

2003-01-05: Four Noble Truths

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SPEAKERS

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So Happy New Year, everyone. And I'm aware that coming down here that it's been one year now since we've been here. And it was a year ago, the first Sunday of last January, that we came down here and had our first formal Sunday sitting and I gave my first Dharma talk. So it's been a wonderful year, this last year and I thought, both because of what we talked about last year, and also because it seems like a nice thing to talk about beginning of the year, and maybe always talk about it is to talk a little bit about the Four Noble Truths, which was a topic for last last January. And in thinking about this very important theme in Buddhism, I'm reminded that all of the Buddha's teachings can or could be summed up in a very simple expression. If you cling, you'll suffer. And if you don't cling, the suffering will go away. And the word for suffering is dukkha. And it's translated many different ways into English by different translators. And the one I saw recently was discontent. So if you have discontent, if you claim you'll have discontent of some sort, and ease is another one. If you cling, you'll have unease beat will be uneasy. If you claim you feel unsatisfactoriness if things are unsatisfactory in some way, if you claim you have misery, if you claim you'll have grief, limits, grief, sorrow and limitation. And it's interesting to word it that way. To say if if you cling Then you'll have suffering. As opposed to saying, If you suffer, then you'll be then that's because of your clinging. Wherever there's clinging, there'll be suffering or some sort of other and all of you have your own special varieties that you your favorite types. And, and clinging then also there's many different ways of translating the word clinging. There were just tons and tons has literally means thirst, which has a very kind of, you know, physical feeling to it, you know, me thirsty, you kind of drive you know, if you're really thirsty, can you really want to desperate you kind of uses a fixation perhaps and by taking care of that. And so there can be his mental thirst. This clinging or craving, a sense of groundedness a sense of compulsion. So if you're compulsive, you'll suffer. If you're driven, you'll suffer. If you crave you'll suffer. If And then there's a Converse things to cravings. If you resist, you'll suffer. If you hate, you'll suffer. So, if you cling a lot, you'll suffer a lot. If you're clinging is great is great, you'll suffer your suffering will be great. And if your clinging is small, your suffering won't be small. So that's it,

apply it to your life as you wish. So, the Buddhist teachings can be subsumed in a sense under these two categories, to focus on suffering, and to focus on the release from suffering. And I read recently, an article an article by a psychotherapist who argued that in American culture, the value of suffering is undervalued that he thinks that suffering is actually very important when you suffer in the sense that if you avoid it at all costs, if you try to recoil from it and escape from it, you're not going to do then you're not going to not likely do the work of understanding your suffering deeply. And really seeing it for what it is. And so he being a psychotherapist, he talked about the tremendous emphasis now on medication in the world of psychotherapy, which is kind of skyrocketed in the last 15 years. And argued at least he argued that sometimes people have the false assumptions that there's a cure for a mental suffering. And if you have, if you have that medicine here, that pill, you've gotten the cure. And he said, that's kind of sometimes certainly the medication is very helpful, but it's not the cure. More often than not, it says that there is some kind of something deep below the suffering that sometimes we can attend to and learn from. And the Buddha would say that your suffering has it as its root, some kind of clinging. And if you're if your attitude towards suffering is I don't want to get close to it. I don't want to pay attention to it. Give me a spiritual practice that takes me away from it. That gives me bliss and joy, then it can be a kind of myopic spiritual life or unwise life. Because the forces the root of clinging, the route, the tendency to that is unattended to it was fascinating at this last retreat. There was a lovely woman there who had spent over two decades in a spiritual tradition to actually become a teacher in the tradition. That was one of the teachings was people don't have enough joy. So what we to do is to focus on on meditations that bring a lot of joy. And she had developed a tremendous capacity to sit in meditation and bliss out. So you can go into this great happy states and great light and kind of dissolving the body. And just, it was really great. She was really good at it. And, and she was so happy to be at the retreat because she said, I'm finally ready to face life as it actually is. And, and to really see you know, not not to escape into that place of joy, but really see the places of clinging of holding to really see where the discomfort is, to see the way in which I've recoiled from really being there for the suffering of the world and seeing it for what it is. So here's a woman who really found value as it's like a therapist talked about somehow stopping and being present for our suffering. And that's the injunction. Are they the encouragement In the first noble truth, which is, study your suffering, get to know it, realize what it is. And it's not meant to be kind of heavy, dark or morbid or depressing. The beautiful thing I believe, for many people who really take on the Four Noble Truths is that they become better and better at recognizing suffering, that they get lighter and lighter about it as they get better and lighter and happier. And you know, that's so because as we study our suffering, get to see it, then we start seeing the root causes of it. We start seeing the clinging, the craving, the thirst thing that goes on, and one form of craving, or thirsting or resistance is a very judgement about suffering being there in the first place. So if we're getting heavy about our suffering, If we're getting oppressed by it, that itself is another form of suffering that the Four Noble Truths are supposed to clarify and free us from. Isn't that great? So the whole thing whole system is a self correcting system, where you actually get lighter and lighter, the more you study your suffering. Makes sense. That's an important point. Otherwise, it's kind of dour. And so I told myself, I was in Safeway here the day with my son, my four year old son, and he started his thing about wanting,

wanting one thing and I don't think it really works to tell him you know, more you want, the more you'll suffer.

But there he was wanting one thing and all we need to do is get milk so I was like, you know, let's go to the milk place and get the milk and leave because Safeway is not a kind of place that you normally would choose to stay in. But the dairy were and, and there's been a pattern of having this wanting. So I told him I'll tell you a story. You'd like to hear a story but a little troll. He kind of looked at me odd place tell a story. I also Safeway okay? And this is a little wanting troll teeny little wanting troll. And, and there was a little boy came along, and he said the boy up and he said, not my son's name is Tor knock Taryn.

Often he likes often he likes the part of the stories. I think he caught on

And so So I said to you, he was outside the store and this boy came to the store this little wanting to jumped in his mouth. And the boy got into the store. He just kept wanting things everywhere wanting, wanting, wanting. And finally his mother realized what had happened and went in there and pulled out like a wanting troll. And then and then the boy was much happier.

And I had the very strong impression that he did not appreciate the story.

Maybe in 20 years, I'll tell him a story again. Maybe then. So the willingness to stop for suffering, the willingness to look at it and be with it, and not to and to do it to realize willing to stop for it. Because you realize the value of stopping for it. If you don't really, there's no you don't see the value of stopping for your suffering. Maybe there's not so helpful, I don't know. But But if you really see the value of stopping for it and looking at it, and one of the values is a secondary value in that, what is the relationship we have to our suffering? Do we suffer more because we suffer? And many of us do we judge the suffering, you know, oh, this is embarrassing that I'm suffering or this is terrible, I'm suffering or I hate it. I need to hold it a distance means to shut down. I need to do something we do something in relationship to our suffering. And if we realize how important that can be to stop the suffering so we can kind of see what is our secondary relationship we have to her what's the relationship we have to it? clarify that it won't make our suffering go away. But it'll make it a lot easier to suffer. And there are some times when people come to me to talk to me about their suffering. And sometimes it can be very severe, sometimes very difficult. And then people are very depressed, or something. And it's not always clear to me that I know what to say to them what's helpful in terms of helping them with a primary problem. But what are then we'll focus on with them is what is their relationship to that primary problem? And often enough, the relationship they have to it is, is really important. And if they can clarify that, then they're not going to be unhappily depressed. But but they're going to be much more ease about it. So they're not you know, so troubled by it. Grief is another one, you know, a lot of complications we have towards grief when we have deep grief. There are extra there are complications. So what is the relationship we have to it? Part of the value of stopping for suffering and

other value is within we can kind of begin to kind of looking behind the suffering and seeing how it works. What's really going on? How what kind of suffering, is it? Are we suffering because we don't want things to be the way they are? Are we suffering because we want things to be the way they are, but they're changing. What are we clinging to? What are we holding on to? So in the second noble truth, oh, the word noble is interesting. Because there's one scholar that I like a lot to translate it translates the word as the ennobling truths. And I like that a lot because the whole function of the Four Noble Truths, they're not like the truths, you know, the great truths, the great, you know, they're those truths which have, which help in the process of becoming free. Those truths which are helpful for becoming ennobled. Attending that dignity of being someone who is become liberated to free become released from their clinging and holding. So, they have a function the Four Noble Truths and by translating by by the word ennobling, it points to the function they have to a nobleness. So, this, so, the noble truth of suffering. So, it is just simply say that, you know their suffering, you know, some people will get kind of those Buddhists. But if you say the noble truth of suffering, oh, there's something there. What is that? And then there's the noble truth of the cause of suffering, which is a second noble truth. And, and it's very simply said to be thirst to not craving. But then the Buddha talks a lot about what is it we cling to what's a form of clinging and craving

One of the very common forms of clinging is clinging to pleasure, to comfort, to ease to clinging to sensual delight. And many people who have addiction problems are often confusing pleasure with happiness. And so they're pursuing this kind of addiction, which is another word for tough enough for this thirst. And so there's, you know, attachment to pleasure or conversely, the resistance to discomfort, which drives some people into suffering. And we see that a lot on retreats, where retreats are not always comfortable. So what do you do? uncomfortable when you leave the retreat, you can start back some people fantasize about going to Tahiti, you know, anything to get away. Or some people get angry and frustrated and take it out on themselves or take it out on others but there's an another humbling way of connecting to suffering and no bloody way of connecting to our aversion or resistance to really see it to be with it there's also the clinging or craving to what's called becoming and becoming is includes things like ego enhancement you know have been John Travis gave a beautiful talk last week on partly on the suffering around beings self importance and the special some point you know, I'm really special you better notice how special I am how important I am. And then there's the opposite suffering of not wanting to be seen. Not wanting to be special wanting to be invisible and clinging to that when am I you know, for example, for me a little bit is not so much anymore but still I think I suffer from this is I don't like to wear t shirts that have anything on them. Because I don't want to be anybody. You know, you know, I don't want to I don't present myself some way. And my son loves to wear t shirts with something on it. Because he really wants to see finds it happy and joy joyful. And, you know, so I'm a little bit attached to unbecoming to not becoming the non existence of it. And, you know, it's we cling to ideas of who we think we need to be, and we suffer. we cling to ideas of who we shouldn't be. And we suffer. And this plays itself out in all kinds of situations where we have an idea we're trying to measure ourselves against. We have something that happens inside of us that we feel is wrong. And then it's all too common to set to have a war within us between that part of Which is we don't like. And that part of us we think is supposed to be happening. And we

certainly see that a lot in meditation, where someone thinks I'm supposed to be in peace, but really, I'm agitated. I'm supposed to be with my breath. And really, I'm restless. And so there's this tension that gets created between what's really going on. And the idea of staying with the breath or staying calm or whatever. And it can be kind of fighting ourselves. And I've seen it over and over again, people fighting with aspects of themselves, this is not good. This is not right, how to get away from it, to stop it, have to crush it, they have to destroy it. And part of the beauty of mindfulness is we don't find ourselves. But we turn the attention around and bring our attention to that which we're fighting that's which we are opposed to. And then can we have an ennobling presence towards that which we find difficult within us? And perhaps by doing that, Letting the difficulty of it disappear. story I love is a friend of mine some years ago who told me that he had a dream of holding a poisonous snake by the neck so it couldn't bite him. He was in dream he was a failure, lethal snake. But he won't let go of the snake. But you know, he like oh, but the neck would be free enough to swing around and bite him. So he didn't know what to do. He was going around holding it wanting to let go but and finally he did like over in the dream. Anyway, when you let go of it, the snake vanished.

So, letting go, what are we holding on to what are we clinging to? And why are we clinging? What's the value of that clinging has for us and then that often has some to do with safety and security, often with a sense of self. Often with our Ideal so we cling to what what do we think we need to have in our life. And you can see the lawyers of the mind coming into play around when you come up against the edge of possibility of letting go of some clinging. Something we're holding on to, oh, I need to cling because I need to claim that's how I get what I need in life. That's how I protect myself. That's how or what's wrong with me clinging you know, good old clinging, you know, it gives me good energy and vitality. And you know, it's great to have that vitality and sense of aliveness when I have a really good clinging bout. And so there's all these reasons that come into play. And so it's interesting to look at that, you know, what, what are the arguments you have for why you can't let go of clinging? The Buddha said, nothing whatsoever is worth clinging to. What do you say? And then, but not not, not to Say that you're wrong, but I would encourage you to have that discussion with the Buddha. You know, really explore why is it that you think clinging is worthwhile if you do, it's common enough. And one of the interesting things about clinging in all its forms, it can, it can have a kind of self fulfilling the right word self propelling quality. Where clinging, evokes more clinging or clinging helps us become blind. To the suffering of itself. For example, you clinging you really want some beautiful objects and nice thing. It's pleasant to have wonderful, nice fantasies about it. And so we're seduced by the pleasantness of the object of clinging and we don't really feel the cost of the cleaning the suffering in the cleaning the cleaning Often outwardly directed, resistance is sometimes outwardly directed and cents away from awareness itself. And so because we're so fixated on the object we're paying attention to, we don't notice the cost of clinging or resisting itself. And one of the reasons why I think we can say with some confidence, if you cling you will suffer is because clinging in and of itself is painful is a form of suffering. And it'll produce more suffering tends to produce more suffering down the line. And then there's clinging to unbecoming is the technical term, not becoming which is wanting things to be different, wanting things to go away, pushing things away, wanting not to exist. So it's fascinating they both have clinging to existence and claiming to know existence is a form of suffering

that drains our energy drains our vitality ultimately. The third noble truth is that if you stop clinging, you'll stop suffering. So there's thirst is suffering, the cause of suffering. And then suffering will end when you stop clinging. And it's that simple. And if you let go little bit, Arjun cha said if you let go a little bit, you have a little bit of happiness, or peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace or happiness. What's the opposite of suffering?

When non suffering what else what's the opposite of suffering except Edie's peace sorry, openness, serenity freedom sorry, Joy sorry, contentment emptiness surrender, release

non resistance sorry, fluidity

sounds good to me. So the expression you know that the very simple thing that if you let go of your clinging You won't suffer. The ending of clinging is the ending of suffering. Sounds like a pretty simple statement. But as the answers you gave, it actually opens up to a really wonderful depth and Demet really wonderful dimension of human life. And the tendency is not to define it in positive terms, even though like many of you had positive terms for it, because then the tendency is for people to cling to that. And either they don't have it to cling to it or measure themselves against it or I'm not good enough because I don't have that serenity or whatever. Or if they have some experience, some experience of calm or peace or something, very common people to cling to that hold on to that in some way. Hold on to Grinch there and become brittle or hold on to it when it's gone away by holding on to the memory or whatever all kinds of things. in relationship to it. And the ennobling truths in that being a process of continually continual reflection is to always be looking at where's the clinging where's the release from it and not to settle any particular state as being a hard this is it. Always be willing to do this reflection over and over again.

But the experience of release experience of release from clinging, I feel is one of the most sublime and beautiful things that a human being can experience. And small release maybe doesn't feel that sublime or wonderful. But when you start realizing how pervasive clinging functions in our lives, and you get a sense of when the pervasive Have it the subtlety of it begins to fall away. It's really one of the most amazing things. The most amazing thing perhaps. And one of the ways to get the sense of how pervasive cleaning is, is to meditate. And, and watch your thoughts. And see if you can control your thinking. See if you can stop thinking. And most of the compulsion to think comes with a form of clinging. That can be thinking without clinging. But if you can't let go of your thinking, and rest peacefully, because you pulled back into your thoughts, so you kind of drift pulled off into thinking about something obsessed, fixated on it. Then there's clinging and often as we go through our daily life We're not so subtly sensitive to the train the flow of our thoughts to see how even our thoughts are being propelled or directed or held in place, fueled along by a little bit of holding on to them, fixating on them, thirsting there, that's going on. What is it like when thinking itself is not characterized by any kind of clinging. So that maybe is trying to give you an indication of how subtle that can be. It's not just simply not, you know, no longer clinging to what, you know, something large and obvious. So, then

there's the last of the four noble truths, the noble truth of the Eightfold Path. And I like to think of this as this way that the first three statements are very simple. A child could understand them. Maybe suffering causes suffering and the ending of suffering. But even though they're very simple statements, it's very hard to do thoroughly completely, to really have it penetrate all the different corners and recesses of our minds psyche. And so the Buddha then offered a path that supports that happening, a path that lays the foundation, so that the attention or intelligence can go as deeply as possible. And to to, to figure it out the places of holding so it so we can find the deepest wellsprings of peace and happiness. It's possible for human being And so there's a full path and becomes kind of the, the template or the kind of general guideline for someone who, following the Buddhist path or you are engaged in these things, reflecting on these things, working with these things, practicing with these. And I like to think of looking at this at the Eightfold Path that the Buddha mentors to us, all our intelligence, all our intelligences. When we engage in the path, you're not expected to kind of you know, you know, check out you know, if you know, what it is called. Drop or ignore some of your intelligence in order to practice which some people seem to think they need to do. And we have many different forms of intelligences and they certainly cognitive intelligence processing elements of logic There's the intelligence of emotions, which Daniel Goldberg gold, Goldman talks about. And there's kinesthetic intelligence, different forms of intelligence. You're supposed to use, use whatever intelligence you have, you don't have to be intelligent to practice. But you all have some intelligence. Right? Yeah, otherwise you wouldn't have found yourself here today. You managed to get your clothes on and get here. So everybody has some, you know, everybody with you with important things to use whatever you have.

And, and use it for the purposes of becoming peaceful, for the purposes of finding where the clinging is, and seeing how you can relax it, let go of it. And so then, because that's the purpose, there is then a corrective quality to using your intelligence because some people, for example, have a lot of cognitive intelligence. They think A lot in analyzing what's going on. And that can just keep a person disconnected and keep person kind of, you know, agitated and not really settling deep way. But if you're using that analytical intelligence in order to help you become peaceful, I think there's a self correcting quality there you realize its limitations. And when you realize its limitations, you'll naturally let go of it, soften it. The analogy that I like is that of using sandpaper. You know you if the wood is really coarse, first you use coarse sandpaper. And then you've kind of gotten as far as the coarse sandpaper will go, you get a little bit finer sandpaper and you get the wood even smoother, but then that next little bit lines and then you do a finer and finer one until finally you're just using a little piece of cloth. So the same thing with our our set That we need to use, you know, the coarsest intelligences that we have initially at certain points. But then we also have to have the wisdom to know when to let go of it and use something more refined and finer and finer. So, the first two aspects of the Eightfold Path have a lot to do with using your thoughts and thinking that part of your intelligence and the first one is having what's called the right view. But that's also seems kind of strange to people right view there's a right and wrong view and those Buddhist think they know it, and whatever, you know, it's like he was like, you know, some creed. But remembering it's the right view, for the purposes of ennobling ourselves with purpose for the purpose of setting ourselves free. So what is the what is the view The

viewpoint that helps us set us free. And the viewpoint that the Buddha said helps set us free is to begin understanding our life, from the point of view of the Four Noble Truths to actually take an interest in suffering, taking interest in what's the cause of that suffering, taking an interest in letting go of it, that cause it's not easy to really understand where the clinging is always, sometimes it's obvious. And sometimes it's very hard to understand where the clinging is, you know, your suffering, you kind of look at it and look at and look and you can't really see what am i clinging to? It's really hard. But he has to be interested in exercise. So I have the viewpoint take on the view, or take on the perspective. I'm going to study this and get to know it. The second one is to have rightly directed thinking, to have your thoughts or your intentions directed in certain in certain direction that's helpful. So it is a kind of channeling and choosing what you're going to be thinking about. So for example, if it's not very helpful to be day night thinking about the stock market, I don't think that's gonna help too many people become free. Or there's all kinds of trains of thought, directions of the mind the takes that aren't that conducive to helping us become free. So can you choose to let your mind go in useful directions? And there's a number of ones the Buddha gave, I don't remember the whole list right now, I don't know if maybe someone here remembers the list. But one of them, I think, was thoughts, of relinquishment, thoughts of letting go of thoughts of renunciation, to have your thoughts and direction of what can I let go? You know, to have that in your mind. Not to be, you know, an aesthetic about it, not because you need to kind of do it blindly, or because it's good to be Not have things, but what is it that you can let go of that helps you become simpler enough that you can begin looking deeply. If you're always thinking about the stock market, maybe you need to relinquish that concern, at least for a couple hours a day. You know, so you can kind of focus your attention to look deeply to sit and meditate, for example. So it have thoughts, but what can you let go of? What can you simplify?

both internally, maybe, maybe externally, it's one of the things that Buddha encouraged. The other is thoughts of loving kindness, thoughts of love, to have the direction of your mind, be in the direction of love or kindness, kindness towards yourself, kindness to the people around you, the world around you. So to choose that as a direction for the thinking mind to take and then there's a third one I don't remember What it is so that's kind of using your your, your thinking capacity, the first two. The next three has to do with your actions what you do in the world, your behavior and it requires a lot of discernment. Having right action, your ethics, your behavior. To live a virtuous life, it's very hard to have the sensitivity to go deep and study or clinging. If you're living an insensitive life, and to intentionally be transgressing the precepts to be killing people or other beings to be stealing, to be lying, to be harming other people through your sexuality, to harming yourself by getting intoxicated. It's very hard if you do those things, to develop the deep sensitivity requires to sense and feel our way into the deepest cleaning we have. So, you So, if you want to follow the ennobling path, you would then look at these you know the precepts and live by those precepts. Right Speech, very helpful. If all you did for a week or for a year for you know, whatever is completely track why you say what you say? You would open up deep, deep insights into what makes you tick. What makes you work what you cling to? Why do you say what you say? And the Buddha encouraged us to talk, speak with sensitivity. So, with kindness, don't be harsh in your speech, don't be Don't lie. Don't gossip, things like that. Then there's a right livelihood. To have a lively which is many of us spend much of our days Working to have a work

or have a source of livelihood, that is in harmony with the ennobling path. So again, look at it from the point of view of sensitivity. Don't do kind of activities, that you have to be somewhat insensitive to the suffering in the world in doing those activities. And the Buddha gave a particular list but that's for you to figure out what, what, what list works for you. But the Buddha was very clear, that do not be engaged in trading, trading of weapons, anything having to do with weapons, don't be alone, that kind of work. Don't be involved in the trade of alcohol, drugs and poisons. The poisons back in the old days meant, you know, poisons for people and kinda like a weapon and don't be involved. professions involve killing. So being a butchers considered a no no. In Buddhism, and so kind of odd thing is that Buddhists in many countries in Asia would still eat meat. But it would be the, for example, in Thailand, it would be the Muslims would be the butchers. That way they, you know, they wouldn't have the karma of killing and then the last three are the Eightfold Path has to do with beginning to cultivate the mind. cultivating the right effort, making the effort in the mind to in a healthy way, choose those qualities of the mind which are helpful, skillful, skillful, for the purposes of liberation and learning how Let go of those qualities of the mind, which are not skillful and helpful. making the effort that it takes. So it means really tracking your mind well. Next, there's right mindfulness, to practice mindfulness, to really be mindful of what's going on in the present moment. It's a whole skill in itself, the skill to develop mindfulness. And the last is to develop a concentration,

to look to develop our ability to be stable and composed, in the midst of what our experiences. If you're not composed, in your experience, it's very hard to track what's actually going on. Also, one of the nice things about concentration practice meditation practice, is that the Buddha said that concentration practice is best built on happiness. It's easiest to get concentrated, if you're happy. How do you get happy? You know, as if you can just do that automatically. But I think part of the Buddhist path is to try to find ways to encourage ourselves to be happy. At the same time as we're being encouraged to focus on our suffering, you're also encouraged to find how to be happy and what does it take to let happiness become a more part of your life? Can it and I think for a lot of people here in our busy society that happiness is not always so far away. If if we just weren't such workaholics just stop, you know, and spend a little bit time looking, you know, at the sun sunset or, you know, going for a walk on the bay lines or having tea with a friend or tea alone. Sometimes, are there ways to enhance our happiness or well being in our lives? What would it take booking in our town? intelligence as a foundation, to help our mind, rest get composed, be still not be agitated. Because as the mind becomes more composed, and still, that is the key to being able to look in the really deep depths of our psyche and the most tenacious, clinging that we carry, carry with us all the time. And that's really the ultimate function of Buddhism is to get down to the very root clinging that holds the whole edifice of suffering in place and have it release.

So I hope that as you go through this next year, That you always remember the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path and that you find some way to or many ways to contemplate this very simple statement. If you cling, you'll suffer. If you let go of your clinging, your suffering will stop. Good luck.