

Only Suffering That Arises

Comments from a retreat based on the Kaccangotta Sutta Sn 12.15
(abridged and edited)

“Only suffering that arises.” This is a phrase that shows up here and there in the Pali Canon.

It's not a big thing like the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path or Dependent Origination or any of these big lists. It's not like the enlightenment factors or any of that. It's just this little phrase. But in a way, it's more than those lists that we're so familiar with. This little phrase, if you look into the culture in which it arose - the culture of practicing monastics and enlightened beings - you realize that this phrase represented at least one person's discovery of nibbana, their epiphany, their moment of understanding the dhamma.

In reality, because it was passed around so much, it was probably more than one person. In the same way we have the phrase “All that is of the nature to arise is of the nature to cease.” It's the sort of typical understanding of a stream enterer, the epiphany they have. They're like, “Oh, wow, everything that I see arising and ceasing, it's impermanent.” And that's the breakthrough to the dhamma. That's the point of 'no going back'. You realize that everything is impermanent, and even those things that you've taken your whole life to be quite stable, from then on you see the world in a different way. You're changed. And in the same way, this phrase, 'it's only suffering that arises and suffering that ceases' is very in line with this understanding.

But how? How to process it? We know that enlightened beings have changed deeply, fundamentally, in how they view the world. They see it's only suffering that's arising and suffering that's ceasing. But how do we get there? As beings who have not yet had this epiphany, not yet had this breakthrough, not yet dispelled all of our ignorance, how do we get there? There's a measure of faith and wisdom that gets you to approach practice. And the practices that we're taught are meant to take us by way of that faith and wisdom to this understanding. How do we take the techniques that we are given and point them in the direction of this life-changing paradigm-altering shift? What techniques do I mean?

When you practice meditation, you probably won't be sitting there saying, “It's only suffering that arises. It's only suffering that ceases. It's only suffering that arises. It's only suffering that ceases.” (You can, that's a totally valid form of meditation. Some of my real strong moments of practice have involved a phrase or a mantra that has landed very strongly with me, spoken by a teacher that I have confidence in. I'm like, 'oh, wait, there's something here.' And I try to hold on to that understanding and watch what comes up to challenge it.)

You're probably going to engage in one of four basic meditation practices. The Buddha recommended these four meditation practices kind of universally for anybody who is working at getting firmly established in the dhamma and bringing their mind to maturity.

You can do body contemplation. Reflecting on the nature of the body in which we inhabit. This is sometimes called Asubha or unattractive meditation. You're recognizing the body just as it is and you're kind of pulling it apart and realizing it's not beautiful. So that's why we call it unattractive meditation.

You can be doing loving-kindness meditation. It's hard to understate how important this is for the mind. It buffers the mind and lubricates our mental activities. If we're cultivating ill will towards others, it's a double-edged sword; we're cultivating ill will that will harm ourselves as well. Friendliness meditation on the other hand brings a sense of kindness and friendliness to the mind.

We can be doing breath meditation, which the Buddha said is the foremost of those meditations that is calming and helps to still mental chatter.

Or we could be developing the perception of impermanence.

These four basic activities are what we call meditation. Each one of them deals with a different hindrance. We can alternate between them as a way of rounding our mind out, sanding off the sharp edges until our mind is more calm and more stable.

They're not the goal in and of themselves. They're to bring us to a place where we can understand deeper realities. Each one of them helps us deal with specific hindrances, specific blocks to understanding reality. They are not in and of themselves the reality. The meditation on unattractiveness is not to set up a paradigm or a new way of looking at the world where everything is unattractive, everything is gross, everything is miserable.

When you hear the phrase, 'It's only suffering that arises and only suffering that ceases', you might think, 'Oh wow, that's dark.' It sounds like it's saying everything is suffering. Many people think that's what Buddhists actually believe...that it's 'all suffering' (and especially Theravada Buddhists- we don't have all of the deities and the mandalas and all those colorful things to fall back on).

But that's not actually what we're doing. We do the meditation on unattractiveness not so that we can see everything is unattractive. We do it so that we can see truly all of the things that we've assumed are attractive, and are really kind of attached to them being attractive for the pleasant feeling that it gives us. We can separate ourselves from that. Because ultimately, deep down, it's a compulsion. We don't have a choice. We set up these ideas beforehand and then they act on us against our will at times of weakness. What the meditation brings us is not setting up a perspective, like 'It's all unattractive. It's all gross.' Instead we are letting go of the perception that it is all attractive and desirable..

We're not taking a fundamental standpoint. We're not establishing ourselves on a view. We're using that meditation to help open us to see what actually is. We don't normally look at the body in a sort of calm and yet critical way and say, 'What is it really?' It's stuff. If we look, we see unattractive stuff. It helps us deal with the fact that things change. Our bodies are not what we think they are, as attached as we are to them.

It's the same with Mettā. We probably get the idea that we're supposed to be friendly towards all living beings. Right? That's the 'goal.' No, actually, it's not the goal. You don't have to be friendly to all beings. You don't have to be friendly to a mosquito. Like, just don't be angry at it. Don't be aggressive towards it. At the point that you have no ill will towards the mosquito, the reality is: the mosquito kind of disappears. Right? Because it's "out there." It's only in your mind if you're attending to it. Otherwise, it's just off doing its own thing. That's actually a pretty enlightened perspective; to just let it do its own thing. Let it move fluidly through time and change and evolve and seek out what it wants to seek out. And if we can do that for a mosquito, we can do that to each and every one of the difficult people we encounter in life.

We're not setting up a stern perspective. We're not attaining to some new way of looking at things that all beings are essentially beautiful. No, we're letting go of our assumption that all beings are frustrating and abnormal and are out to get us. We're getting rid of all that. In doing so we attain to this openness.

The openness, the looseness, the friendliness is not a thing in and of itself. It's not a paradigm or a perspective that we are taking on. It's what happens when we drop perspectives. Mettā meditation facilitates that shift.

Now, the breath, we can totally sit here with the breath and just breathe in and breathe out. And if you get to a state of calm, even a state of pleasant abiding by meditating on the breath, you might think that this is what it's all about. This is nirvana here and now. Relaxation, peace. And yet it's not. Because the moment somebody slams something in the next room, you're like, 'Whoop! Oh!' And there goes your nibbana, it's gone. We weren't actually planting a flag and saying, "Okay, this, this breath, now that I have attained to a mindfulness of the breathing, I am safe from all forms of adversity and suffering." No, no, no... You've just calmed down a little. You've let go of a little bit of distraction. The real proof will be what happens when these distractions come back knocking at the gateway to your mind. Do they get back in? And how do we keep them from getting back in? Well, again the breath meditation is helping to facilitate an understanding.

Then there's the perception of impermanence, which threads through all of this. We assume that things are stable and they are, for the most part. Until they're not. We can look at the way that we make assumptions and we will see, 'Wait. This is not stable.' The clock on the wall is not stable. It's not a paradigm that we're taking on. We don't charge out into the world and say, "All things are impermanent! You! You there, you're impermanent! This car, this is impermanent! I don't need cars because they're impermanent! I know they will someday break down. So I walk!"

We're not taking on a new standpoint. This whole perception is more about opening us for when the car does break down. It's not that we rushed to it breaking down so that we could prove how impermanent it was. But when it does break down, we say, "yeah, things break down." When the body breaks down, we say, "It's been getting older all the time. I knew this was gonna happen. The wheels will fall off at some point." But what's happened is not that we've taken on this perspective, 'You're impermanent!... You're impermanent!... You're impermanent!...' We've taken on this perspective of looseness that says, when impermanence is knocking on the door, "I will accept; I'll answer, that's because things break down." We're opening the mind to try to let in this new perspective, that there is something quite different in these meditations, something that is hard to really quantify in a way that doesn't sound like it's mere philosophy.

What do you do when you sit down in meditation? You close your eyes and you're immediately aware that there's all of this stuff going on. You've just sat down, you've gone from interacting with the world and needing to process things and needing to be on guard... to sitting. If sitting was enlightenment in and of itself, this would really be quite an easy practice. But it turns out you sit down and the mind is still running around. Mind and body are attached, but they're not always doing the same thing. It takes time for that synchronicity between mind and body to be reestablished, for the mind to accept, 'Okay, now we're not doing things out there, we're just sitting.' Mindfulness of the body really helps this land.

If we looked at the mind, we would see thoughts: "Okay, there's this thing I gotta do, and okay, I gotta get the car into the shop and I've gotta get groceries for later. And okay, at 11 o'clock I'm gonna have to turn on the oven for lunch." And it seems like we are moving through time and space, but we start to practice mindfulness in the body, and we start to bring our mind back to the breath or bring our mind back to our posture and we realize we're not going anywhere. It's not going anywhere. Each thought is just arising and ceasing in the very same place.

Gradually this dichotomy starts to arise. We start to see that there's really two things here, just these two things. One is: there is 'outside.' Two is: there is 'suffering'.

For the first, "There is this external reality." The clock behind me, the wall, the floor, this computer, there are things out there that are impermanent, they're flowing, they're moving. And curiously, these things are not suffering. Now we might not realize it right away, and again, this sounds like the opposite of what I've been saying, but think about it.

Take this little meditation timer. If you were to set it up in front of you and just look at it for a while, where is the suffering? Does it look like it's suffering? Does it look like it's having an existential crisis? "Why am I a timer? What is my function in the world? I am almost four years old! I'm over the hill. Is this what I wanted to do with my life? Oh, oh..." Even when it's vibrating, is it suffering or is it just vibrating because it's got an electrical current going through a little motor? The longer we look at it, and even as its battery goes dead and it gathers dust and it gets water splashed onto it and it dies, it never stops being just a timer. It never suffers. The same can be said for the wall, for the clock, for a cup, for water flowing in a stream. These external things are never suffering. So where is the suffering? Where is the suffering occurring?

That's why I say there comes to be an understanding of these two things being separate. Because even when the external things don't suffer, we find that there is suffering. We're feeling it, we're spinning with it. We're toppling end over end with it. It's arising and it's ceasing. But where is it arising and ceasing? Well, it turns out that in addition to the stuff, the outside, there is this internal environment. We don't see this until we stop spinning around physically out in the world. We don't see this until we stop moving and start meditating. But then we realize "There is this internal environment." And it turns out that in this internal environment there arises something that we call suffering.

There are external things. When the mind comes in contact with the external thing, the mind tries to make it into a tangible thing, a permanent thing, a reliable thing. A definable thing that says, 'this is a timer, this is my timer. This is a working timer.' All of these are perfectly normal and acceptable definitions. Except when they're not. When somebody else walks off with this timer, it's not really my timer anymore. When it gets water splashed on it, it's not really a working timer anymore. When it gets caught under a stack of boxes and gets smashed, it's not even a timer. None of the definitions work anymore. But where does the suffering arise? Again, the suffering arises in the place where those labels were attached to it. Those sometimes-right-sometimes-wrong labels. By definition, the suffering is arising in us. And again, if I put a label on this that says, "This is my meditation timer," and then someone is watching me with my meditation timer, and they watch me as it slips from my hand and falls and breaks, do they suffer? No, because they didn't have that, 'Mine' label on it. They didn't have any expectations. They probably don't feel anything about my meditation timer, broken or not.

That really shows us that it's not merely suffering. It's personalized suffering. It's our definition; It's our misperception; It's our suffering. So now with this foundation we're starting to meander our way towards this epiphany, towards the great understanding of the Dhamma. This epiphany cannot happen on its own. It cannot happen in a vacuum. We have to do the meditations. We have to consider unattractiveness. We have to consider friendliness. We have to consider letting go of distraction and

paying attention to the breath or the body. And we have to reflect: things aren't permanent. There is no abiding self in these things. We have to open the mind.

In time, we've settled and we start to see these two realities. This external reality that is not suffering, that is just following physical laws no matter how we feel about it; and this individualized, personalized environment where we're trying to make sense of things. We're trying to own things and rely on things and be satisfied with things, and we're failing, but we realize: that which is arising and ceasing is not the external world, rather it's our internal world. This paradigm shift is a groundbreaking change in how we relate to perception. All that is arising and ceasing is fundamentally suffering because the world is different than our perceptions of it and always will be.

As we sit to meditate and a thought arises and then a thought ceases and a thought arises and a thought ceases, we can know: This thought brings with it suffering simply because it's not reliable, simply because it has no effect on the actual reality. When we have a feeling, a sensation, a perception, or when a habit starts to play itself out in the mind, anything that arises, we can know as it arises, "This is suffering." The thought is personalized, the mind is creating it, and it's trying to overlay it on the world in which I live, but it's doing so at its own peril because this definition can't work indefinitely. This definition doesn't actually match the thing in reality.

We're not trying to plant ourselves in this perception, "There's only suffering that arises, there's only suffering that arises, there's only suffering..." This is not what we're doing. Instead, I invite you to use your meditations and your sitting and walking as a way of opening up to what could possibly be this epiphany, this understanding. Open up to the reality that maybe all of the things that are arising and ceasing, all of the thoughts, all of the feelings, all of the sensations in the body, all of this is nothing to be latched onto. Experiment with seeing that as part of the external – as things that just come and go based on conditions, things that will never match whatever labels we put on them.

If we say, "Oh, this is good. This means my meditation is going good." Or we say, "Oh, this is mettā, this is great. I gotta hold onto this." Or we say, "Oh, finally I get that it's unattractive. I've had this great dhamma understanding," anything that comes up simply by virtue of the fact that it came up, we can know that it will cease. We know that it's arising and ceasing, therefore if we latch on it will become this personalized experience of suffering. We don't have to do anything else. Just knowing that much allows us to detach from it, allows us to separate from it.

We don't have to make anything of it. We know that whether or not we want it to happen, this internal experience of trying to make sense of things has been preconditioned. If we don't make anything of it, if we see it as it's happening and we know, "Okay, yeah. That's a thought that's arising. That doesn't have to be chased. It's suffering. Oh, that's a feeling. I like that. Or I don't like that. Or I don't care about that. And that perspective, that bias, that too is suffering, I don't have to make anything of it."

We can see that when we allow that to happen, not planting ourselves, opening up to this as a possibility, maybe there's coming to be less and less of that going on in the mind. It's only arising because we've assumed that somewhere in our body/mind complex there's going to be a good thought, there's gonna be a good perception, there's gonna be a good feeling. We want samadhi, we want good feelings, that's why we're doing the meditation, right?. But what if we turn it around? What if we say "No, if it's arising and ceasing, it can't possibly satisfy me. It can't possibly be good. It can't possibly be stable or worth clinging to." We get closer to a place where the mind accepts that the only real stability

is in not creating this personalized reality to begin with, that things already have their own reality. Rather than trying to tell this reality what it is, we can open up to what it actually is. We can begin to perceive what reality really is by letting go of our labels and our feelings and our perceptions.

We're opening the mind by just simply perceiving, simply knowing, accepting, receiving the reality in front of us. When we do this, when we actually manage to just observe, to pay attention, to receive, to empathize, we can check to consider 'is there suffering or has this personalized experience of suffering not arisen' in that instance.

If we can start to see it, then maybe we can start to find the causes and conditions for this new way of being in the world to arise. With that goal, let's meditate now.