

# 2010-01-10 The Four Noble Truths

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desire, suffering, four noble truths, buddhism, conflict, people, understand, peace, craving, opposition, first noble truth, noble, second noble truth, life, happiness, clinging, truth, world, deep, driven

## SPEAKERS

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So it's the custom here and I emcee for the first talk that I give every Sunday, the first Sunday talk I give every year, and the first Monday talk to give it on the Four Noble Truths. And so I'll do that today. And the reason for that is that the Four Noble Truths lay at the foundation at the pinnacle, and all the way through in between, in Buddhism and Buddhist practice, that, in some sense, transcends all of Buddhist practice is an expansion on these core teachings, the Four Noble Truths. And so here we begin a new year, I thought it's nice to start the new year, emphasizing the importance of this. And perhaps as the year goes along, you can refer back to the teachings in the Four Noble Truths. I think of the Four Noble Truths as certainly as precious jewel that Buddhism maintains and supports and teaches, I also think of it as a protection. That by referring to them or practicing with them, that these four truths really protect one's oneself from one's practice protect oneself from oneself, protects oneself in one's life as one goes along. The very, very useful reference point to constantly come back to and refer to, they can be applied in many different ways. And so, there's one teacher who defines the first noble truth that truth usually in English is called the truth of suffering. He defines it not by suffering, but the truth of stress. Because stress is much more broad kind of term than suffering. And then you find it can be very easily applied to us. Stress Reduction, just you know, very simple, you know, you cert you're, you're, you're tense at the traffic light, turn red. And, and so you want to kind of deal with that tension. So you noticed that the tension comes from your desire to get somewhere fast. And so to reduce your stress, you reduce that you kind of soften and let go of that desire. So you can sit there and maybe just watch your breath as you're waiting for the light to turn green. pretty small and innocent. It's not very religious, but it's an application of the Four Noble Truths. And then the Four Noble Truths apply to the deepest teachings Buddhism has to do with a deepest pointing to the human psyche or the heart, that Buddhism points to the possibility of the human heart to uproot the deepest places of suffering the deepest places of clinging and find the heart really freed opened up, transparent luminously empty of suffering and clinging Many years ago, when I was my early 20s, I went to see an old girlfriend, who by that time was going to medical school. And, and we had dinner at her house with her roommates. And perhaps I was a little bit intimidated by all these medical students, smart people and all that. But anyway, she asked me at dinner since I was involved by that time in Buddhism, she asked me, you know, what was the, you know, essential teaching of Buddhism, I was interested. And I recited to her the Four Noble Truths, and probably did a little bit kind of from memory rather than really understanding but that referred to it. And I remember leaving that dinner walking through San Francisco, and kind of feeling Oh, you know, that was kind of embarrassing. Here I was involved with one of the world's great religions. And all I had to say about it was the Four Noble Truths and Two years later, I remember looking thinking, remembering back on that kind of reflection I had about being embarrassed by talking about the Four Noble Truths. And that maybe I should have been embarrassed because I didn't probably really understand them. But, but there's no need to look see the Four Noble Truths as being kind of the kind of grade school Buddhism might be easy to easy to explicate or to describe. But to really apply it to

one's life is really a powerful thing to do. The word noble is interesting, the Four Noble Truths. There's one Pali scholar is very fluent in the language of Pali and scholar for a long time.

And he translates it not as the Four Noble Truths, but the Four Noble Truths. And because these are truths that have They're supposed to transform us or change us. And they change us into people that are upright that dignity in the ancient language kind of nobility Noble. And so these are the insights these are the understanding that allow that transformation to happen. So the Four Noble Truths there is another way that they are tradition understands the word because the Pali word the grammar of it is a little bit ambiguous. So it's multi Vaillant. So, you how you translate the term into English, you actually have to translate it three or four different ways to get all the different original meanings of how that term is. and noble truth, there's just one possibility, but the preferred way in the tradition is would be to translated as the truth of the noble ones. So not so these are the people who have had some kind of profound transformation of the heart around transformation that allows them to Really free their hearts or minds of clinging, grasping, of fear of distress, of ambition and greed, that they would see the world in a new way. They have insight, and that insight that seeing the world in a new way, is said to be seeing in through the perspective of these four truths. So, this is how an enlightened person would see things, not anything at all mean you see lots of things to see right. But really, how they see the essence the essential aspect of what in Buddhism, we can call the spiritual life that is understood this way. And so, the, it begins with this called the truth of dukkha and dukkha is more, as I said, often translated to English English as suffering But suffering is kind of a somewhat vague word or general word and, and does doesn't really do justice to the Pali word, the Indian word dukkha, and probably no single word would Some people prefer just to keep it in Pali. And so then we can pick out a sense of all the different aspects of it. But certainly stress is one term for it. The opposite of it is sukha. And sukha also has a number of different meanings. And do this prefix do means kind of like bad in Pali and assume means good. So that's kind of the contrast. But sukha is often translated as happiness, but also often translated as ease. So whatever the opposite of ease and happiness is, is dukkha. So maybe sometimes it's stress. Sometimes it's maybe suffering, distress. The I think very interesting Word to think of as the first noble truth the dukkha is the word conflict. And I would like to use the word conflict today maybe as the as a way of kind of entry into the Four Noble Truths. Now, Buddhism doesn't rely on the authority of God's right God, to tell you what you should do. So in terms of finding what's meaningful for your life, and what's important way to live your life. Buddhism doesn't have some authoritative book upon which says, This is what it means to be human being and this is what you should do. And to be fulfilled human being you should do these things. And if you don't rely on tradition or external deities, or on, you know, Bibles or something to tell you this is what you should be doing, you know, then what what do you use as a criteria for finding your way to find out what you know, what is the fulfilled human life what's a meaningful human life to be to be had? Even back in the ancient Greek times, the Greeks, who some of the Greeks, philosophers, who also were grappling this very question, use something as it was very experiential, immediate in this lifetime as a reference point for understanding what was a fulfilled or satisfied or meaningful life. And they used the some people have translated as happiness, others as capacity to thrive human thriving, but the capacity to be for human to be happy, and many so many quests or pursuits that people have in their life. If you've, if you look underneath why a person is doing it, is to some some sense of happiness or well being that they're trying to experience.

And, and somehow, that reference point or the measurement of well being or happiness or thriving in this lifetime here now is one of the fundamental Until important and maybe only criteria you can use for understanding what is a meaningful life, if you don't rely on these kind of external sources of authority manuals to tell you this is that thou shalt do this, you'll be fulfilled in the next lifetime if you do this or whatever. And it seems a little bit are to some people to hear that happiness or well being can be a

reference point for meaningful life. Because isn't that selfish? Isn't a meaningful life have to do with self sacrifice? And that's part of the message has been given by some religious traditions that deliver meaningful life you have to do a lot of self sacrifice. And then, you know, you know, that's, you know, that's what's meaningful, but they do that, to be happy is selfish runs has occurred through I think much of some of Western culture. But what else could there be if you don't have these extort external authorities mean certainly not going to say that the more suffering the better, you know, if I can, you know, you get there that whoever accumulates the most suffering by the time you die wins. That doesn't work. What are the one of the biggest challenges though to suffering as a reference point for a meaningful life would be the suffering of others. And the idea was you should be compassionate supportive of other people to help other people. But how do you know what's supportive and helpful for them? What's the measurement for that? It's their happiness and well being and welfare right. And so still that becomes the reference point for understanding how to what to do in our life. So there has to be some understanding of well being and happiness and so in order to kind of move towards that, you have to understand something about happiness or well being what what has provides a welfare for you and you have to know something about the opposite of that. You have to know something about that which is the opposite of happiness. In a kind of simplistic way, Buddhism uses the word dukkha to represent that. And so the first noble truth is the truth of suffering. It does not say that life is suffering, which is often a modern kind of popular way of talking about the first noble truth. Because if it said, if the Buddha had said, life is suffering, you know, well, then we'll make the best of it, I guess, and get on with it. And, and it's not life isn't suffering, but life contains suffering. They're suffering within the human life. But it's not inherent or it's part of life. There's process possible to live a human life that's free of this, this dukkha, whatever it might be. And, and so just a statement that there is suffering. So people find this a huge tremendous relief, that when they hear a Buddhist Buddhism say they're suffering in this life, because they've been used to, they feel it, they know it. But they often some people find that their people they know around them, their religious traditions around them are always trying to deny it. And trying to put a pretty pretty face on it then kind of make life look nice and sweet. And they say, but no one, you know, no one wants to look at the big elephant in the room where no one wants to say that the emperor has no clothes. The or maybe they're putting too many clothes in the hamper. And it can't really see the person for what it is. And so Buddhism has a very realistic approach where it's insists that if you really want to become a mature, upright, transformed person, dignified, noble person, you have to really kind of wake up to or see clearly the suffering you have the number one Thai teacher that has Spend time with was asked was explained it was asked somehow or was done explaining about these four noble truths and he said that if you're thinking example was he like out in the hot sun really hot day in Thailand is really hot. And he wanted to ask us, you know what's the difference between just suffering because it's hot and suffering that understands the Four Noble Truths. And he said the difference is that the heat is a noble truth of suffering, if you understand where the freedom is experiencing that heat, if you just suffer because of the heat, with no understanding of freedom, then you just old fashioned, regular, boring suffering. You know, you've had a lot of it already, you know, it's kind of gets it through while it gets cold. And, and I say that because the Buddha said it's important to get disenchanted with your suffering. Isn't that a great idea? probably most of you are not disenchanted enough with your suffering. But, so I take it to as too important, but Buddhism so but understand a suffering and see and kind of look at it directly, honestly and see the possibility of freedom in that experience, not because you're supposed to suffer like some tradition say you know you, you know you should really suffer a lot and an XP and kind of purify yourself have you know your your defilements your sins by suffering more suffering, the better to really cleanse yourself. Buddhism doesn't emphasize that you should suffer and you'd suffer better and more. It says if you suffer if it should happen one day that you suffer, then train yourself to look at it carefully. So you can begin understanding what's going on there. And if you train stuff, look at it carefully understand there, then it big that starts the process of becoming ennobling. And a huge part of Buddhist practice is to learn how to relax into our suffering, not to suffer better, but to be able to open it up and break it up. Begin teasing apart the elements of it, and

finding how to where the freedom might be in that experience. So the first noble truth is a truth this dukkha. I like to call Duca conflict, that there's conflict in life and there's a lot of conflict. And one of the key aspects of where conflict arises is when things are not happening according to what we want. When we want it to be one way and things and the relative reality is not cooperating. Then there's conflict between you and reality. Things You might want something to happen and something different is going on. And so that's where the conflict is. It could be that it's something is something is happening, that you don't want to be happening. And that's a conflict, you want something different to be happening. It could be that in that that kind of covers a large territory, that what you want or don't want is different than what's actually going on. And so there's conflict. So what do we do with that disparity between what we want or don't want and what's actually happening? And someone once said, I think it was maybe Bruce Friedman, who said something like, if there's what do you say somewhere if there's a conflict between you and reality, reality usually wins? Somebody said. Reality is a really tough, really tough opponent. If you argue with reality, reality usually wins. As it Bruce's quote, Yogi Bruce, here argue with reality, reality usually wins or always wins. So you know it. So if your desire is different from what's happening, you can certainly address what's happening and try to change it and sometimes we can, it's appropriate to do that. But in terms of finding the Buddhist path, or finding the second noble truth, it's not a matter of finding what's wrong with the world and changing it. It's a matter of looking within and understanding the nature of that desire that wants things to be different in how they are. So this is a very important point. If you want to find the path of fixing something in the world, you better understand something about the world, what's needed there. You all have street smarts, do research, whatever. And that's important to do. So the path of social change the path of, you know, something out there has its own kind of rules or own kind of way it's done. If what you want to do is to find the path to freeing your heart. You won't find that path. By changing the world.

It's important to change the world. I hope you all go out and change our world that leads us to do something. But you don't find a path by changing the world. You don't find that the path to your heart. By changing the world. You find a path to freeing your heart, by looking in your heart are looking in your mind and if you look there In terms of that conflict that exists, that lack of alignment, disharmony that might exist between you and reality, then you have to look at the nature of those desires, the desire to act if you want something to be different, or you want things to be certain way, and need to look at those desires and really understand what they are. And there's a wide range of desires we can have. We can have desires, which are really wonderful, appropriate to have. And even though they're wonderfully appropriate, they still are out of harmony with what's possible, what's going on. And then, and then if we say, Well, I feel resentful, because I can't get what I want. The problem is the world and I get angry with the world. That's your choice, of course. But if you do that, then you continue living this world of conflict. If you want to be free of the conflict or fear this suffering or stress, you have to really get to terms with how you hold your desire your relationship to desire to one Do you believe every desire you have you? Some people give a lot of authority to desire, this desire to have something or desire to push something away. Some people their God is their desire, because what other whatever the higher God could there be? And but what's your relationship to desire? Some people latch on to it and hold on to it, you see it with kids pretty dramatically. And, you know, it's like, you know, what else do they have to hold on to or relate to or their desire. And some people are afraid of the desire, that's the relationship they have. Maybe they've been burned too many times, in many ways. And so they pull back or they feel it's not okay to have desires, and so their relationship is one of not honoring their desire. It's very important to look at how we relate to desire our beliefs around desires or relationship Do it for two reasons. One is because desires can be one of the primary the primary source for this conflict that exists. And the other is, we need to have desire to walk the path to freedom. And so if you hold your desires and check into like not okay to desire, then you probably want to apply yourself to something as ennobling as a path of liberation. So, how do you hold the desire for you know, for real

transformation? Or how do you hold the desire for transforming the world and helping others. It's not a matter of getting rid of all desire. It's a matter of understanding something about our relationship to desire. So we know what desires are appropriate to have, and what desires to let go of, to know how to even even good desires. It's also a matter of learning how to hold those desires, so they don't cause more conflict. So I have a little thought experiment for you. Around conflict.

What if I tell you that I'm in opposition to someone? There's someone out there that we have some differences differences going on. I'm an opposition. So just kind of what what comes up for you to tell me at the moment but what comes up now you hear that? And now, I say, there's someone out there. I'm in a wholehearted opposition with wholehearted opposition with is there a difference? What's the difference between those two ways of being an opposition just regular old fashioned opposition and enter its opposition wholeheartedly. off or something, someone I hope you somebody I'll say what I had in mind.

Yes,

what I felt was a heartfelt thing where I thought the second one was much more positive. Because if you know you're in wholeheartedness, either opposition or with then it's there's an honesty to that there's a recognition. Whereas if you're just in conflict with someone it's you centric to me when I heard someone else all the way in the back,

I guess I felt the opposite of the last person.

When you said the four I feel conflict, like felt kind of a normal what I would say normal version. But when you said I deeply have this conflict, or I could just feel my heart kind of crunching it was

much more intense, the desire was much stronger.

Great, okay.

My

reaction was similar to genies in that when you said the second one, the whole hearted conflict. It made me feel like there wasn't room for anything else. Hmm,

okay. Over here,

I keyed on the wholehearted word. Mind, I had a positive connection with it. And I felt that if it were I, that you still embrace my humanity and the connection to that humanity left open, many paths that we might walk together.

Great, thank you. One more here.

But mine was similar, where I kind of felt like a wholehearted was sort of an embracing and holding of opposition. Whereas so kind of gave room to see it, where you are and in relation and the just opposition to me to sound like a wall up against where you're not really willing to look at what it is you're opposed to



Great. Okay, thank you. So of course, you're all right. Because it all has to do with how we use these words and also the history of head of opposition and using those words. So different people have different reference points for it. But the reference point the way I was thinking of it was more like how the positive side of it that in my mind when you're wholehearted that, you know, theoretically, at least my feeling is that you're not divided in the sense of the way that greed or ego would divide you. And when you're wholehearted, something else is going on. Besides, there's no room in a sense in wholeheartedness with Being self centered. And so you enter into that you enter into it into the opposition of the conflict with something else happening besides the conflict itself. The wholeheartedness is as a player in it, and the wholeheartedness is, is a feeling that the continuity of the conflict deposition is not the key thing that's happening, but rather what's maybe more important is this wholeness that's there. And what is it? How do we enter into with a sense of wholeness or open heartedness or heartfeltness in a situation that it's like a third party in the in the conflict? That makes some sense? I'm saying, maybe not so much. So some people does some people doesn't. So so. So the second noble truth is a truth that thirst, clinging or grasping, craving is the source or the condition for conflict. So I said, so not the only source. But if you want to find the path to free in your heart, that's the source, the origin of the condition, they have to really look at in a deep way. And another way that I like to think of it is that what is this? What is the way in which desire craving? hungering for something prevents us from being wholehearted. Presents prevents the heart from being open, transparent, full, relaxed. And if the desire you have allows those qualities of wholeness or fullness or openness, relaxation, perhaps you're holding it just the right way. Because if you hold it that way, then you probably don't have to act on it. But if you have to act on it, then you're actually driven. And I love the English term driven or driven this as one of the translations of this tun na, or craving or thirsty. that defines a six second noble truth that if we're driven, we're going to be in conflict. If we're driven, we're going to end up being stressed, stressed, if we're driven, we're going to end up feeling somehow some suffering in that very drivenness. And then we know there's lots of examples of people who are driven, who drive the expression English and we think is special as you drive yourself to the grave. So driven. So now in the Buddhist definition of the second noble truth, there's an interesting turn expression, which is almost never talked about in trends in discussions about the second level trades people usually people like me, usually Just stop right there. So, the second noble truth is a truth of how craving or thirsting or so desire and a certain kind of way, gives rise to dukkha gives rise to conflict. But there's an interesting, little bit more.

It is craving. So the Buddha defines and what is the noble truth of the origin of suffering? It is craving, because that's the common what's commonly taught that is accompanied by the by the, by the light and lust and delights in this in that. Isn't that interesting? It's desire craving that's companied by delight and lust. And what I find interesting about that is that Not always of course, but a very powerful fuel for desire is blessed and intensive delight, imaginary desire, anticipatory delight or actual delight that comes with it. That craving is not only something that is unpleasant, but it has sometimes within it the promise of pleasure or sometimes has pleasure as part and parcel of it. I've known people who have been involved in like a meditation retreats they get caught up in fantasy, they spend hours days and meditating, trying to meditate. But really involved in fantasy can be sexual fantasy, for example, all kinds of fantasies, but their positive fantasies and insensitive, fantasizing some something pleasant, and the hook that keeps them engaged and involved is the pleasure they get from the fantasy. There's fantasies of

in Grand divestment, no one I am. And you know, as you're building up this huge, wonderful, imaginary persona. And it might just be the pleasure of that. And then what's interesting on retreat is when people do it for such a long time, get really good at it. That if sooner or later, you see what the cost is that kind of thinking, and you realize how much stress how stressful it is, or how exhausting or tiring is to have

the mind constantly nying at this pleasure at this kind of fantasy going after it. And after a while people say enough. But sometimes it's hard to let go of it because the pleasure that's there. So in studying desire, what's the role that pleasure or lust or delight has in how the glue that keeps us locked in to those desires that we have. So Buddhism causes us to look deeply into The way that the second noble truth is in ennobling how to nobles us or transforms us, is if we look deeply at to understand the nature of our desire, how we desire, how our desire works for us, as we do that, to begin kind of stepping back from it, and not being in its grip, not being caught by it, I've been pushed around by or driven by it. When we when we step back enough, but not driven by it, or caught by it enough, then there comes a time when we can start relaxing the very desire we have it because desire, craving is always an activity of the mind. There's always a doing going on. And it's a doing which is part of the software of the mind of the heart, not the hardware. And so it's possible to start to relax, the tension, that activity of desiring and as it begins, So first, we step back from it and see it for what it is. So there's desire And no longer be in it in its grip, and we're no longer in its grip, then if we can just stay present for it, it begins to soften and relax, we can relax around it. And it's quite beautiful, to have an experience of craving, the whole range of it any kind desire at all, to actually watch it, dissipate and dissolve and be left not with nothing. But be left with wholeheartedness. To be left with ease, to let be left with peace, to be left with this beautiful kind of beautiful qualities of heart to be left with happiness. So to look deeply and to relax, let deep deeply and let go. So that the clinging the grasping the desire can sees not as a way of diminishing who we are becoming by enhancing who we are to becoming with the blue illustration cause a noble person to be a noble from that process. So, there's first truth of suffering. The second is the origin of suffering. And the third double truth is the possibility of ceasing or ending that suffering by letting go of clinging. Now there's a very interesting thing that happens. If you have let go of your clinging in some deep way. Imagine some time in your life. When you were the most peaceful most Eddie's most contented, most satisfied. You're just kind of there. No particularly desire for anything anymore. You were satiated, happy, contented, conferred wonderful walk up in the hills. had a nice lunch, nice conversation with your friend. You lay down on the oak tree, the weather was just perfect. You took a nice nap, and you woke up really refreshing that nap and everything was right with you. I've been correcting the world for like, you know, at least for the next 30 seconds. And, and, and those that little period of time there where you really felt that you know, peace and well being then imagine in that peaceful state there rose Rose is really compelling desire for what? For something and you could if you watch, you could feel how that compelling desire I gotta have it now erases that piece that you experienced. And you can see that movement and if you see it clearly enough, you can, you can say, Wow, look at that. I'm grasping onto that desire that one thing and now I've lost my well being that I had. I wouldn't say that I'm suffering Exactly. But I don't feel as good as I did. 30 seconds ago when I felt all this peace

when you've attained some level of Peace or well being, it's quite steep and stable. It becomes a reference point for seeing very clearly what it's like to grasp and what happens in someone who's enlightened. Why the Four Noble Truths or the truths of the noble ones, is because noble ones enlightened people have a vantage point of peace, where they see very clearly, what is what it called, The cost is beginning to grasp, and how that grasping dissipates the well being and peace that they have. That makes sense. So and really the Buddha understood the Four Noble Truths, not theoretically, but he understood it when he became enlightened, when he saw the deep state of peace. This is the way that he could see. This is this was the insight that he was able to live his life by, because he had that vantage point of peace. Why would you so you're laying there and The oak tree quite happy and peaceful. And you have this really burning desire you have to right now, I have to know what's on television tonight. And I got to do it. You know, where's the closest? You know, I guess now I was gonna say a TV Guide but now it's like where's the closest Wi Fi connection so you know, some people can check on their phones or something and now is now hopefully have enough sense Wait a minute, that

desire giving up sacrificing my peace for what's on TV tonight knowing what it is. That's not worth it. Someone has a profound enough peace begins questioning a lot of things. Not just because on TV, but you know, is that worth pursuing. So the Four Noble Truths were originally designed or come up with, not as a description of going from suffering to freedom, but a description of how we go from freedom back to suffering. Interesting. So as a truth of the noble ones. The fourth noble truth is the path that noble ones walk. It's not a matter of following a path of training, so you can be free of suffering. But if you have attained a deep state of peace, deep state of harmony, deep states of well being, whatever it is like it possible, then this is the way ANOVA one would walk. You would understand the Four Noble Truths, you understand how you lose your peace by clinging, which was the first step and they thought that you'd have an intention to live in such a way that you don't take on things that keep you in the grip of desire. You would not you would live ethically, you would speak in ways they're in harmony. That peace, you would follow a livelihood that's in harmony with that kind of sense of well being insight you have. And you would engage in your mind in ways that also relate or kind of speak to or informed by this well being that you have. So right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration are all come out of that piece. So, the Eightfold Path, the Buddhist practice, has these two major perspectives from which it's seen. It's been seen from the vantage point of suffering, going to freedom or freedom and staying there. Peace and staying there. Peace and living a life that manifests that peace or live or training in such a way that we attain that peace. what's beautiful about the Eightfold Path? It's both it's both a training for how to find This deep suka, peace, happiness and the very same time it's the way to manifest and express that peace in our life. Isn't that beautiful? Before and after in some ways become the same. So may you all think about this and more importantly, may you all allow it to ennoble you. You all become enabled. Thank you very much.