I can do better." While it may seem humorous, there is a profound sadness behind the humor.

Psychological craving manifests as a constant need to find some reflection of ourselves in our environment. The question then arises: How can a child's need to be seen find validation in the Buddhist language of no self? Would the Buddha have assumed that a person with an adult body is automatically an adult? Surely this was the prevailing mind-set of all people in the pre-psychological world, not only in Asia but Europe as well. Would the Buddha have assumed that a person with an adult body had automatically put away childish things such as a child's need to be mirrored by a loving parent? The answer must be yes. A Buddhism that cannot bear the fact that the language of dharma must eventually

incorporate alien, Western psychological truths, may never truly take root in our Western soil.

Some questions about desire itself still remain. We seem to have concluded that *tanha* is “bad” desire, but does this mean that there is also “good” desire, like bad cholesterol and good cholesterol? Keeping in mind that the Buddha-dharma is *nondual*, it should come as no surprise that there is a wide gap between our view of desire and the Buddhist perspective. In the following chapter, we shall call on Mae West, of all people, as we explore this theme further.