

# 2006-01-02 Four Noble Truths

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four noble truths, mind, suffering, buddhism, people, buddha, mindfulness, understand, task, teaching, practice, clinging, world, word, happening, deep, thinking, life, buddhists, begins

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So, happy new year. It is my custom to give to have the first talk of the year beyond the Four Noble Truths. So this would be the first talk of the year. And the first no Four Noble Truths is sometimes seen as the kind of key or central teaching of the Buddha. And everything else kind of radiates out from there. And introductory books to Buddhism sometimes or introductory classes. The four noble truths are often are often introduced first right away and The idea is very simple. And the I think it's pretty easily understandable. It's at least in principle. Whether you agree with it or not. That's another question, but it's very simple. But it seems that when the Buddha taught what he had to teach, he didn't treat the Four Noble Truths as the entry point for people into his teachings in practice. Meaning that if the Buddha was going to teach introductory course in Buddhism to people who didn't know anything, he would not start with the Four Noble Truths. And actually he would wait a long time, until he felt that the audience had a sufficient enough spiritual maturity, had enough clarity of mind had the mind which was stable and calm enough to be able to understand the full import of the Four Noble Truths. Can you see this kind of idea in the famous text that is the foundation for our practice the mindfulness practice, the teachings of the sutras discourse the Buddha gave called the four foundations of mindfulness that we described practice of mindfulness. And he gave us a series of ways of practicing mindfulness in this text. The very last teaching there. Last practice given is the practice of the Four Noble Truths. Now that's your thinking in two ways. One is again, you see it's comes last. And all the earlier parts of the four foundations of mindfulness, where you develop mindfulness to the breath, mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, are the foundation that allows a person to apply or use the Four Noble Truths in a deep way. And when people came to the Buddha, who didn't know anything about his teaching, and maybe didn't know much about spiritual life at all, he would, he wouldn't teach them the Four Noble Truths, but he would teach them first about the importance of, of generosity. And he teaches them the practice of generosity. Then he would teach them the practice of virtue, help them develop their virtue. And the idea is you develop these wonderful qualities of generosity of virtue first. And not just because they're good qualities to have, but also in developing them. It gladdens the mind. That's a theory At least,

that's the Buddha thought. I don't know how to show you. But they're supposed to kind of gladden the mind kind of make the mind happier. And happier mind happy mind, is a kind of mind that you want to teach the Four Noble Truths. And it seems maybe a little bit counter intuitive because you think that if people are suffering a lot, that maybe you would introduce them the Four Noble Truths right away because the Four Noble Truths are really about a kind of a very direct pointing To the cause of suffering. So, there people are suffering should just kind of hold a mirror to the cause the origins of their suffering and the possibility of freeing right away, help them. And maybe that's a work for some people, but maybe some people for whom are very depressed or upset or afraid or somehow tormented or troubled in some way. Maybe it's more useful to teach other things first. I help cultivate help to help them who cultivate some kind of gladness and happiness in their lives before you actually help them address the suffering directly. And so I leave that for you to kind of just ponder and think about There's a story in China, Chinese Buddhist story of, I think it was like a general some some general governor, Governor of province, who went to visit a monk who was called some like the tree monk, because he lived in a tree all the time. He spent his whole time living up in a tree. And he's kind of a little odd thing to do. But it was his thing to do. And he went to visit this tree monk. And he asked him what the teachings of the Butoh R and the monkey looking down at him said, told me the Four Noble Truths. And the governor said, Oh, any child knows that. And tree monk says, Yes, but even a person who's 90 may not have really realized these portraits to the difference between understanding them and realizing the Four Noble Truths I realized for those of you who might be new to all this, I slam and define them. But the Four Noble Truths are, are usually again introductory books in Buddhism, offered as the central teaching of Buddhism. And for some Western people, they translate that to being the creed of Buddhism. This is you know, if you really understand what the teachings of Buddhism is, you understand the Four Noble Truths As far as I can tell, the Buddha did not enter, offer the Four Noble Truths as a belief as a teaching in that kind of way as to create a belief when he did the Four Noble Truths even if the word Four Noble Truths frightened some people in the west or truth, you know, and usually when you spell dude in English you haven't capital T, four noble truths are two really big, and the truth The truth is a proposition. And so this is a proposition about reality, the truth and and, however, when the Buddha introduced the Four Noble Truths, he didn't introduce them as teachings that way, as abstractions or principles. He introduced them as practices, things that you have to engage with and use, do certain things with. The tradition talks about each each of the Noble Truth has Duty, or a task connected to it. So it's a task that's important, not the, you know, believing in some kind of way Oh, now I understand what Buddhism is about is to take each of these truths and apply the task that each implies, which each point to in our lives. So, the task or the first noble truth is to comprehend or understand suffering. So that's the task to really understanding well, man, I was reminded this last week of the famous John Chuck quote, teaching where he said, Those who run from suffering, run right into it. So be careful so here, here the idea is you study it. Now, someone who's new to all this and is depressed and anxious and all that, maybe it's the wrong thing to tell them to study their suffering, maybe they should wait for quite a while before they're ready. But at some point, understanding suffering is the key one of the key aspects of Buddhist practice, understanding that goes as part of the second task. The second noble truth is to abandon something, let go of something. And that abandoning that letting go of is letting go of the cause of suffering. The Origins The with with

prompts of suffering to happen, suffering doesn't arise without a cause. And so, we need to understand that cause and then we need to abandon or let go of that cause and Cause is said to be craving or grasping or thirst or I like the word givenness or compulsion. If there is compulsivity in the mind. You're not free. And meditators who realize this very quickly, because if you try to meditate, you say, Okay, I'm going to just sit down. Place my breath on the mind or place my breath, my mind the present moment. I'll just stay there. That's what I want to do. This my desires, my wish, my attention. It's the direction I give my mind. You know, and you sit down, you do it with great determination. You put your attention on the breath. How long does it last? You could be to have tremendous passion. Wonderful spiritual passion for practicing feel like the most important thing in the world for you, nothing else is more important. And all that passion, sit down, follow your breath. In that case, maybe get four seconds. And what you'll find out is the mind has a mind of its own very quickly. And the mind is running around this way in that way. And your choice, but you don't, you know, sometimes you don't, don't seem to have much choice in what the mind does, where it goes. And some of that you can see is kind of driven as a compulsivity of the mind. But the mind takes over. And you can if you watch you see how much the mind kind of carries you around, pushes you around. You're sitting quietly and you get caught up in fantastic desire, a fantasy of desire. And it's sometimes very hard to extract yourself from it. Or you get filled with anger about someone or something. And it's very hard, you can just say, Okay, that's enough. Thank you. You know, I think I'll do something better now more interesting. And indeed, the doesn't want to let go that easily, because it's kind of pushing us to keep thinking about that keep being angry or keep being desirous or keep being afraid or keep planning or whatever it might be. So there's so the recognition in Buddhism is that there's a very strong, addictive quality in the mind, or compulsive quality in the mind. And when you're when the mind is involved in compulsive activity, then you can say to that degree, the mind is not free. But more important from the teaching of the Buddha. When the mind is in this compulsivity mode. That's the origin or that's the source that gives birth to suffering. So, to somehow learn to let go of the drivenness of the mind, of any kind at all. So that's the second task is to let go and the third task is to realize The word realize is very important in Buddhism to realize something to realize the truth. And to to realize the cessation of suffering, to see see its ending to really see it. And it has three very important steps. So involve some understanding. So the idea of understanding knowledge understanding is very important when in Buddhism and Buddhist spirituality, you're not supposed to get liberated without also understanding what goes into it. That what how you get yourself liberated what, what are some of the forces in the mind that are operating, that needs to be addressed, they need to be dealt with, in order to get liberated. So to have someone as a magic wand over you and say, Abracadabra, you know, liberated. Now that could be very pleasant and very nice and they can be quite efficient that way. But this is not how the Buddha taught. The Buddha said you have to actually understand this process how it works. So there's some work involved there is that there's a, there is a work, there's work, there's some. And I like it, there's some work is kind of involved certain level of spirit of, I think maturity of of self understanding, to really engage and look and understand what is really going on in this world of mind in my mind, and then ended under deep understanding, then finding liberation. So then realizing the cessation of suffering, and then because letting go of clinging and realizing the end of suffering or cessation of suffering is not an easy task. Then the fourth noble truth is something that is the truth.

The task there is to cultivate oneself, to develop oneself. So the human mind and heart is quite malleable. And it's ineligibility that we can somehow take responsibility for if we don't take responsibility for the processes of our mind, the directions of mind, the intentions, the feelings, the thoughts and impulses of the mind. There are lots of people in society who will do it for you. And I'm really deeply impressed by how easy it is to be conditioned by our friends, by our society, by our media, by all kinds of things, our politicians. And you have to be very, very sensitive to the impulses that come in from our society, to somehow be able to withstand the deep, deep conditioning the way we're conditioned by what goes on. And so in Buddhism, we're not letting the mind be developed and changed and shaped by forces outside of us, but rather, there's To take some kind of responsibility for the shaping of the mind, the mind is always being shaped in Buddhism The idea is the mind is not a thing. So it was a thing and then you can kind of just maybe just you can just have it made your set with the mind is a series of processes. And those processes are constantly changing and flowing. And think of some of you have been to spirit rock. And you know, there's a wonderful creek that goes, I was at spirit rock this last week in meditation center up in Marin County with it in the epicenter of the rainstorms. And we're kind of in a steep hill, so it's the rain just mostly washed away, but there's this creek that runs by the meditation Center by the kitchen over there. And we woke up, I guess, Saturday morning, was it to the road from the kitchen all the way down to lower parking. Look like look like it was completely filled strewn with trees and bogs and stumps, and it was really dramatic. And then that kind of whole creek that goes up by the meditation center and not radically changed its contours and shape if it can be landscaped. And you know, if you've been used to walking along there, have you stay with meditation spot, you know, in the shade of some big tree on the rocks, not there, the boulder your sadness, no longer there, the trees and along there how up sitting in the sun, Sunny, it's often in the landscape so that you know, nature's processes, so it's being changed and shaped. And not a thing. JACK kornfield during that because he when he first got spirit rocket, the idea that he would go and he actually went for some people and went Down to the creek and was shaping the creek and making I don't know what he started doing little places to sit and do whatever and to make it really idyllic and nice. Someone told him, jack, don't you know it doesn't work this way. And so, so, the mind is that way to the mind is and is constantly being shaped by forces and so, it takes a certain degree of sensitivity to be able to understand that understand how the impulses affect us and then take some responsibility for it. So, these four tasks, then to understand something, which is understand suffering, which requires study or studying it letting go of something, realizing something and then cultivating something developing the mind and And again, this is something to be meant to be done by people who are already somewhat spiritually developed already. And so you have to already have that a train mind combined in order to do this work. And so if you feel exhausted just listening to me, all stuff is Buddhist there was telling you what to do. This is actually supposed to this, you know, in one understanding that this is actually something you do when your mind is actually quite stable and deep, concentrated, and it's easy to do it relatively easy. It's not doesn't feel like work. So, in the four foundations of mindfulness, this famous discourse, it kind of ends with Buddha offering the Four Noble Truths. And I'd like to tell you how it begins. Because I think it has a very interesting beginning. When the Buddha gets ready, when even when he's gonna start teaching, the spiritual practice of mindfulness. He begins like every sentence I guess, it begins with a single word, one word. And that

word. When I said when I realized recently what that word is, and it's 10 this text the first word I was really struck by it that really resonated deeply for me. And we just skip over that first word, no one pays attention to it. The first you know the first word in the instruction. And so the word in Pali Buddhist language is e da. So and nice word. And a reminder when I saw that I reminded me of the opening of the rules of St. Benedict, in written order and it starts with a link Probably lacking Italian a Latin word I sculpt, sculpt, sculpt means listen. And when I was introduced, this is the rules of St. Benedict that word first word is considered very significant, you know, is very deep spiritual significant listening a sculptor. So, for us Buddhists we have a very important word. And then I thought that's a great word he dies when those great words that ends with Ah, you know, I just Ah, it's a relief. You know, these great spiritual realities and spiritual truths that have these wonderful words when you can relax. Like you know, Allah, the great word right or Rama or Jehovah or Krishna, Krishna. So, we Have the gray is a good way word like that word that you know, is really important, you know kind of points to what's most sacred for Buddhists the place the thing is to kind of spiritual refuge spiritual, solid spiritual and the ground of spiritual life where it's all found good we have such places and it's really good. Like every religion should have this right? So we have you probably can you agree with me now? Guys? Why don't you just tell us so it means here like here and now We're here. That's our God here. And that's the place it all begins and that's the, you know, a refuge or that's the place of practice. So realization here that's so important for Buddhists here. So here, here we are. So, first task is to be here. Not to be someplace else with the mind. doesn't mean you have to be IMC, but me here, you know, here, we're where you are, wherever you are. You really be here. And if you study them, study the mind you find that very easy for the mind for you by body to be in one place. Your mind to be someplace else. You're thinking about the future thinking the past thinking about fantasy, some places has to do with someplace else or something. But to actually really be here is the first task of practice mindfulness practice. And there's something really precious about here to some degree, for most of us here is pretty safe. It's pretty safe place to be. For most of us, our anxieties or fears or distresses that we many modern modern life we live much of our stress and anxiety and suffering. It's often not about something that's right here, but rather to some degree, it's imaginary. Not too discounted. This has some reality to it, but it's like in the future, perhaps People think a lot of anxious about the future. And the future is really imagination. Who knows what the future is going to do? So if you're worried about what's going to happen, you've engaged your imagination. It might not be that way at all. I think was Mark. Someone, I don't know who it was Mark Twain or someone else said I've had a lot of difficulties in my life, most of which never happened. And I've known people who've had like panic attacks. And one of the techniques for working with people with panic attacks, occasionally could work is you ask them, just to look around like you're in a room someplace and you know, just look around and say anything here. threatening anything. And they look around they can no see anything that's in any danger. They realize in the present moment, there's no danger at all. So for so at least I propose to you to be as your study of suffering. How much of your suffering has to do with what's here and now? And if it's not here right now? How real is it? If it's not here now, then it's being mediated through your thoughts. And what's the reality of a thought compared to the reality of our body here and now? a roomful of people here now and my voice speaking here now Your thoughts right now. Right now what's happening now? I think there's a huge qualitative difference between, you know, our thoughts



projecting things far away, and what's happening here right now. So it's certainly, American Buddhists have been accused by other people of having the present moment to be kind of like their God. And sometimes in Buddhism, in the kind of Western Buddhism, it seems like that's all it is, is to finally arrive here and he's really here and that's not the be all end all the Buddhists have just to be fully here. In the in the discourse of the Buddha, here is the beginning of the path to somehow figure find out how to arrive here, to be here in a very clear way, and have some sense of the commitment, or devotion maybe a devotion is a better word, devotion to the importance and value You are being fully completely here. I love you still love it. I haven't done it after a few years, but I used to love looking at old photographs. And really old, the older the better. old enough to the people in the photographs were dead. That's why it's really hard. It's really. So 100 years old, 120 30 years old, the old pictures and why I like looking at it. I liked it. What I like most was to look at the faces, the facial expressions, or in the eyes of the people in the photograph. And you'd see this human expressive activity of a one single person at a particular time. And occasionally, you see someone whose eyes kind of sparkled in these photographs like he was like alive. Did you know like, they're really here. Sometimes you see they really tired days or whatever different kind of expressions. They really like blocked ones were kind of right died. Anything was fine. And the reason I like looking at it was looking at those eyes and the spaces was I had to I had to stop that moment, 100 years ago, 120 years ago, that was their moment to be alive. Each of us are given these moments, certain number of moments. And we're using them up very quickly. a certain number of moments to be alive. And that was their moment. So that's precious life. And that kind of reflect looking at those pictures in those eyes and reflecting that way. I think that comes come comes from At noon used to come rushing at me. And this is my time to be conscious, to be aware, to be here, conscious way. This is my time in a great expanse of time each of us has given just a very short time and it's really great to have that short timer given to actually be present for it to be conscious. So the Buddha said, to be basically something like this little bit paraphrase, but attention is the path path to the deathless inattention is the path to death. Those who are attentive, never die. Those who are inattentive or it says if they're already dead that's seems to be a very powerful statement. If you're not paying attention, you're not conscious. You know, it's almost like you're dead. You know that wonderful life force of our life is not really happening. And I've known people who spent years in fantasy years we remembering the past years years planning for the future. I wonder if people plan to plan the way some people are just addicted to planning probably is plan to plan also Tomorrow at three o'clock I plan for next week. Some people are really good at checking out going into fantasy, watching television whatever. So here, so begins the Buddhist path begins here. The path of mindfulness begins here. And here is supposed to be very special place, very important place. And I would suggest, maybe a safe place to be the beginning of safety and then the for to finish the mindfulness Excuse me. Had a kind of a cold last week. It's all gone now except that my lungs are cleaning themselves out. So then if I take those in there that's a nice for you to have to listen to. So I apologize. So then the fourth of the four foundations of mindfulness makes a very interesting statement. Setting up this practice of paying attention, being mindful, it says the person is going to be mindful needs to put aside greed and distress concerning the world. So put aside greed and distress concerning the world. And how I pardon how I understand this statement is if you want to wake up if you want to start practicing mindfulness, you have to be able to learn a revolution in the mind. You turn

the mind around a certain way. And this is how I'll describe it. Most human minds are or, let's say the production time being, let's say thought processes. Our thinking is usually about something. So like, if you think the words you had, it's silly to have a subject and object and a verb. And so there's an object for that thinking. So the planning thing, right. So, your mind your thinking is about the future about the plan. Remembering it's about what happened yesterday. Or it's about the fantasy, or it's about what you want, or it's about what you don't want. Or it's about, you know, it's about something. It's about what you're afraid of. Thinking is about something. And often it's about things in the world, or just a bit about about something. And what we're asked to do in mindfulness is to begin disengaging ourselves a little bit from a mind which is preoccupied with the world of aboutness and turn around the sense 180 degrees from aboutness to isness. So rather than living a life of aboutness, to begin living a life of isness I say that so and so the turnaround And become present for our innocence or subjective experience. What is it? What's actually being experienced here? What's the experience right now? That's happening now? Now what I think about it. Now what I want about it, what's the immediate right now experience that's happening? The mindfulness practice, in order to practice mindfulness has to be some willingness to let the mind decouple itself from the aboutness world, that virtual reality world so that we can really begin investigating seeing what's really here. Now, that's a huge, you're asking the mind a huge task, because of the mind often, you know, just, it's been doing it for decades, usually. These are people our age, thinking, thinking and thinking about things about stuff about this is the world of kind of constantly negotiating and reorganizing the world for ourselves and fixing things. And building up an ego and creating a better cell for defending yourself or, or you know, all this self thing that we do a self is another world of about necessity if you're trying to make a self or defend yourself or fix yourself in the senses can very easily switch to a world of aboutness some ideas about about you treat yourself as an about thing. So this movement of Okay, what is my real experience here Can I inhabit and live my experience is in the kind of same kind of direct way that I'm living in the busyness of what's going on rather than in the aboutness. So with that as the introduction here, and this time Turn of the mind. Then the Buddha teaches mindfulness of breathing. And habit your breathing be present for breath. In mindfulness of the body and habits, your, your body be your body that's it isn't this much it isn't. This is your physical felt sense, lived experience of being in a body can be centered here by yourself here in this body, grounded and then my closer feelings Excuse me. And then mindfulness of the mind, start paying attention to some of the things going on in the mind, the present moment. And then with that as a foundation where you really can begin to kind of become familiar with the immediacy of Your body, the immediacy of your feelings, the immediacy of your mind. Then you're you've set the stage for the begin understanding some of the ways in which the processes of the mind how they operate, the ecology, the ecosystem of the mind how the ecosystem operates. And so the mindfulness practice then begins to be kind of a naturalist mycologist of the mind studying the ecology of the mind, how it works. And the and the final psychology the final kind of process that we're asked to study is studying the Four Noble Truths and that's a process. So the process of suffering how suffering happens, the process, the connection, process, connection between craving or clinging and suffering. Thank you. Here's a teaching of Buddhism, I believe that very simple formulation of core teaching of Buddhism and that is, if you cling, you will suffer. And if you let go that clinging to suffering will stop. If you cling, you will suffer. If you let go of that clinging, that suffering will stop. So then, so

there's four noble truths so in this huge foundation that's been created, there's stability, being here, studying what's here, seeing what's here, having your mind centered and calm and really knowing yourself then, to look and see, where is it that the mind is holding? Where's it clinging And the amazing thing about the mind is that the clinging can be very subtle. And in fact, some of the most tenacious and most powerful and And influential claims that we have in our minds are usually out of sight in ordinary consciousness, walking around just being so there has to be some ability to really get in there kind of under the surface chatter of the mind to see really deep down at where there's holding, where there's a suffering suffering, maybe that we don't even know we have. Is that depressing you know, you don't get what Buddhism to help you address the suffering you know about. And then you know, you do this practice and you discover your suffering You didn't even know about. But that isn't medicine. It is it's the suffering, that that kind of the deep clinging, is is found is the is the is the wellspring for the suffering that we can see the clinging we can see. So develop yourself Calm, stable, concentrated. So you can start seeing very deep, very deep, deep. It's so deep that I like to say that consciousness itself is a form of clinging. And the interesting thing is what happens when consciousness let goes, lets go of itself. And why would you want that? One of the reasons you want that is because you see that it's there's suffering there. It's very, very refined. I mean, it's not like anything like you know, you've got a parking ticket or something. I mean, it's really, you know, it's you have to mind this very Very happy to see it. instrumental stability in mind, but but then so suffering that it's nice to be free of suffering. And the task in Buddhism is to somehow learn to discover how to be free of all the suffering. And so if consciousness consciousness itself is a kind of suffering kind of strange, subtle kind of suffering, and so you let go of that to then what kind of inconceivable, isn't it thinkable that's what you can think about. It's unthinkable, inconceivable that place that has no, there was there's no thinking going on. However, it's it's one of the greatest peace, greatest peace, that peace, that freedom that release conscious of itself is sometimes in Buddhism called the great happiness. So therefore, last thing I'll say, is a rewording of the Four Noble Truths. I get criticized with sometimes we wording it this way because people think it's becomes like Buddhism lighter, or, or it becomes and becomes superficial. The first noble truth is the truth of suffering. The second noble truth is the truth of the origins of cause of suffering. The third noble truth is happiness. And the fourth noble truth is the conditions that we put in place to let that happiness bloom in our lives. So each step along the way of letting go of clinging and letting go of suffering, the goal is to make us happy to be happy. So that's very important to realize so that we don't get sometimes Buddhists get filled with too serious. glum and by all this. It's supposed to be you know, supposed is all this supposed to make you happy? very deeply. So the first talk of the year and the Four Noble Truths I don't know how many of you are ready for these profound teaching. So maybe something you can you can work on over the course of the year. Is it make yourself ready for next year stock. Anyway thank you very much and I wish you all happy new year.