

The Four Noble Truths - (Part 1)

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The month before that. I think there's a lot of talking throughout the day, a lot of teaching on my part, and then there's all kinds of ways in which this unfolds. Each day is meant to stand on its own, but each day also is part of a year-long series. So this year the series is on the one meditation instruction the Buddha gave called the *cattāro satipaṭṭhānā*, the four foundations of mindfulness, and there is a whole series of exercises therein in mindfulness practice. The Buddha gives, and so we've been going through them over these months, and now we're at the last exercise, the culmination, the climax of the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness. And that's the topic of the *cattāri ariyasaccāni*, the Four Noble Truths, and the Four Noble Truths are often seen as the essence core teachings of the Buddha.

In sum, everything the Buddha taught, everything that Buddhism is about, can be kind of held or contained within the Four Noble Truths. If you understand the Four Noble Truths, everything else follows from that. The Four Noble Truths can be seen as very simplistic, and however, sometimes the simplest ones are the most elegant, and simple ones are the ones that are most profound. In science or mathematics, that's the way it works in Buddhism. There was a scholarly study. A woman wrote a book some years ago on that. She made a claim based on some very probably not very reasonable assumptions about linguistics that when she looked at the ancient texts and came to the conclusion that the Buddha didn't teach the Four Noble Truths, it was a later addition in the tradition.

So when Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, a scholar monk we know who comes here sometimes, read in her book, he said, "Well, you know, I don't really care. Whoever came up with the Four Noble Truths, that person's the Buddha. So whether the Buddha came up with it or it came later, you know, it doesn't matter. It's so important." For those of you who don't know what they are, they're usually stated very simply. Often the way they're stated is the way the game of

telephone happens. By the time the Four Noble Truths end up in popular American culture, it's often misrepresented.

The first Noble Truth is simply that there is suffering, and the telephone game brings it to America as saying "life is suffering," which is just a drag to hear that—there's no hope, right? But the statement is "there is suffering," and it's kind of hard to argue against that. There is suffering, also happiness, but there is suffering. The second is that there is a cause or condition that gives rise to that suffering. The third one is that there is the cessation of suffering, or there is the cessation of the causes that give rise to suffering. There is cessation. There's the end of this. There's coming to an end. The last one is that, as a truth, is the path to be walked, to be engaged in, that leads to that cessation, leads to that end. So there's the cause, the end, and the conditions, the path that leads to the end.

Another way of saying it, which is usually not said in Buddhism, but you could, with kind of a little bit lightly, say there's suffering and the cause of suffering, and there's happiness and the conditions for happiness. The fact that we use the word cessation or end for the third noble truth doesn't mean that now it's just, you know, a dead end that kind of leaves you in limbo with nothing. So it's very simple. There is suffering, a cause, possible to end it, and there's a path to walk it. When the Buddha taught, sometimes you find him in his discourses that he prepared people for the Four Noble Truths. He would lay out a whole series of presentations that would lead people to a state of mind, a state of openness or faith or confidence, prepared them so that their minds were primed to somehow understand the Four Noble Truths in a way that was really deeply penetrating.

So even though it's easy to understand, it's another thing to have it really penetrating and really have a transformative value in us. One way he did it was he would first talk about things that bring joy. He would talk about the joy of generosity, and that would gladden people's hearts. Then he'd talk about the joy of ethics and of integrity, and that would gladden and kind of inspire people a little bit. Then he'd talk a little bit about, indirectly, the joys of the happiness of the rebirth that you'll have if you live an ethical life and generous life. You get born in these beautiful heavenly realms for some time. That's a nice thing. People would be happy, inspired by that. Then he'd talk about some of the benefits of letting go, of renunciation, of living a life of simplicity. I suppose that would inspire people, and then he would talk about the benefits and possibilities of getting concentrated.

In my imagination, I imagine that he's doing this, he's talking about concentration. People are really getting kind of focused and concentrated. What he is teaching, their minds are getting still, settled, alert, clear, just right there, their minds not wandering a lot into other

things or thinking about the baseball games. They're just there listening to the Buddha, and their minds are getting concentrated. At some point, when he felt the mind, the audience was prepared and ready, he would teach them the Four Noble Truths. Because their mind was so ready, they could maybe understand how it applies to their life in a very deep way. In that sense, the Four Noble Truths is a kind of climax, or the kind of what the Buddha taught, not to be understood just as an introduction to Buddhism kind of thing, but as advanced Buddhism. We prepare ourselves for that in this discourse.

We've been looking at this this year with the four foundations of mindfulness. If you've trouble hearing, there are hearing system devices there, if that would help you, that are to plug into your ear and make it easier to hear, or we could move closer or cover everybody else there. So I'm working for you now, so how's that working, better? In this discourse, we've been looking at the Four Noble Truths as the last exercise, and one way of understanding that is that the earlier exercises are preparing us to really be able to address the Four Noble Truths, take them on, really let them penetrate into our life. To be kind of simplistic about the earlier exercises, first there are exercises that are training a person to be in your body, to be embodied, to get calm and settled. Use the breath to calm and settle the body. Use the breath to be in touch with the body, to pay attention to the body in other ways. It's kind of be embodied, be present for your body. Now, how to be in your body?

Then there are teachings or exercises on learning how to pay attention to the simple ways in which our body and mind respond or react to stimulus, whatever's going on. There's something, I know, as it causes suffering or causes us to experience things in a pleasant way or unpleasant way. We can see kind of how we react and respond to whatever is going on at an immediate kind of felt sense level, dropping into not only the body, but in the felt sense level of our experience. That, of course, is an antidote to the usual way of experiencing things through the filter of our interpretations, or stories, or metaphysics, or, you know, history. It can be very complicated, the way we interpret experience, often not accurately. So that teaches to come back to what's most primary and immediate, what's happening right here.

These early exercises really train a person to be immediate here, and then learning to pay attention to the states of the mind. The state of the mind can be varied. Be learning the quality, the quality of the mind, knowing how to track it. Again, that's also about just being meditatively present for what's here. Then it goes into looking at some of the patterns of the mind, how the mind actually works, how the mind works in a reactive way with desire and aversion, to see how that works, to understand the causes and conditions of aversion and desire and restlessness and anxiety and doubt, and understand what prompts it, understand

how to let go of it or abandon it, and somehow being able to begin working also with the attachments of the mind, the way the mind gets attached or clings to things. There's a lot of emphasis in Buddhism in learning how to work with the clinging mind, with the mind that may possibly be present, but even though it's present is still clinging and reacting for and against what's going on.

Often at a very deep affective level, deep emotional level, we react and cling or resist. So learning how to be present for that, and see that, and not turn away from it or ignore it, but being very wise to be able to connect, to understand the reactive qualities of the mind. Then, as we did last month, this second class exercise is to start paying attention to the beautiful qualities of mind that come into play as a person engages in the Buddhist path. As you engage in this practice, it's not just about looking at attachment and suffering and all that, but as you might get settled, concentrated, mindful, engaged at the present moment, sooner or later, it'll give birth, give rise to some really beautiful states of mind. There are seven of them. So there's mindfulness, investigation, effort, energy, engagement, joy, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity. These are called the seven factors or seven conditions for awakening to happen.

Here you can get a sense of the kind of development, or learn how to be present for your immediate experience in your body, your reactivity, your mental states, emotional reactions, and clinging, and learning how to engage and be honest about it, and work with it, let go of them, and then cultivating these beautiful qualities of mind. After all that, then the Buddha's instructions are: Now notice the Four Noble Truths with all that as a foundation. Then notice the Four Noble Truths. Notice how you are suffering. Notice that you are suffering. Noticing what the cause of your suffering is. Noticing the possibility of ending that suffering and notice what it takes to end the suffering. It is not always easy to let go of the causes so far as I take it.

So now the mind is so prepared, maybe quiet enough, concentrated enough, still enough, engaged enough, that when you direct the mind to look at suffering, you don't get depressed. You don't get reactive, but actually can meet the suffering with a very wise presence. In many spiritual traditions that I know of, I've seen certain, in some corners of the tradition, the teaching that if you run away from your suffering, it hurts more. If you turn, there's something about turning towards suffering which is very freeing and very important, and certainly true for other people. If you turn towards suffering, just be present for them. It can be very healing and helpful for them. The same thing for ourselves is a way of turning towards our suffering and really taking it in. That can be very helpful, just the presence of it. By this time, we're

supposed to have a chronic quality of presence for that, ability to really connect with it in a very useful way.

Then, with that calm, settled mind and willingness to look, then maybe it's possible to look under the surface of what's going on and understand something very deep about the causes and conditions that prompt us to be, to cling, prompt suffering to arise. That's out of the clinging we have. Some of the deepest held suffering, clinging, suffering born from clinging, comes from clings that are very hard to see. So just kind of for me to go down to El Camino here and walk up to a stranger and say, "Oh, I'm sure you're suffering, and all you have to do is let go of your clinging," you know, it's not going to mean anything, right? Because what clinging? I don't realize I'm clinging, but to really see the clings, like the example clinging to self, clinging to self-identity, it takes, again, a still, quiet mind to really be able to penetrate that and see it. Then to see the possibility of freedom enough so you can really let go in a deep way takes, again, a prepared mind, a cultivated mind. Am I making sense to you?

So this is a climax of what the Buddha had to teach, is the climax of this particular discourse of practice. It's meant to be something quite profound. Today we're going to explore these Four Noble Truths, and we're not going to explore them in the abstract, because that's useful, I imagine. But I think it's much more useful, to the point, for us to explore them, for you to explore them in your life, in your meeting, in your own experience. Can you point it back? Can you discover these Four Noble Truths for yourself? I believe at the beginning of this year-long series I did say something. Didn't I say something about this as a high-risk class? Didn't I? I often remember that. No, I didn't say that. I thought I would have a disclaimer at the beginning, and now I tell you, he began. Sorry, I guess it hasn't been risky enough yet.

And then, you know, I take you very seriously to do a class like this, and what the engagement of practice in order to really make a difference in your life. It means you're kind of willing to engage yourself and take some risk, or some decent exposure, or really kind of engage in ways that may be a little bit unusual, if you're kind of, you know, walking down El Camino. Some of the things we might do today might initially seem uncomfortable to you, and you can always adjust and make it more comfortable as you wish. But there's a little bit of warning that's the case, and maybe it won't make you uncomfortable, but also the day is meant—some people don't often notice that. Some people will come for these Friday Dharma practice days and leave at lunchtime, and some people do it every time. That's their kind of pattern, and that's fine. That's what you want to do. But today, be warned that you might leave incomplete because the day is meant to, you know, as a whole, and so they won't go through the Four Noble Truths in the course of the day. If you leave at lunchtime, then you might just be left

suffering, you know, and you have, and us, you know, and you leave suffering, and you won't have seen the resolution of it. Oh, you could just leave now, and come back at lunchtime, and just get the good news after lunch.

So why don't you, if you want, it might be nice just take thirty seconds to stand and stretch, and then we'll do a meditation as a *manāsana*. So take a comfortable, alert posture. Close your eyes and then take a few moments to get into your posture. Being careful with your posture, attentive to it, maybe a little better. Twist a little bit with your body. Really settle in and find a good way of sitting, and not thinking about your posture from your head, but rather being inside your body in a sense, and feeling your whole body settling in, being present. As you feel your body, your posture, if it's possible to enjoy or appreciate being in your body because it feels pleasant, or maybe because you feel some sense of strength, some sense of aliveness, see if you can kind of appreciate or enjoy something about being present in your body, with your posture.

Then within your body, as part of your body, become aware of your breathing. Notice how your body experiences breathing, the movements in your body, the changing experiences of pressure, tightness, release of pressure, release of tightness. Then feeling your body breathing, and from the inside of your body as much as you can, so as not watching from your head but sensing, feeling within your body. Take a few slow, long, slow, deep breaths so the breathing helps you connect more fully to your body. The deep in-breath stretches your rib cage, your shoulders, maybe even your belly, your back, rib cage, and then as you exhale let go, relax, soften your muscles. Breathing in deeply, and as you exhale letting the muscles of your body fall away from the bones, and then letting your breath return to normal. But staying with your breathing, breathing in and breathing out, see if you can allow the breathing to have an effect on you. Allow even the breathing to help soften, calm the body and the mind. By directing the energy of the mind to the breathing, the energy of the mind is less and less available for thinking and preoccupations. So the breath is at the centre of your experience.

Many things occur on the sides, around—the preparations, thoughts, body sensations, sounds. Let them just be in favor of being settled in the breath at the middle. As you stay with your breathing, see if you can cultivate a little bit greater sense of ease, easiness, being easy with how your body is. Even if your body feels uneasy, be at ease with that as you breathe in and out. See if you can be at ease in your mind. Be easy with the mind. If the mind is uneasy or restless, keep breathing mindfully best you can and be easy. Be at ease with how the mind is, breathing in, breathing out, like the breath of the wind moving through

Even if you feel uneasy in the heart, be easy about that. Each time you exhale, using the exhale as a reminder to let go of whatever you're thinking about, to let go into a little greater stillness or peace. As you exhale, see if you can let go physically, emotionally, mentally, let go into some feeling of well-being. Even if you feel uncomfortable in many ways, is there some little hint of well-being or sense of well-being that you can tap into as you exhale, settling into it? Perhaps that well-being, its presence, maybe, can make it all be easier to stay with the in-breaths and out-breaths. Staying with your breaths, in-breaths and out-breaths, if you can't relax or let go into some sense of well-being, remember the bottom line here: to try to be at ease with what is. If you feel uncomfortable physically or mentally or emotionally, can you experiment a little bit? As you keep breathing mindfully, experiment with somehow creating some space or calm or acceptance or allowance or ease around what's uncomfortable. Letting go of thoughts as you exhale.

Now, from whatever the foundation of calm you might have or stability, inner stability you might have, turn your attention mindfully, deliberately, quietly to some way in which right now you are suffering. Is there any way now that there's suffering in your experience? Try to bring that attention to the suffering without now thinking about it, but bringing a calm presence. It might be quite subtle. It might be quite large. It doesn't matter how it is. It might be quite far in the background. Or it might be a current of suffering about something that's not happening here and now, but that's part of your life these days. Then see if you can bring an easy presence, relaxed presence to simply hold or be present for the suffering that you have, as if suffering deserves your respect and you can have a respectful presence of it, getting to know it better, sense it better, not to get rid of it, not to do anything with it except getting to know it better from as calm a presence as you can bring. Do you have any habits of reacting to suffering that make it hard for you to bring a calm, friendly presence to it?

Then come back more fully to your breathing again, and for the next two minutes or so—not very long—immerse yourself in breathing. So that's all that you're really doing. Your attention is, best you can, connected to breath for two minutes, letting go of everything else.

Ababa: Letting go of everything else. Ababa: Letting go of everything else. Ababa: Letting go of everything else. Ababa: Letting go of everything else. Ababa: Letting go of everything else. Ababa: Letting go of everything else. Ababa.