

The Four Noble Truths - (Part 3)

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So to take these *Four Noble Truths* as one of the essential keys that the Buddha was offering to penetrate into our life to some degree of freedom and awakening. To really clarify our life, it requires us to be very honest about suffering, and then to be even more honest about our role in that suffering. And our role here is, you know, in calculating this term, *taṇhā*, thirst. So there are a lot of synonyms I've been using for it: craving, clinging, thirsting, holding, resisting. Somehow, even we, in seeing, being very, very responsible, very honest about this in ourselves, and then beginning to learn, Where is it that I can let go? How is it I can let go? How does letting go happen? Where is it? Whatever the conditions set into place, the possibility of letting go?

So there has to be some wisdom here, understanding that in order to really deal with our suffering, there has to be some willingness to look at ourselves more deeply, and to look: What is my role in this? And where is it that I'm holding? Where is the possibility for me to let go, to intuit that, to feel and to see it directly? And as for some things, that's very obvious. You can just see what I'm clinging to. At other times, it might take months or years of presence, of study, of investigation, of concentration, to be able to see some of the deeper roots of where the clinging might be.

So that in Buddhism, then, the task for each of us is to study suffering, and to study to understand what it is we are to let go of. So there's to be some willingness to look at this question: What is it I can let go? Even if I can't let go of it right now, what is it? What's my role? It's my responsibility. What can I let go of? What will be useful to me to look at so I can find? Where is it that I'm—what is it? What will be useful to look at in myself to understand what I can let go of in this issue of suffering?

So, make sense at saying, make sense enough. So what I'd like now, we have, we just take another fifteen minutes or so, is I'd like you to go back into the dyad you had before. And

there's two people joined on Katina Goat. Maybe you can become a pair, so go back into your pairs you had before. And I'll ring a bell, so, you know, with a switch. But you have about six, seven minutes for each of you to talk about this very challenging teaching, that this teaching of looking at ourselves, and trying to understand: what is it that we contribute? Where's the holding or the thirsting ourselves? And what is it that we can let go of?

So what is your relationship to this? If you look at yourself or explore on your own this possibility of you letting go of something, what happens to you? What's your relationship to that? What thoughts do you have? What protests do you have? What do you discover? What were you saying it this way? What aspect of your life do you think would be useful to look at in trying to understand how you cling, how you grasp? That makes sense as a question. Where would be useful to look at to understand where you're clinging? Where are you grasping now?

When you do this exploration, I wonder if I can't—I feel like I can never stop saying this enough. As you're exploring this for yourself, not for the sake of the person who's listening. So if you find yourself explaining something that you know all too well, the whole full story, then, you know, summarize it really quickly because you want to get to the cutting edge, growing edge of your understanding, to understand something new. Some people actually like to close their eyes when they do this, and just kind of—so it's more internal than exploration. So I want you to go back to your partners and decide who's going to start, and then I'll ring the bell when it's time to switch. So there is an excuse me. There is a non-excuse me. Let in, come back.

So there is a Buddhist scholar who, a Pāli scholar, knows the ancient language of the Buddha. And when he translates the expression *Four Noble Truths*, which is usually in English, he translates it a bit differently. His translation is the **four ennobling truths**, the four ennobling truths. And so to experience—or, you know, a lot of people have experience with suffering, but just to experience suffering on its own is not ennobling. We have to bring something, to bring a certain kind of attention or presence or engagement with the suffering, that somehow we get ennobled or it becomes an ennobling activity. And the same thing with clinging, grasping, or thirsting: it can be ennobling or not depending on what we bring to it.

So I think of this certain kind of dignity and nobility to bringing attention to suffering and to clinging. And I think it's somewhat important to understand, because it's very easy to think that this is why Buddhism is such a dark religion. You know, these Buddhists, you know, all the talk about suffering, and they rub my nose in my suffering, but the point is that this is a path to becoming ennobled, becoming dignified, or becoming free. And it's a very dignified

or respectful, a very important process, a very maturing process to engage in this. And so we're not asking just suffering for suffering's sake. We're asked to meet our suffering in a way that is ennobling, maturing, deepening for ourselves.

So part of the practice of Buddhism is to learn how to do that, what kind of presence and mindfulness and concentration is needed in order to engage properly with our suffering, then to understand our clinging. But in a sense, this part of the *Four Noble Truths* first, too, is more like the descent, I know, into it all, and now we're about to turn a corner and start the ascent. And appropriately, we'll start with lunch. And so what I'd like to do—you think we could have the lunch break be forty-five minutes? Those of you done a lot, forty-five minutes is enough this time, because we ran a bit late, and so let's take it until one-thirty. And you're welcome to talk—what? Oh, because you go out to eat. Boy, you're clinging to that every time you come here. Well, there are fast food joints nearby. Ahhh, little food and the subway. And I don't know. Anyway, let's try forty-five minutes and don't get indigestion, you know? And then we'll start. And so if you please, you enjoy your lunch. You can talk during lunch time. You set up the tables inside or outside. Take chairs outside if you like to sit outside. Just bring them back in again. If none of the air conditioners are on—I think this air conditioner is set too low, it gets you cold in here. Come on.

Now we come to the third noble truth, and the instructions in the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness is to know the cessation, is to know cessation. To know this, the cessation, the ending of clinging, grasping, thirsting, the ending of suffering. And it kind of follows, you know, directly from the second noble truth: There is clinging, and there's the end of clinging. The two go together. And this is the kind of, you know, the good news of Buddhism. And to choose to have to use the word cessation as the expression for the Third Noble Truth hides the fact that this is good news. When cessation doesn't sound like a big word, we don't use the word very often. And what does it mean after all? But this is the happiness, the peace, the awakening, the freedom, the liberation that the Buddhist path is pointing towards. So this is really the good news.

And then, in terms of cessation, there's a number of freedoms. There's a number of ways in which that can be understood. One is—there's two major ones I would like to mention now. One is that as we experience something like our suffering, we can bring a kind of presence to it and awareness to it, that the awareness itself somehow is spacious enough, accepting enough, allowing enough, open enough, that we're not suffering because of the suffering. There's, you get, there's a shift of perspective, and it's possible to, in a sense, identify, live in the perspective that can hold the suffering without being identified or caught or living in the

suffering itself. Does that make sense? A shift of perspective, like thinking outside the box, so it's like thinking out, being outside the box of your, of the maze of suffering and clinging and all that, and in stepping out and seeing, Oh, there it is.

And that shift can have a visual, felt sense to it of place, space, spaciousness, ease, peace, calm, a little bit, a sense of healthy remove or distance from the suffering of all that, and at ease. There can be a sense of ease in that. And that's very important to have some sense of that, because if you don't have some sense of a place of calm removed from the suffering, from the fire, then you think the only option is to get rid of the fire, the pain, the suffering, right? But you don't necessarily have to get rid of it. It's possible to have this clear knowing of suffering, of clinging. And in that knowing itself, there's something about the knowing, when it's very pristine or very clear or very stabilized, that the knowing itself has a quality of freedom or awakening or relief or release in it itself.

So again, repeating myself, it's very important, because if you don't know that, then you keep attacking the problem as if the problem has to go away, and there is a certain kind of maturity and freedom that can be had, not by making something go away, but by becoming bigger than it or stepping outside of it. That's one kind of freedom, one kind of cessation, ending of being entangled with what's going on. Then there's another kind of freedom, or other kind of liberation or cessation. And that is that the very problem, the suffering and the cause of suffering itself, comes to an end. Not simply that we accommodate the suffering by having a more spacious kind of presence, but actually there's somehow the root suffering for, the root clinging for that suffering is somehow let go of and doesn't arise again.

Now, that can be relatively short term—if you are clinging to having dessert after lunch, and you begin suffering because, you know, where is dessert? I guess there were some cookies, right? But you know, you know where I'm suffering. I want more dessert. Why? You know, this and that. And you see that it's just dessert, and I had my fill, basic, content and happy. You know, I probably can't get indigestion if I have that, so I'll just let go. The desire for dessert may be relatively easy—until the next meal, and then it arises again. There might be a certain clinging to wanting to be seen in certain ways, and so you see that, Oh, I'm trying to prove myself and show everyone how wonderfully profound my understanding of Buddhism is. So I'll ask the most profound question I can think of and stump Gil. And now you see, Oh, I'm just trying to show off, and so you see that I don't need to do that, and you can let go of that very pretty easily. So sometimes things are pretty, can be pretty easy, and then they arise later. And sometimes it's possible to somehow penetrate or settle certain kinds of clinging so it may never arise again.

And I'm thinking of a woman who came to retreats with me, a series of retreats, and she came back one year and said, You know, after last year's retreat, before that retreat, I was very judgmental. I was always judging people, judging people negatively, very critically. I was constantly—going to a retreat, it was outside my normal life. It's like a constant theme, as is judgment. And I don't know what happened in that last retreat, but since that last retreat a year ago, I've stopped judging people. So I don't know now. It's been many years, and I know it's come back. But that's, you know, a year, you know, something that's kind of deep in her person, in a personality. To have that kind of come to an end for a whole year, it's pretty dramatic, I think, you know. So with a lot of things, it can come to an end—certain cravings, addictions. I need to have that in a certain way. I need, you know, and you can see through it, and it's, you know, and we're no longer interested.

So there's a kind of freedom that can be called a kind of stepping back and accepting or allowing or accommodating what's going on. And then the kind of freedom that can happen when something actually disappears, actually finishes and settles or settles down. And then, for the kind of freedom that comes when things come to an end, there's a kind that is temporary, just as good for a little while. And then there's that which is much more permanent and abiding. In any case, one of the things the Buddha is asking us to do here is to know cessation, to know what it's like. And later, in other places, he talks about knowing what it's like to be without the hindrances, knowing what it's like to be without attachments. So one thing is to kind of look at clinging, look at attachments, to look at suffering. And some people then will kind of, once it's done with, they'll forget about it and go on with their life and do something else. But my reading of the Buddhist teaching is it's actually very important, when something has come to an end, some suffering or some cause of suffering, to spend a little time getting a visual, felt sense or sense of what it's like, the absence of that clinging, of that suffering, and that has a number of advantages.

One is that it gives you a reference point of what it's like to be without clinging, and it kind of reminds the body, kind of, This is a good place to be. This is a nice thing. And so it strengthens that place, you know, by appreciating it. It strengthens it, and maybe even deepens it a little bit, and by becoming familiar with it, it might be easier to let go into it in the future. So I know this place. This is a place, you know. It has benefits or advantages. In this place, I can feel a sense of well-being. I can feel the sense of compassion, the sense of creative thinking that can arise in that place where I'm not caught up in things. And that's a really good thing. And so in the future, when you realize you're about to let go, you're clinging to something, you're more willing to let go, because you know that the place of letting go, the place you let go into,

is a great place. It's a nice place, make sense.

So there's clinging, and then there's the ending of clinging, the release of it. And as I've been teaching this week, there are two general senses of letting go. There's letting go of something, and then there's letting go into something. And most people think of letting go of something as being the main name of the game, but there's also letting go into something. And whenever you let go of something, you're letting go into something else. They go hand in hand. And so if we let go of clinging, we let go into a sense of ease or openness. If we let go of hate, maybe we let go into friendliness or loving-kindness or compassion. If we let go of confusion, maybe we let go into clarity, understanding. Maybe not. But at least we let go into a sense of, maybe, ease or peace. There's a kind of letting go into something.

And so the idea of when I talk about the cessation as the third noble truth, it might, for some people, hide the fact that there is a cessation of one thing is kind of like the arising of something else, or to say it a different way, maybe a better way. When something ceases, it allows something else to be revealed. And I like the word revealed because that is not up to you, you know, like I have to figure out something here. Something shows itself. So when you let go of clinging, what's the opportunity there? What's the learning there? What is it that gets revealed and shown to you? What is it that's really good that happens as a result? And having some sense of the benefits of letting go are really important, because without that, some people are unwilling to let go because, you know, that's the only thing they know, i.e., holding on. And if you feel like letting go actually is a really good thing, and maybe a trustworthy thing. Some people are afraid to let go because they're afraid of the sense of defenselessness or the sense of something that there might arise when you let go. And so, you know, I'll be vulnerable then. If I let go, then I'll be vulnerable. And people take advantage of me or this or that. But if you have some sense of something really good that comes with letting go, it not only may be a place of peace, but it might also be a place of strength or places of greater understanding, better understanding of how to take care of yourself in ways from that place. So it's important to get some sense of the benefits or what it's like, the good side of letting go, of cessation.

And I'd like to suggest that each of you have had lots of experience of this, even though you might not realize this yet. I apologize for telling you what you should be, what you should be like. You'll forgive me, I hope, but I say that all of you have had some experience of letting go, of ending, of cessation, a certain degree of clinging or holding or suffering, and don't underestimate the value of what you've done already, the experience you've had already. So now the question is, on the other, what's the other side of that? What do you know about

the benefits of the well-being or the positive aspects of having done that, letting go, making sense? That's the question. And so it might be you know something really simple. The fact that—I mean, I don't know why this comes to mind as an example. But you were driving here today, and of course you were in a hurry to get here because it was so important, and see. And so you came to a stop sign, and now you came to—people came to the same stop sign, you know, intersection, same time as you. And literally, you had the right of way, but you can see the other people kind of jumping at the bit to get through. And so you let go of your sense of needing to get to IMC two seconds faster, and see, let go, and let the other person go by. And it can be that simple. So what was it like to let go of, you know, I need to get here so quickly, those two seconds, you know? And then, letting go of that, and allowing expression of generosity, perhaps, to someone else. What's it like to appreciate that? Take a moment to appreciate the value of that, even though it may be such a teeny thing. The teeny things add up. Teeny things begin reconditioning the mind and make it easier and easier then to let go of the big things. So to train yourself in the small things, so that when it gets really big, you have the muscle, the letting go muscle stronger, and you have the wisdom, understanding of what that entails and what can come out of it.

So I think you all just had lunch. Is it safe to meditate? Because, I mean, one way of letting go is to sleep, right? You know, I put you all asleep, and they say you're at the *nibbāna*. Now, sleep is the poor man's *nibbāna*. So is it safe to meditate or share something more energizing? No, okay. So won't you take a meditative posture? And you might have to sit with a greater sense of, you know, dynamism. Sit strong, alert, like a noble person. Maybe, you know, there's ancient light, especially in the ancient times. We don't use it so much nowadays. But they used the language of being a warrior, and you don't bring out the warrior. You are really tired. Maybe part of the reason was they had only one meal back then. They were really tired after lunch, and so they had to really muster themselves up. So the warrior language really made sense. I don't know. But the point is, bring some energy into sitting here. And if you need to, open your eyes. So if your sleepiness begins taking over. So, but for now, close your eyes and take on just a little bit bigger breath than usual. Not just a little bit, just a teeny bit more than your bigger, deeper breath normally would. But as you do that, little deeper breaths, see if then you can kind of appreciate the uplifting quality, the energetic quality of breathing in, breathing in more deeply and more deeply than usual. Can you feel the uplift? And any kind of uplift sense in your spine, maybe especially your upper spine between the shoulder blades, right up into the vertebrae of your neck and let your breath return to normal, letting your breath breathe itself.

And as you experience your breathing, as you experience the body, as you feel how the body experiences breathing, imagine that your breathing is at the very centre of your being, and that everything else that occurs is peripheral to that, and you're not going to deny or ignore or push away anything. It can be in the background, or could be in the periphery, or very much be present, everything else. But you stay right at the middle of it all, right at the centre with the breath breathing, letting the breath kind of undulate and like waves, perhaps, up through everything. There's no sense of denying anything or pushing anything away. Whatever way you are feeling your body or your mind or your heart, whatever is going on in the room is all fine, but at the centre of it all you have your breathing. Stay there with the breath, ride the breath, float on the breath, let the in-breath and the out-breath fill the sails of your awareness.

Okay, I'm going to now give you a very important piece of instruction for this sitting and for the next little while, short while. I want you to completely stop paying attention. Don't notice anything. Stop any effort to be mindful. Let go of paying attention. And what I suspect is that for a good number of you, you can't do that unless you race off into your world of thoughts quickly and lose yourself there. In fact, for some of you, imagine that the very attempt to let go of attention makes you more attentive. Attention, awareness—it's not something you have to do. It's a natural functioning. Experiment for the next couple of minutes with letting go into awareness rather than trying to pay attention. Let go of everything that gets in the way of being attentive. Natural awareness: let go into awareness. The natural awareness, which is here, arises every time you exhale. Perhaps let go into awareness in this, well, and now as you exhale. See if you can extend the letting go into the very core of your being, into the marrow of your bones, the core of your heart. As you exhale, see if you can let go at the very deepest level that you have access to. It may be letting go, just have a sense of softening around or easing up on. Feel your way into the core of your being. Feel your way into it. And in feeling it as you exhale, let go, relax, ease up into whatever degree you can let go, ease up on, soften. Can you also experience something good from that, some sense of peace or joy or happiness or well-being? See if you can notice the other side of letting go. And as you let go, let go into that well-being, into the joy or the peace, whatever the qualities, however the qualities are felt for you. And as you breathe, see if you can breathe with the other side of letting go. And you can breathe with whatever sense of well-being or joy or peace or calm that might be there, as if the breath is like the wind fanning the flames of a fire, somehow strengthening it, letting it grow, that well-being. Experiment a little bit to see if you can relax into some well-being, some sense of freedom or peace.

Now, there is a cycle or a spiral where the more we let go, the more we are relaxed or at ease, the more sensitive we can be to more subtle forms of suffering and clinging, and then we can address those more subtle forms of suffering and clinging, and perhaps let go of them, and move into a deeper level of peace or well-being. And then that can really reveal something deeper: deeper clinging or suffering. Something may be subtle, but very deep, very tenacious, and were then fundamental to who we are, our personality. So too in this wonderful cycle: letting go, being more at ease, and at ease, revealing more places to let go, letting go of everything. So one of the things, one of the opportunities, or one thing on the other side of letting go, is the ability to see more clearly, more deeply. And so there's a wonderful cycle or spiral, then, of letting go, being still, or being able to lean more, having more clarity, and that greater clarity, being able to let go more deeply. It goes on and on. And then ultimately awakening with a capital A is when the deepest root of clinging in the mind lets go, a release from all clinging. There is no clinging, no clinging at all, characterizes or shapes the mind or the heart. The mind is not influenced by any kind of clinging at all. That kind of ultimate freedom, ultimate release. And now, it's a very radical transformation of a human being to have that happen.

And one of the ways the Buddhist tradition talks about that, as they talk about that happiness or that freedom, as being unconditioned. And what that means is that it's not shaped or conditioned by anything. It's not dependent on anything. Most things in life are conditioned or shaped or manufactured or cause and conditions come together to make it happen. So many forms of happiness as we have are conditioned. Happiness is: I feel happy today because my boss praises me. I got a raise. I'm happy today because I got that hot date that I wanted. Or I'm happy today because I won a lottery. I'm happy today because it's good weather. Maybe some of them are all reasonable forms of happiness, but they're all conditioned about things in the world being a certain way. Unconditioned freedom or happiness is not dependent on the conditions of the world. So it's a very deep and radical letting go that can happen that the Buddha is pointing to. When he is talking about cessation, it is pointing to the possibility of letting go, or letting go into a happiness or freedom, a peace which is not dependent upon anything being any particular way. That make sense. And along that, along the path towards that, there can be a lot of small letting go that build towards that, deepen, like a spiral or cycles that could go further and further closer towards it.

But it's very important to have a sense, to know that letting go is not just deprivation, you know, just letting go in a deprived state of being is letting go. In the teachings of the Buddha, he was very reluctant, seemingly, to describe what you let go into when you let go into

ultimate freedom. He seems to be happier to describe things then as in the *via negativa*, the absence of clinging, the absence, the absence of something to letting go. And some schools of Buddhism focus more on the positive description of what you let go into in this freedom and describe that quite a bit. There's a danger with both kinds of descriptions. The negative description, in the absence of letting go, letting go, it can just seem like it's some kind of annihilation. The positive description, that it is a wonderful thing you let go into, gives the sense that there's some thing, which is it, some condition, which is it, I got it, or I'm trying to get it, you know? And it's neither annihilation, nor is it some thing, which is it that you got. So for whatever reason, the Buddha seems to err on the side of just saying not that, not that, like *eko*. Other people err on the side, It's this. Maybe, but in some sense both are true. There's a middle way between them. So some of you look sleepy—one's posture, Sister. So what I would like you to do is if you could please quietly gather into groups of four.