

2003-01-06: Four Noble Truths

Sun, 7/5 4:16PM • 40:54

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, clinging, people, four noble truths, psyche, thinking, eightfold path, buddha, mind, helpful, called, buddhism, avoid, retreat, mindfulness, teacher, bit, deep, intelligence, emphasize

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Happy New Year. And we have a year ago when we had the opening Dharma talks here at the center, I talked about the Four Noble Truths. And the opening celebration, we read the Buddhist first discourse, which was about the Four Noble Truths. And I thought I would, as I did yesterday morning, I thought I'd take the opportunity now, to talk a little bit a little bit about the Four Noble Truths, since they're so central to what we do here in the practice in Buddhism in general. And over the years, I've encountered a good number of people who have come to hear a Dharma talk. For the first time and left quite happy. Sometimes they left the project That's also true, but quite happy. And what they say is that they've always felt that there was something off in the world or suffering in the world, and that most of the people around them, or all the people around them didn't ever seem to really want to address it directly. They want to avoid it, they want to brush it off or deny it, or all kinds of ways in which people in our society or any society, I suppose, will try to avoid suffering, talking about recognizing it. And sometimes people will very actively say no, it's not that way at all. And that paints a very beautiful, idealistic picture of reality is and then they'll spend a lot of times a lot of efforts to try to maintain the picture at the cost of you know, what the reality is insisting insisting on us. And so they hear a Dharma talk where they emphasize what Buddhists do is they pay attention to suffering. They recognize the suffering and it's in the world. There's an active attempt by Buddhists, not to avoid suffering not to pretty it up not to live in some ideal, but to actually face it directly and admit how it is this world of ours. And it makes them very happy they found some place to kind of feel a finally someone is willing to talk about it. At his last retreat that I thought there was a woman there who had spent 22 years in a Eastern religious tradition, where the kind of philosophy was, there's so much suffering in the world. So to balance it, we're going to focus on joy. And people became great adept, she was very good at meditation going into bliss states, and spent a lot of time as became a teacher in that tradition. And she came to spirit rock because she was taking a sabbatical from her tradition, to see what else there might be. And, and rather than always kind of going off into bliss states to really kind of sit down And face reality as it actually is not, you know, printing it over. And it took some doing to help her with that. And what I took with her was to she was in a meditation retreat. Right, right, was I

prohibited her from meditating for 24 hours don't meditate. And because any kind of meant she was she was so used meditation was her crutch. And so don't meditate and you stay at the retreat and keep the silence. And she came, she walked around and looked in the rivers and sat in the room and journals and things and discovered how precious it is to really connect with reality directly without putting it over, avoiding it. So the idea of, you know, facing suffering directly. So we've been here now for one year, and a little bit, tongue in cheek but also a little bit seriously. People come here to suffer at our center. Who would want to come right? This is where you come to suffer, and he's come to suffer really well. And we specialize in helping you suffer. And now, of course, we don't want you to suffer. And, of course we want people not to suffer. That's the whole purpose of Buddhism is to help people not to suffer. But part of the prescription is to be very realistic about your suffering. And to really face it, admit it and look at it, and very being very realistic about it. Then knowing wisely what to do next about it. And it's very common teaching in many spiritual tradition, traditions that if you avoid if you try to run away from something, it chases you. But if you run towards it, you can somehow resolve it so much. Being away from suffering, some people find just doesn't work. And but running towards your suffering in a healthy way facing it is a way of resolving it, dealing with it and coming to terms with it, and hopefully becoming free of it.

It's a little bit encapsulated this idea in the life story of the Buddha, where he rejected ascetic practice. He spent many, many years doing ascetic practice, where it is a kind, even though you're kind of emphasizing suffering, causing himself great suffering. He was doing it as an attempt to escape from this world, to separate the soul in a sense from this world, and not have part of it and free himself in that way. And what he found was it was an alternative to asceticism in for suffering. And that was basically you sit down and you face what's here, and you study the suffering is actually here. You don't have to add any Anything more to it?

So when I was a young Zen student, I found that sitting with a certain amount of pain was a little bit helpful for my concentration. So I asked my teacher, if I should sit in full lotus. And he said, No, we don't go looking for suffering. You know, we don't, we don't go creating it. We don't make it happen. But when it comes to us, then we look at it seriously, we take it seriously, we stopped we stopped for it. Now why would you want to stop for your suffering? Certainly to learn from it and learn the wise response, wise approach to it. And sometimes it's appropriate to delve further into it directly with it. And sometimes it's appropriate to do something different. Sometimes it's appropriate to find joy to find an antidote for it. If suffering is causing too much distress and kind of a kind of quicksand kind of, you know, the psyche is just kind of sinking into the pression a useful way, then sometimes it might be helpful to do something different, to focus on peace or calm or joy or something like that. So there's a place for that. But it's done realistically is, oh, this is helpful. This is a helpful antidote. It just is just the right medicine. And then once I'm kind of stabilized myself, then I'll turn around and deal with this directly. So it's not an escape. It's a temporary kind of withdrawal in order to come back stronger, and to be with it directly. One of the reasons to be with suffering that is emphasized in Buddhism is that in some way or other suffering is the source of inspiration of faith or spiritual motivation. And if you cut yourself off from your suffering, don't really stop and pay attention to it. Then you actually cut yourself

off from the potential for that suffering, to generate tremendous motivation to do something about suffering, to resolve it, to deal with it. And so it said in the classic texts, that faith which is Confidence or trust or something, which is a very important spiritual quality is conditioned to arise out of our contact with suffering. So rather than suffering being all bad, suffering can have a very useful quality, since faith is indispensable following the path all the way. Um, another reason to pay attention to suffering is we can learn what our attitude is towards suffering. And each of us probably has our own characteristic way of relating to suffering. We're on, you know, common strategies that we have. For some people, it's the refrigerator. And for some people it is blaming and for you know, someone else or blaming ourselves, or for some people, it's, you know, some other desire going off in the desire realms, wanting things and running away by wanting to compensate in a sense by pursuing desire, some desire and so some people. And it's aversion or blame or criticism or anger, that is a strategy is kind of avoids really dealing with it directly. For some people, it's restlessness, or agitation, anxiety, which takes over worrying as a strategy of not really dealing with the suffering directly, but kind of hovering with it. And then for some people, it's resistance or lethargy, you know, kind of giving up. And for some people, it's doubt, you know, not knowing what to do filled with doubt. There's a lot of different strategies we have, and everybody has a strategy until they become they become maybe liberated. So it's useful to kind of look and see what is what is your individual strategy for in an unwise way dealing with your suffering? Well, how do you avoid it? How do you avoid really facing it directly and being within a simple way? Are you afraid of it? Do you assign meaning to it? This means that This means that something about yourself, I suffer, therefore I am a failure. Or this is embarrassing. Or this means that, you know, it's always gonna be this way. And there's all these attitudes and beliefs that we might have around this thing we call suffering. that complicates the suffering. And what we're looking for is to have very uncomplicated relationship to suffering, and to not suffer more. That adds to that pile of suffering on top of suffering.

And why the fundamental reason in Buddhism is to pay a careful enough attention to the suffering, so we can see the second noble truth. So the first noble truth is very simply the truth of suffering. It's sometimes said that Buddhists are real pessimists, the party party poopers because they keep talking about suffering. And, and they sit and the Buddhists say that life is suffering. The Buddha didn't say that, in the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha emphasized there is suffering in this world. And you don't have to go very far to find that. It's, you know, it's admitting it, calling it like it is. And then the Buddha went on to say, the second second noble truth is the cause of suffering. And I'll get back to that in a moment. The third noble truth is the possibility of ending the suffering. And the whole purpose or the Four Noble Truths is not a stated philosophical creed, or a metaphysical creed that you have to believe, but rather is stating those truths which can help lead you to that possibility of ending suffering, that freedom of the heart that is represented by liberation, liberation from suffering. So there's once Dharma who translates the Four Noble Truths were noble by a, by the word ennobling. It's the Four Noble Truths because they have a function. They're not abstract ideas you must hold on to there have a function to help us in a particular way to help ennoble us. And I remember once I joined Julian, who was a Thai forest Master, who will probably come and teach for us in June for a day long. He was talking to the spirit rock teachers, teacher, Vipassana teachers, and he loves to laugh. And he was

laughing and he was talking about suffering, the first noble truth of suffering, you know, and he said, suffering is holy. Suffering is really sacred. And it feels a little bit kind of juxtaposition. Most of us don't think of suffering as makes me sacred and holy. And what he was what he meant was, if we have the right attitude towards our suffering, If we approach it with wisdom, and mindfulness, and clarity of kind of really looking at it deeply, there's a possibility in the suffering to be a noble to be set free. So in that sense, it's sacred if you use it that way. So the noble truth of suffering, sounds a bit better right than just the truth of suffering. The what it How is it that suffering is ennobling, has been the theme of the talk so far, how is it helpful? So, then in order to in order to really be helpful to understand the cause, and the Buddha defined the cause, by this almost poetic or poetic word, kind of, I take it as a non technical word. The very simple kind of, kind of biological word of thirst, ton now, you'll be talking English but the thirst for power and, and using a word like that, I think it's our tasks to fill in some like empty Blank kind of gives us kind of a general idea. And then we have to kind of fill it out and in our individual life, what is thirst look like in our life? How is it that so clinging, greed, craving, hate, aversion, resistance, obsession being obsessed, compulsion givenness. All these could be synonyms for the word, thirst. And all these it said, produce suffering. And suffering is many different words for suffering. It's also kind of a kind of a general general word that you're supposed to fill in your words like anxiety and fear and depression and frustration and anger and grief and limitation and sorrow and a lot of good words, right. And so how is it that clinging or craving or thirst or attachment produces suffering, knows varieties. And that's how we need what we need to look at it in our own lives. What is the connection? The first connection that can be emphasized is that craving or clinging, is suffering in and of itself. So you don't have to isn't that a cause of suffering in the future, but to have the mind tight and contracted, is painful.

So that's one way and then it does tend to create suffering kind of secondary or down the line, sometimes terrible suffering. If we cling to wanting things to be a certain way, and reality doesn't accommodate that clinging will probably lead to frustration, anger or sad or something. If we don't claim there isn't that power in the psyche, to generate the fuel to fuel, the sadness the frustration It's the cleaning which gives it fuel. Next, visit fire to burn. So can we understand our cleaning? Can we see the connection? One of the most remarkable summaries of the Buddhist teaching is very, very simple. And that is if you cling, you'll suffer. And if you let go of that clinging, the suffering stops. And that's all you really need to know what the Buddha taught. Don't go home. And But what happened is that we spent 40 years teaching, basically expanding on those two things. Talking about how suffering, how clinging causes suffering, and talking about how the release of clean the ending of clinging releases us from the suffering And so incense the highest of these four noble truths, if there is a hierarchy of them is a third one that says there is a possibility of bringing suffering to an end. And by their release of clinging and it's a little bit anticlimactic, it's a little bit kind of, it's not very sexy in terms of great world religion. Someone asks, you know, what's your highest thing in your religion? You say, Well, the ending of suffering. It doesn't sound so great. I mean, some people commune with God and we just end suffering. But what is what what what would you say? The experience of the ending of clinging to ending of suffering is like, what are some of the synonyms for it? Sorry. Peace, liberation. Sorry, openness sorry, communion, feeling of unity perhaps lightness, freedom, freedom. Sorry, relief,

relief through release. I like to emphasize that some people are only looking for relief to their suffering, and Buddhists are looking for release. There's a difference. But yes, certainly relief certainly brings relief. being refreshed.

So if you cling, you'll suffer. If you let go of the clinging you'll stop suffering. And one of the remarkable things is the degree to which clinging is has its own comes with Along with his own lawyer or you know, advocate or something that will argue why it's necessary to claim and you might look at those voices in your in your minds that say, yes, this is all very good, but don't I need to claim to this isn't claiming helpful here? If I if I don't claim then then how am I going to take care of myself? How am I going to be successful? How am I going to get ahead in the world? How anything? Do you have you have reservations about giving up clinging? Oh, yeah. Anybody want to talk about the reservations? been lovely to hear some of them? Yes. If you give up your clinging you have to give up the love of your child in a scale of one thing, That's a good question. The we certainly know that there can be a lot of clinging to to our children, which is not healthy. And our children will tell us when they could grow up. And so that we know, but that is there's something in the in that connection, the bonding or something that represents some kind of holding. And perhaps and perhaps maybe we shouldn't call it clinging, the movement of empathy of compassion, which is a kind of feeling and suffering of others, and feeling lost and the pain that is not not done away with with the ending of suffering. In fact, the classic argument is that as clinging is released, you will actually have greater compassion and sounds good in the abstract. But compassion means kind of empathy, we actually feel the suffering of the world. So are you giving and giving up clinging? Are you giving up something unnatural? Is your is would be kind of your question then. If that's if you're answering responding to my query there were Yeah, it was quite something there was a woman on the retreat who was dying slash retreat and their care cancer spread to her liver and there was teeny bit of hope, and that her so called her numbers had gone from very, very bad to very bad after doing certain chemotherapy, but you know, and she had an eight year old daughter, you know, and that, you know, was very that was the hardest part for her was because of this daughter and And, you know, again, here was another another person she had, she came to the retreat somewhat numb. And part of the process of being in retreat was opening up to her pain or distress about this. And then the end by the end of the week, coming to a different resolution. And it was quite beautiful to see the difference between who she was the first day of the retreat and who she was at the end. And I don't know if it was going to stick but there was much more peace and openness and she wasn't locked down. She wasn't closed down.

And one of the teachers told her enough was the wise thing to say, but said that probably one of the most important things that she's going to give her if she's going to die anyway, one of the most important things you can give her daughter is showing her that you're not afraid of dying, to die with some peace. So hoping that things that would motivate her to do the inner work that it would take to let go of the clinging on this tremendous amount of clinging on her daughter and what this meant for her Daughter in all this, it was compounded by the fact that her father died when she was 10. So, you know, the, the, this work of dealing with suffering, facing it, we're not talking, you know, we're not talking about, you know, you know, just something lightweight or being casual here, you know, people,

all of us, I think, you know, there's very, very deep things in our psyche and our soul that, you know, we're trying to deal with and have to grapple with. And, you know, this enterprise of Buddhism is quite serious. And you when you have someone come to retreat like that, there are a lot of people who have to retreat to had all kinds of things going on.

And it was quite quite interesting to watch, you know, as a teacher there, how useful it is to encourage people to feel where they're contracted, where the cleaning is and where the tightness is and how easy it is for people. To avoid it, there was one man who, who was there who had written a lot of books. And I don't know if that's a good breakfast or anything but he, he complained about being in his head too much. And being very intellectual and not really being in his body and not being in his heart very much. And he'd been working with one one Vipassana teacher for some time, who was helping him get into his body into his heart. And, and he, and he came, and he said, all these practices I'm given are really great. But they only work for about two meditation sessions. And then what happens is my mind kicks in, they start becomes becomes a doing that I'm doing something I have to do and should do and I locked down on it. It's not helpful. And so give me another give me a practice. So when I heard that I said, Well, I can't give him another practice to do. That's not gonna work. So I said, Okay, I said, Stop fighting yourself. Stop, stop assuming you're supposed to be in your heart in your body. And there's something wrong with being in your head being disembodied in the sense. Why don't you if that's what's going on with you turn around. And if they're suffering, they're contraction they are whatever it is, their turn around and actually faced that directly and be with it directly as it actually is. And by the end of the retreat, he said, it was really great, because I went into it. And I was really there for it, I got to really concentrate on it. And it became shifting and changing and it spread out and became quite expensive and there was no suffering in that big strong minded mind. And lo and behold, I discovered my body inside of it. So turning facing the suffering, you know, the contraction, the tightness.

So then the Four Noble Truths, the first three, suffering, the cause of suffering and thirst, the possibility of ending suffering by releasing the thirsting sounds very simple. But it's not occasionally simple. You know, he has some simple things to cling to, and we say, don't have to let go of that. But sometimes it's quite deep seated in our psyche, what we cling to in the real, real suffering we have, which is, you know, and so we don't want to be misled by the simplicity of these statements to think that it's easy. And the Buddha didn't do that. And it's, it's obvious because the fourth noble truth, the fourth noble truth, is the Eightfold Path. And is the Eightfold Path then, which is how we channel all of our intelligence for the purpose of becoming liberated from this clinging and I emphasize this that I like to think of is all of our content Sometimes people enter spiritual, I think they have to kind of check parts of their intelligence at the door. As if you know, they're not supposed to use their thinking mind or not, you're supposed to, you know, use their logic or something. We want to be able to use every resource we have available for this momentous and very profound task of liberating the psyche in the heart. So we don't have to be at war or check out check, avoid any part of our minds or hearts or anything, but channel use all of it for it. So we use all intelligences and as I've read someplace, I don't know now, but I read once if someone had come up with like nine different forms of intelligences. Does anybody

know about this kind of thinking? One? Yeah, so what are they? seven different kinds of intelligences are other. So I mean, there's kinesthetic intelligence, there's emotional intelligence, there's logical intelligence. There's I don't know. But there is spatial intelligence, I suppose. And so use all of it. So in the Eightfold Path, the first two steps has to do with thinking. So it's not in Buddhism is not about avoiding thinking, but rather the first two has to do with thinking. The first one is right to you, having the right understanding the right frame of thought have the right thoughts for understanding our experience. And in particular, what this means is if what you'd want to do is to become free of suffering and clinging, then you want to look at that what you want to have your thinking your concerns, your thoughts, your view of your problem, focused on that directly. That's all it says. Right View. It what it says is that the Four Noble Truths is the right view to carry along The right view to have you want to become free is the Four Noble Truths. So that's a way of thinking about your experience. Our experience is so broad and complex the ecology of human life, then it's helpful to narrow it down a little bit and have it more focused at what actually gets to the point. And so the suggestion is that you want to get to the point, start thinking about your experience through the lens of these four noble truths. And the second of the Eightfold Path is sometimes called right intention, sometimes called right thought. My late lately, my favorite translation is to call it right directed thinking. Because have your thoughts directed in a certain direction. Your thoughts can go in all kinds of bizarre directions, as some of us occasionally noticed. Right? And What is so you can just let your mind your thoughts going in any direction you want, or from time to time you can channel it in particular directions and have them flow and it'd be helpful. And there's three particular channels for thinking ways of thinking approach you to think things think about that the Buddha recommended in this category. One is loving kindness. Love, being kind is not great. The second is renunciation. Americans usually don't like that. simplicity, relinquishment to train ourselves to begin simplifying the life enough so we can really get to the point for people I just said. If you let go a little, you have a little happiness. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of happiness.

And if what you want to do is have a lot of happiness, to find the ultimate peace, you might really want to concentrate your Life and doing that, which requires in some sense simplifying your life, relinquishing, letting go. So you can really do that work well. And the third directed thinking is to think about non harming, to become a person doesn't harm. Think about that. Reflect on those things. So those two things, the Four Noble Truths and these three directions for your thoughts, then create a strong foundation upon which it becomes easier to do the deep work of getting into the psyche, the roots of the psyche, to help see where the clinging is, so it can be released. And the same is true for the third, fourth and fifth of the Eightfold Path, which all have to do about living a life that doesn't harm can be extension of non harming. Do not harm in through our actions by living by the precepts face. The basic cardinal rules of non harming, not killing, not stealing, not lying, not harming other people through our sexuality and not harming ourselves and others, by intoxicating the mind. Being careful with our speech, not harming through our speech, gossip Putin, which is very harmful, not gossiping outline, not using harsh, harsh speech. And then the fifth is right livelihood to have the live limited we live by be one that doesn't cause harm. The Buddha gave particular advice around this, he said, You should not be engaged in any kind of commerce or activity, that engaged that involves the production

and sale of weapons. So it's a bit hard nowadays when everything's so interconnected for us, but he was very clear, this is you know, and And then after that, to nurture to really get into the mind deeply. So one is kind of setting your thinking straight, sending it right. And that can take a lot of time reflecting and thinking, reading, talking with friends, talking with teachers, massaging these basic understandings of Buddhism, and to really make it your own, see how it really true for yourself. So you know, not simply adopting something, because of the great authority of Buddhism, or a teacher or whatever, but really kind of learning, you know, using your mind and then beginning to change your behavior. So your behavior corresponds, or as harmonizes and supports, the deeper work that can happen. And then the last few days will steps have to do by doing the deeper work of really getting into the psyche, really getting down into it to really see what's going on at the deepest, deepest places. And, and so one of them is, is right effort, which is defined by being very Careful very careful about what you do with your mind. If your mind is doing things which are is unhelpful to find out how to let go of those unhelpful tendencies of the mind. Or if you think that there's some way that unhelpful tendencies of the mind might arise, avoid what it takes. So the void, getting to those situations, if you know, for example, that going and watching horror movies or action packed movies or whatever full of violence makes you a more violent person, as you leave you kind of start you were much more inclined to yell at people or beat people up. Then, if you know that that's not very unhelpful, so you avoid those movies because, you know, and then conversely, the right effort is promoting helpful states of mind. kindness, peace, joy, honesty, you know, promoting those things which are helpful in the mind, being very careful that it isn't kind of pollyannish and kind of positive thinking that overlays what's really going on.

But there can be a way of promoting the helpful states of mind and kind of doing away with the unhelpful ones. As the states as your state of your mind improves, not an easy thing to do, of course, but as your state of your mind improves, then the next the next thing is developing your mindfulness, which is a kind of state of mind or quality of mind, developing your mindfulness so your mindfulness becomes a very skilled, powerful light, flashlight or spotlight that you can really use to look deep into your body, your mind your heart, to see what's going on. And it becomes a powerful spotlight that isn't itself. A non violent approach to looking at your life. We emphasize a lot in our tradition, acceptance of what mindfulness is aware of, very important is to be accepting. proclaim, it's a more useful thing to talk about being non violent to what you see. And then the last one is concentration. So to join your mindfulness with cultivating the stability of line, so that spotlight is, is held kind of unflattering. So you can really see well, you know, if you have a spotlight and it's shaky, you know, it's kind of hard to see what's there, the spotlight is held really still. And you can see very well and with concentration also comes can come at certain points, experiences of joy, of well being of unity. And these states are can be very helpful, certainly for re educating and reconditioning your psyche, when that's been very kind of torn apart. For various reasons, but also, the deepest, deepest work of Vipassana is best done at after you've had this encouragement or support of a joyful state of mind, happy states of mind. And one of the ways to do that is to get deeply concentrated. Concentration brings happiness. And happiness then brings further concentration. So once you get talking about the Eightfold Path, they can start seeming kind of complicated, all these things you could you could you could do. It's really

simple. If you cling, you'll suffer. If you let go of your clinging, you'll stop suffering. And you're encouraged to use whatever intelligence you have, or intelligence does, you have to really look and see how this is true for yourself. If you want a little bit help along the way to make your thinking and investigation, more effective, the Buddha suggests that you take seriously the Eightfold Path. If you follow the Eightfold Path, the whole process will go along much smoother. And it said that those people who have discovered the free freedom from clinging or the give the world the gift of fearlessness. And that means two things. It means no one needs to be afraid of them. And it means they're reassuring enough that no one they're not they're not afraid of anything. Nothing Nothing frightens them. It's a gift to the world to do this practice. And one of the things I hope that all of you think about as you do the mindfulness practice, reduce practice through the practice of liberation, is that you're not just doing it for yourself. But you're doing it for the well being of all people. That what you're doing is intimately connected to the well being of others. I think that the, it's very hard to be deeply motivated to follow the path all the way to its combination. without feeling that somehow or other, you're also motivated to help others in the process. It's gonna make a difference for others. So, I'd like to end with a very traditional way of ending. Sure done this at the end of last year, but we can do it for this year and fix it for today. And that is with a little expression, a little ritual done in Buddhism called dedication of merit. It's a whole topic in itself merit, but give us the benefit of the doubt for the time being if you don't know for whatever benefits and merit that has come from our practice together may it be for the well being of all beings everywhere. So there are all beings may be happy, so that all beings may be safe. So, they're all beings may be healthy. So they're all beings may be at ease.

So all beings may find their potential of liberation. May you take this simple expression, if you cling, you'll suffer if you let go of that clinging you'll stop suffering when you take those expression and help all beings so thank you