

Noble Path - From Not-knowing to Knowing¹

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(Translated and summarized by Radhika Abeysekera)

Part 2: Seeking the Cause and Cessation of Suffering

1. Seeking the cause of suffering, not-knowing (*avija*)

It is not enough to just understand and learn about not-knowing and knowing. We have to work at seeing where not-knowing is hidden. What if we can see this not-knowing resting in our mind or life, then can we not have the end of suffering? Yes we can; however, first we must know the Dhamma to identify where not-knowing is hiding.

Let us now try to investigate and recognize what not-knowing is so that we can see where it is hiding. We know that we are subject to decay and death, which implies we have not-knowing (*avijja*). For now, keep this fact aside and reflect on how we perceive the world. Let us examine how we see and experience the world with our consciousness.

When we see something, we consider that there is this object and that is what we see. Isn't this how everybody thinks? Yes. Humans, animals and devas all feel this way. Similarly, when we hear something we consider there is this sound arising from this object and that is what we hear. When we feel a touch of an object, for example a chair, we think that there is a chair and it is what we touch. When a thought arises in our mind about our house, we feel that there is a house, and that is what we think about. We perceive and experience the world through all our six sense organs in this manner.

Reflecting with wisdom on the fact that we are subject to decay death etc. and the way we perceive the world, it should be apparent that the way we perceive the world is false. According to the law of cause and effect, we know the root cause for decay and death is not-knowing. We also know that knowing (*vijja*) and death and decay cannot co-exist.

At present we believe “**What we see is what is there and what is there is what we see**”.

When we see a beautiful form we are immediately attracted to it. This is because we believe, “What we see is what is there and what is there is what we see”. We do not realize that in truth, what we see is an ever-changing aggregate of component parts that come together and deceives us as a desirable form. Later when we reflect and see the beautiful form again in our mind we believe that, what we see is what is there and what is there is what we see. We do not realize that these are just mind objects that arise from within our mind. In this manner we are deceived first when we see something, and later

¹ The terms *avijja* and *vijja* are usually translated as ignorance and wisdom. I have used the words not-knowing and knowing because these words arise from the word knowledge and because the word ignorance has a negative judgmental association in the West often associated with stupidity or lack of intelligence. The not-knowing (*avijja*) in this context is common to all beings.

when it comes into our mind as a memory and we think about it. We apply this to all six senses. As such we believe that:

1. What we see is what is there and what is there is what we see.
2. What we hear is what is there and what is there is what we hear.
3. What we smell is what is there and what is there is what we smell.
4. What we taste is what is there and what is there is what we taste.
5. What we touch is what is there and what is there is what we touch.
6. What we cognize is what is there and what is there is what we cognize.

When we hit two iron rods together we hear a ringing tone. We believe that what we hear is what is there, and what is there is what we hear. But where is the sound? It does not lie in either of the rods. As soon as it is heard it disappears. Later when we recollect it in our minds we believe that what we hear in our mind is what is there. We do not realize that they are just mind objects that arise from within. In fact the sound disappeared without a remainder the moment we heard it.

Let us take the example of taste. We taste this juicy mango and it is sweet. Later every time we think of the juicy mango our mouth waters. We crave its sweetness. We think it is really there. We do not realize that it is just a mind object that rises from within. We taste a lime and it is sour. Now later every time a lime comes into our mind we shun it. It is a lime so it is sour. We have made the image real.

All beings – animals, humans and even devas and brahmas think and believe in this way. However, decay and death are with us. We see it in our own lives. Therefore not-knowing is with us. Then we must investigate and see if the way we see and experience objects is real.

Is it possible then that this not-knowing is veiled in the manner we see and experience things? If what we are seeing is knowing (*viñña*) and real, then we should have *Nibbana* and there should be no decay and death. However, from our own life and experiences we know that death and decay are with us.

What I am saying now cannot be proved. It has to be deduced by your own knowledge and experience. All six of our senses, on contact, are being experienced in a way that we think is real. We now know that decay and death are with us and if this is so, then not-knowing (*avijja*) is with us. This investigative knowledge, that something is wrong with the way that we are seeing and experiencing this world, should arise within us. Somewhere within us ignorance is hiding. Something that we are experiencing from our six senses is false. This is how we are seeing things. We believe “**What we see is what is there and what is there is what we see.**” Then this seeing (experiencing) must be false. This is where not-knowing, ignorance is hiding.

The Dangers of Not-knowing (*avijja*)

This not-knowing or false view is very dangerous. As long as we see things in this manner, decay and death together with sorrow and lamentation will be with us. This view is why we have been traversing in this endless *samsara* for so long. This view can harm us more than an enemy harms an enemy. It can harm us more than the most vicious animal. If a poisonous snake bites us, we will die from snake bite just once. If we accidentally drink poison we suffer and die just once. But the effects of this false view and resulting mind object that arise in our mind (*nimitta*), at death, can be much more vicious. It can lead to rebirth in hell for eons of time. It can lead to suffering and painful decay and death in many many births.

However, we do not have to be afraid. Even a poisonous snake can be caught if handled in the proper way. Do not be afraid. This door that is so dangerous is also the same door that will lead us to the one path to freedom. As long as we view it the way we view at present, we will not be free from decay, death, sorrow and lamentation. If we can see the danger of *samsara* resulting from wrong view, then we will renunciate immediately. However, we do not see the dangers as it is veiled from our view by not-knowing. That is why we are heedless.

If a small child sees a poisonous snake he will not know that it is dangerous. He will stroke it, and pull it by its tail and even wrap it around himself because he does not know the danger. The snake will bite him and he will die of snake bite. The child died because of not-knowing. If this poisonous snake comes near us, we will not touch it because we know of the danger. The false view that is resulting from how we experience the six senses is even more dangerous than the harm done by this poisonous snake.

In life we are like the little child who plays with and fondles the poisonous snake. We are living in not-knowing. We have to see things the way they are. We have to turn this not-knowing into knowing. The Buddhas come to this world out of compassion to show us this danger and turn this false view to right view. Then, without believing “What you see (experience) is there and what is there is what you see (experience)” you will realize that you have opposing views both at the moment of seeing and later when it comes to mind.

In the Fire Sermon (*Adittapariyaya Sutta*) the Buddha together with a large number of monks observed a forest fire from a distance. Little insects attracted by the light and warmth of fire were drawn to the flames. The large forest fire sucked in the cold air which then arose into the night sky as hot air through the flames. The insects that got close to the fire were sucked in by the air current and burnt to death

The Buddha using this opportunity to encourage his monks to practice said that all is on fire. What is on fire? All six sense bases and resulting phenomena are on fire. Taking the eye as an example, the eye, the object seen (*rupa*), eye consciousness, contact and any feeling (pleasurable, un-pleasurable or neutral) arising from it are on fire. What are they burning with? They are burning with passion (*raga*), hatred (*dosa*) and dilution (*moha*) leading to craving, grasping, becoming, birth, decay, death, sorrow and lamentation.

The three realms of sense pleasures, form and formless in which we seek becoming are like an iron fence that is on fire. You do not then have to touch every rod of the fence to see if it is hot. They are all hot and aflame. If there are hundreds of thousands of iron rods in a fire they are all red hot and aflame. Everything that comes in contact with the fence is red hot and dangerous. You do not have to test it one by one. As dangerous as a flaming hot fire is this birth in any of the realms of existence.

The Enemy who comes as a Friend

I will tell you the story of the wealthy nobleman to illustrate how easy it is to deceive a person. There once was a very powerful nobleman. He was also well liked and had a large number of followers and well-wishers. He was very secure because of his power and large following.

However, he had one enemy who wanted to kill him. The enemy knew that he could not kill the nobleman as he was very powerful and had a large following who guarded and watched over him at all times. So he planned how to get at the nobleman.

The enemy decides to befriend the nobleman and come in the guise of a friend. He visits the nobleman and wishes him long life and informs him that he would like to work for him and take care of him. He then works and excels in everything he does. He gets up first in the household and goes to sleep last. Whatever duty is assigned to him he does it really well. He praises the nobleman and ensures that everything he says and does is pleasant and pleasing to his master. He never does or says anything to displease his master. He works really hard and diligently and before long wins the confidence of the nobleman. Soon he is invited into the inner circle of trusted friends. He can come and go as he pleases. He continues to make sure that he has the best interest and welfare of the nobleman. When he has won over the nobleman's trust completely he plans his death. One day, when the nobleman was sleeping, he creeps into his room like a shadow and cuts his neck with a sharp knife

The nobleman never recognized the enemy. So well did he disguise himself. His one motive was to kill the nobleman. He was an enemy when he wished the nobleman a long life. He was an enemy when he got up early and worked late. He was an enemy even when he complimented him and only spoke well of the nobleman. But the nobleman could not recognize him. Right through the deception up to the point of death he was the enemy. But the nobleman did not have the knowledge to see him for what he really was.

Effects of not seeing the Enemy (who comes as a friend) in our Lives

In the same way we do not see the enemy. Because of not-knowing we associate them and fondle and bring them close as loved ones. We do not see that this attachment can lead to birth in the realms of hungry ghosts (*pretha*) or the hell worlds for eons of time if these strong attachments enter our mind at the time of death. These people who are so

good to you and kind to you, at the point of death, can unknown to you and them, be an enemy. They can harm you much more than the enemy who slashed the nobleman's throat. It is because of this opposing view of "what we see is what is there and what is there is what we see that this image of our loved ones arises in our mind at death. It is because of this opposing view that grasping enters our mind at death as a mind object that results in becoming (*bava*). This is why the Buddha said form is deceptive (*mara*), feeling is deceptive, perception is deceptive, volitional formations are deceptive and consciousness is deceptive. In short these five aggregates together with grasping are deceptive. We are not seeing name and form as it really is.

We think of our possessions, our gold and silver ornaments with grasping at death and take rebirth in an unhappy plane. The cause of our rebirth in an unhappy plane is our grasping of our gold and silver. It was the way we saw our gold and silver at death. This view has done more harm to us than an enemy. But we do not see it as an enemy. It came disguised as a friend. Surely ornaments that will make us look beautiful and desirable are not an enemy. We think of some gold and silver at the time of death with grasping and take rebirth. If today you have people who abuse you and cause you pain and suffering that result in sorrow and lamentation the cause is birth. The cause of birth is becoming. The cause of becoming is this grasping at death (with false view) to mind objects that we think are real. It is this grasping at our possessions and loved ones that result in decay, death, sorrow and lamentation. Even if we are attached to a needle and grasp at it and it appears as an image (*nimita*) at death, it is capable of causing rebirth. Then this needle is an enemy that has come in disguise to bring birth, decay, death, sorrow and lamentation.

All beings in all realms think that what they see is what is there and what is there is what they see. All of these beings – devas, brahmas, animals, humans - cannot get rid of decay and death with this view. They do not know how to change this view even in a dream. They do not know because they cannot see it as false. You cannot be sunk in the mud and think of how to get out if you have been in the mud all your life. That is all that you know. You will not even try or dream of getting out of the mud. In the same way you cannot be sunk in decay and death and dream of getting out of it. That is all you know. This is all that you see and experience.

We are inside an egg. We cannot think outside this shell. The Buddha saw outside the shell. He saw that this world we perceive by our six senses, was dangerous and on fire. Whatever you see inside a fire is hot. You do not have to touch one rod and get burnt and then check the next rod and the next rod. Every rod in the fire is hot. We are inside the fire which has hundreds of iron rods. You do not have to test each of the rods by touching to see if it is hot. All the rods are red hot.

2. Seeking the Cessation of Suffering, Knowing (*vijja*)

Not-knowing (*avijja*) in short is: “believing that “what you see is what is there and what is there is what you see”. Because of this view, we do not see the Four Noble Truths. If you view the world like this you gather *kamma*. While you produce seeds (*gather kamma*) you will have the results (*vipaka*). This is the operation of the Law of Cause and Effect, the Doctrine of Dependent Origination or the Four Noble Truths.

We must look for the opposing view that “**what you see is not there and what is there you do not see**”. Then we will see the Four Noble Truths. Then not-knowing will turn into knowing.

Now we have a good understanding of Cause and Effect, Dependent Origination, the Four Noble Truths and the cause of suffering (not-knowing). We have to see cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) and the Path (*magga*). To do this we require:

1. Sincere Dhamma friends (*kalyana mitta*) such as Venerable Sudassana,
2. The knowledge of what is required to cultivate right view (listening to Dhamma talks).
3. Wise considerations or insightful investigations (*yoniso manasikara*).
4. The practice according to the Dhamma (*Dhammanudhamma patipada*).

These four are called *Sotapatti anga*, the requirements leading to the first stage of stream entry (*Sottapanna*).

Without over throwing not-knowing (*avijja*) we cannot break the links of Dependent Origination. Now we have to seek knowing (*vijja*) so that not-knowing will be conquered. If you have knowledge then the rest of the links will break automatically, instantly. It is just as in the example I gave of the gem we found in the talk “*Urgency of Practice*”. When we believed it was worth millions of dollars, craving, grasping, fear, anger, hatred and suffering arose automatically. However, the moment we knew it was worthless craving, grasping, fear, anger, hatred and suffering left automatically. It was the same gem. Just the view changed. The moment the view changed the quality of our mind changed. It happened automatically and instantaneously.

We have to cultivate the right view that “What we see (experience) is not there and what is there we do not see (experience).” This opposing view is knowing. This is the change that we require. However, first we require the wise consideration or investigative knowledge that leads to confidence (*sraddha*).

Then, we need to know the method so that we can cultivate this opposing way of seeing and experiencing. We have to cultivate right view. We have to let go all that is wrong and cultivate all that is right. All the links of the Dependent Origination will fall away when you have right view. You do not have to break the links one by one. When not-knowing is overthrown the rest will happen automatically. So let us find the right view.

Observing and Protecting the Mind

At the time of the Buddha there was a devotee in Savathi who was very confident in the Buddha Dhamma. He practiced generosity, virtue and meditation as a lay devotee. After listening to the Buddha he felt the urgency to practice further. Giving up the lay life he ordained and became a monk. Three teachers assisted him with his knowledge and practice. One monk taught him the discipline including the 227 rules that monks have to follow. Another taught him the Dhamma including the many discourses that he had to memorize and another taught him the higher teachings.

Before long the new monk was confused and discouraged. He thought it would be impossible to find the time to meditate with all the learning and memorizing he had to do as a monk. He decided to go back to lay life. At least then he had time to meditate. The Buddha heard about the new monk's decision and spoke to him as to the cause of his change of mind. Upon hearing of all the conflicting instructions and memorizing and learning he had to do as a monk, the Buddha asked him if he could just forget all of the instructions and just observe and protect his mind. The new monk agreed that he could do that with no problem.

This is what you too have to do. From today you have to observe your mind and protect it from false view by changing the way you see and experience things. Just learn this one thing. To change the opposing false view "**What I see is what is there and what is there is what I see**" to "**what I see is not there and what is there I do not see.**" This right view has to be experienced by all the six senses using the knowledge of the four great elements. A person who has achieved this view of life is known as an Awakened Being (*Arahanth*).

*Sadhu sadhu sadhu
May all beings be well and happy*

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