
The Second Noble Truth

From "The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering"

By Bhikkhu Bodhi

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The Causes of Suffering

If we want to put a stop to suffering, we have to stop it where it begins, with its causes. To stop the causes requires a thorough knowledge of what they are and how they work; thus the Buddha devotes a sizeable section of his teaching to laying bare "the truth of the origin of *dukkha*." The origin he locates within ourselves, in a fundamental malady that permeates our being, causing disorder in our own minds and vitiating our relationships with others and with the world. The sign of this malady can be seen in our proclivity to certain unwholesome mental states called in Pali *kilesas*, usually translated "defilements." The most basic defilements are the triad of greed, aversion, and delusion. Greed (*lobha*) is self-centered desire: the desire for pleasure and possessions, the drive for survival, the urge to bolster the sense of ego with power, status, and prestige. Aversion (*dosa*) signifies the response of negation, expressed as rejection, irritation, condemnation, hatred, enmity, anger, and violence. Delusion (*moha*) means mental darkness: the thick coat of insensitivity which blocks out clear understanding.

The Buddha teaches that there is one defilement which gives rise to all the others, one root which holds them all in place. This root is ignorance (*avijja*). Ignorance is not mere absence of knowledge, a lack of knowing particular pieces of information. Ignorance can co-exist

with a vast accumulation of itemized knowledge, and in its own way it can be tremendously shrewd and resourceful. As the basic root of *dukkha*, ignorance is a fundamental darkness shrouding the mind. Sometimes this ignorance operates in a passive manner, merely obscuring correct understanding. At other times it takes on an active role: it becomes the great deceiver, conjuring up a mass of distorted perceptions and conceptions which the mind grasps as attributes of the world, unaware that they are its own deluded constructs.

In these erroneous perceptions and ideas we find the soil that nurtures the defilements. The mind catches sight of some possibility of pleasure, accepts it at face value, and the result is greed. Our hunger for gratification is thwarted, obstacles appear, and up spring anger and aversion. Or we struggle over ambiguities, our sight clouds, and we become lost in delusion. With this we discover the breeding ground of *dukkha*: ignorance issuing in the defilements, the defilements issuing in suffering. As long as this causal matrix stands we are not yet beyond danger. We might still find pleasure and enjoyment — sense pleasures, social pleasures, pleasures of the mind and heart. But no matter how much pleasure we might experience, no matter how successful we might be at dodging pain, the basic problem remains at the core of our being and we continue to move within the bounds of *dukkha*.