

2012-01-09 Four Noble Truths

Thu, 8/20 6:11PM • 41:41

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, suffering, buddhism, stress, problem, life, four noble truths, religion, experiment, mind, desire, thirst, solution, truth, require, buddhist, eightfold path, second noble truth, starting, belief

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening, everyone. And Happy New Year. It's my custom at IMC that the first talk that I give every year be a talk on the Four Noble Truths. The four noble truths are teachings of the Buddha, which lay at the heart of what it is he was teaching. And it's been said that all of Buddhist teachings can come out of the Four Noble Truths or fit into the Four Noble Truths or one way or the other, or an expressions or support or intimately related to the Four Noble Truths. So I thought I would so that's the topic for today and So, one of the interesting ways of looking at the role of the Four Noble Truths to say what they are and a little bit, those of you don't know what they are, is that the Four Noble Truths state a problem. And in stating a problem or pointing to a problem, then the task is to discover what the solution to the problem is. And so you start with a problem. And one way of looking at the teachings of the Buddha is that they start by focusing on identifying a problem. And if you have the same problem, then maybe you're interested in the solution. If you don't have the problem, then are you can't see yours to see the problem that as the Buddha states, it you don't see Do yourself in that problem then you know, you can happily go do something else. And the significance of starting with a problem, I think stands in contrast or unhighlight. If you compare it with especially religions which religion is supposed to offer ultimate truths, ultimate values, ultimate perspectives on things is that it's some people say all religions are trying to address basic human problems, but many of the religions begin with not with a problem per se, but with an idea, a belief a tenant, that then almost almost states that the problem is or gives rise to the problem that you have to address. But the belief or the tenant of the religion re Might be a lofty might even be a true tenant. But there's a problem of believing it, or finding the authority for it to really understand what's being discussed. So for example, if you, if the religion starts with the belief in God, then it begs a lot of other questions. You know, how do you know what God is? Where do you find God? Who, who speaks for God? How do you know that whatever said about God is accurate or true. Once you believe in God, it's one thing to believe in God, but doesn't that then call for believing all kinds of secondary beliefs? Once you believe in God, then you have to kind of believe what God thinks or how you supposed to relate to God or, you know, it raises a lot of issues, and people have been debating these issues for thousands of years and struggling with them. And some people of course, just believe directly and so if you believe directly then you know it You don't question those things, but once you start questioning, it gets kind of tricky. So or if you believe that, that there is truth and that, that, you know, what is true is the definition or is the central focus of your religion, then again, begs a question, you know, well how do you know the truth? And how do you define the truth and how do you approach the truth and with what instruments or what what kind of reasoning mind or what kind of observation or how do you find truth and are there different perspectives that people have and are the truths the same and one culture as a different different culture, there's all these it gets kind of complicated. So,

you know, again, if you're embedded in a religious worldview, then you don't have that's so complicated. Just this is the way it is, but in a pluralistic society where you're bump up against many

people Different kind of religious points of view, it's hard to kind of grok or understand the basic beliefs that other people base their religion on. And, and so when people come to Buddhism, especially when Westerners come to Buddhism, people who've been acculturated in the Judeo Christian ethos, there has been a very strong tendency for people to when they look towards Buddhism, to look for the belief system, there's a tenant, there's something to believe. And if you and see it to kind of find and if you want to be a Buddhist, then you're supposed to believe those tenants, whatever those tenants might be. And, and then I remember when I was tea, I was a TA. At when I was a graduate student, I was teaching I was involved in those teaching for a class on Buddhism is an introductory course in Buddhism. And there was a young freshmen from another country was from Kentucky. And she had grown up deeply embedded in a Christian church. And then Kentucky kind of hadn't had much contact with other religions before. And here she was a freshman taking a class in Buddhism. And, and of course of the eyes in her class, her eyes got bigger and bigger. And that her eyes got the biggest most amazed when she learned that from the point of view of Buddhism. You can be a Christian as well as being a Buddhist. And this was a witty foreign idea because she was grew up in a culture and religious system where you had to believe in one religion one religion was the true and only religion. And you couldn't, you know, you know, their religion either was not you know, was simply not true, but to believe both just didn't work. So to hear that there was a religion Buddhism that didn't have that view. That's one and only true religion was It's a strange foreign idea to her. So we come in off and look for unifor for a belief system, something to believe and hold on to and I've known people very strongly kind of wanting to become a Buddhist and what I have to believe be a Buddhist or if I become a Buddhist, or I have to believe something. And I don't know if I want to be a Buddhist because I don't know if I want to believe anything. So this was my attempt to try to I don't know if I did well enough to point out as if there's problems or difficulty or challenges, if the, the entry point for you into a religious system is through a belief or attendant. There's evidence different entry point, if you start with a problem. And then the once you have once you understand there's a problem, then what's interesting is not believing something, but figuring out what the solution to that problem is if it's a problem which is worth pursuing. And so the Four Noble Truths, start with a prop with a problem. And so the question is, you know, we'll see if you have that problem or not. And it starts with the first of these truths. And the first of the truth is a truth that there is something in our world of human life. Something in Buddhism is called dukkha. The Pali word ancient Indian word, dukkha. And we're dukkha is sometimes seen as the opposite of sukha. sukha is usually translated as happiness or ease. Dukkha is usually translated to English as suffering or as some people will call it unsatisfactoriness. But suffering is a good one. Some people like the word stress as a translation. So the problem is the problem of suffering or the problem of Stress as opposed to the problem, for example, some religions have evil. Evil is a complicated thing.

How do you know what evil is? Who gets to define what evil is? Or sin? What is sin? And how do you get to define it? Sometimes people define sin in ways that very closely akin to how Buddhists define suffering. But I think when we're talking about sin, again, I don't know much about theology of sin. But it gets kind of complicated. And many people that I know in the West don't quite relate to the complexity that around this idea of sin and all that. But suffering or the popular right now is stress. And then we have stress reduction programs. So the problem is stress. And so the advantage of starting with a problem like suffering or stress, is that it's not a theory. It's not a belief. It's not an abstraction, but rather, it's something that you can actually experience for yourself, you can know it for yourself. Hopefully, if you're really stressed out, you know it, if you don't know, you're stressed out, you're in trouble. Which, which happens, unfortunately, way too much in our society, people are so driven sometimes that they don't really take into account how much stress they're building up, how they're living. And it's, you know, it's one thing to be stressed for a day. But to have stress kind of built into the way you approach your life day after day after day, after some years, a weak link in the system is going to give out your system, your psychophysical system. And for some people, the weak link, you know,

gives out and it's, you know, not so nice, that's pretty bad. And so, you know, it's quite impressive to me to watch how stress or strain or tension can persist, because people's attitude, the way they're thinking, the way they perceive their life or experience themselves in their life is constantly churning away by some kind of worry, or some kind of concern or some kind of attempt to try and get something. And so people carry with them ongoing stress. And when it's not recognized, then it builds and builds until such a point is recognized. But the idea here is stress or suffering is something that you can experience. No one you don't have to read a book, you don't have to believe some tentative religion. All you have to do is trust that you have the ability to experiences for yourself. So that's that's that's the starting point for Buddhism, that there is this this problem? The problem is something that doesn't require a religious book or teacher like myself or someone else to say that you know, but, but rather something that you can know for yourself. So if you know this for yourself, that there is that you experienced stress, you experienced suffering, you experienced this stress, you experienced some kind of ongoing sorrow or depression or distress. Then the question is, do you have to live with this? Is this kind of built into life the way it is that you're supposed to be this way? Or is there a solution or some way out of a life of ongoing and chronic stress or periodic stress? Some people maybe don't feel a lot of suffering, but they see that suffering or distress is coming or is likely to come. And so then they think, well, I wouldn't prepare myself. For that time in the future. when something comes along and tears apart my world. many people's worlds get torn apart just as we grow up and you know, and live our lives. I'm really impressed by the statistics that show what percentage of the population has had, you know, some major, you know, issue a major suffering major stress. And now I'm embarrassed that I've forgotten it already, because I read it yesterday. But, but the number of women in American society that have been raped is phenomenal. You know, and if we represent, you know, a representative cross section of our society, a lot of women in this room have been raped. Maybe not a majority, but you know, it's, it's, it's been carried here, and some men as well. And, and then who is it? How many people here have lost a parent when they're a child? Anybody here who's lost a child? How many have lost their jobs in a way that's been quite difficult? How many here has been homeless? There's, you know, there's so much that goes on. In our society, you know, in people's lives that cause tremendous amount of strain and stress, we're not talking about stress being an employee that, you know,

you know that you're, it's stressful to drive on the freeway around here is really, you know, deeply, deeply, things that really kind of disrupt the fabric or the, you know, of people's lives of the hearts of their sense of self and who they are. And so that's the starting point. So if you're a person who experiences suffering, what is a solution? Some people find solution in in things that are so called solutions is things that provide relief. And relief. Is comfort. Something that provides comfort, something that some people find relief for comfort in explanations to explain, explain Well, you know, something about The nature of life or explain something about, well, there's suffering in this life, but maybe in the next life, there's a solution. And it's been pointed out by scholars of religion, that people who live hopeless lives. And there are plenty of people who live hopeless lives, because there's so poor there in slavery, that there's been slavery there. You know, there's all kinds of horrible situations of people's lives where they don't see any way out of the difficulty of their life, their poverty, their sickness, somebody. When there's, when there's a large population of people who have hopeless lives, they tend to look for the solution and in a next life, and so being reborn in heaven with God or something or in a good lifetime in the next time becomes very important because you need people need some hope they need something. So there are there are kind of solutions people provide that kind of take you out of the system or take you kind of give you explanations for it. The approach in Buddhism for the Buddha and you know was that rather than was to turn and look directly at the problem itself. And the kind of the suggestion of the Buddha to people or to is Buddhism turns towards suffering in order to understand it, and this is counterintuitive because many people are trying to get away from their suffering. And I've known people who've gotten angry when you when they've been told, get closer to your suffering,

because their whole conditioning is to get away and avoid it, whatever it whatever cost and focus on Buddhism is take suffering seriously. Don't deny it don't pretty it over. I've been having Remember once I was at a memorial service funeral service service, I was a joint funeral and memorial service and I was just a brand new teacher. And I had never officiated a memorial service before. And it was must be a joint service with a with another person of another religion. Because the father was one religion and the mother was Buddhist have this daughter who had died, died suddenly, she was like 21 or 22. She was engaged to be married and she got a cold or flu and within three or four days was dead. And so the other purse I will I'll watch what he does in order to know how to do a memorial service because I'm supposed to ask was a big second and his whole to talk about the memorial was Forget it. Forget about you know But he didn't say it, that's kind of what way but he said he did think positively look ahead, and just march ahead with a smile. And then he had some religious kind of, he had religious teachings going around that, but I don't want to go into the religion, what he had to say, leave it that way. And but I was kind of stunned.

And I thought all these people were, you know, grieving and sad and what about how people are right now, you know, and because the instinct in Buddhism or work was you turn towards it, you name what's there, and then you by going through it, you come out to something else. But you don't deny it, you don't avoid it, you don't try to, you know, create a pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty, you know, positive attitude to kind of just override what's going on. So, the so as you know, some people like to think of the as Buddhism as being an empirical Science, it's probably not an accurate depiction. But what has in common with empirical science is that it's based on what we can experience. And it's based on our ability to look and look more deeply into those into the situation to the problem, in order to see if we can find what's really going on there. As we find out what's going on there, then we can maybe begin finding a solution. So the, the first the first noble truth is a truth of suffering. There is stress or distress, this such this stuff, you know, to the degree to which it exists in the world, it's named. And the task for the first noble truth is to turn toward suffering and study to get to know it. So that's not so much fun. But you know, so then once we look into it, one of the Interesting, important things to try to understand is what gives rise to suffering, what's the cause of it? If you if you want to get rid of something, if you want to end something, if you want to stop something, it helps if you know what the causes. If you have a I guess a leak in your roof and stripping into your living room, you want to find the source of the leak the hole on your roof. So you want to go find where the problem is, what's the source of the problem? And so the second noble truth is the Buddhist suggestion of where the sources and the second noble truth states that the cause of the suffering of suffering is in your thirst is in thirst. So it's a very strange term thirst, and so it begs some disk discussion. In popular English, sometimes the second noble truth is called desire, the cause of suffering is in desire. But that's not a very good translation because that problematizes desire, and there's nothing inherently wrong, necessarily wrong with having desire in a particular kind of desire, which can cause suffering. And so the task is to understand which kind of desire and so the Buddha chose this kind of colloquial expression thirst. And so I don't think it in his time had any kind of technical religious meaning it just but thirst, ton Now sometimes it's translated to English as craving. I think of it like the thirst for money, the thirst for power, the thirst for, you know, so I like the word driven, driven this. There's a way in which we're driven or there's compulsion around our desire and it's the compulsion around desire driven around desire, obsessing, obsessing around desire, which translates to desire ending up causing suffering. Because when there's compulsion or driven around desire, you can't put it down. You can't drop it. And so you're kind of a slave to the desire. And the desire has a tremendous force or power in your life. If the desire is frustrated, you know, you can't fulfill the desire, there's frustration. If the desire is really important, and you're holding on to it, it's a setup for fear. And you can be afraid by anything that takes it away. And we see so the Buddha said the source of suffering is in this compulsive desires that run our lives. So that's kind of depressing, maybe but then he had to Third noble truth. And the third Noble Truth is, I guess, the Buddhist good news.

And that's happens when you run the experiment. And the experiment is that there's a there's a problem. And then there's a solution. And the solution is the end of suffering by putting to rest, the compulsive desire by somehow learning to relax or settle, so that we're not there's not we're not driven anymore. We're not in the throes of strong, obsessive habits of thinking or desiring or wanting or aversion. So how do you run the experiment? How do you explore this whole the whole thing about suffering is the so the so this has to do with a fourth noble Truth. And the fourth noble truth is setting up the experiment, setting up the conditions. So you could explore the problem well, and find a way to overcome or to cut through the drivenness which is bringing about the stress or the distress or the suffering. And so this is called the truth of the Eightfold Path. And this has to do with the what we have to do in order to kind of begin shaping the experiment or shaping the stick the conditions, so we can really kind of, you know, go through it. And this means that so we're starting with something empirical something with awakening experience. But then we also have to include ourselves in the experiment. We can't just stay the observer, and it can't just be wishful thinking. Some people Had the wishful thinking they can actually understand something and they read a lot of books. Or, or if there's some kind of magic and just kind of snap by something, some kind of cosmic snapping of the fingers be happy ever after. People don't want to instant gratification instant enlightenment without having to do any work. It'd be nice if we get enlightened quick quickly because then we can get on do the important things in life. But the best, so the eighth, the fourth, the fourth of this noble truths is the truth of something's required of you. And you have to begin changing yourself or acting in new ways or different ways. So that you set up the, you know, the experiment, right. And so, this is the truth of the Eightfold Path. And these are eight different aspects. What we can do, they create the conditions that we can run the experiment or do the do this thing well, and the first is called right view. And most common description the right view is that if you want to run the experiment of ending suffering, then you need to understand the first three noble gift to appreciate and understand or you have to you have to observe your experience of your life through the perspective of the Four Noble Truths. And the Four Noble Truths are here offered not as truths to believe, but rather perspectives or frameworks with which to study your life. Because if you if what you want to do is to overcome suffering, then you don't want to go off and study you know the power of crystals You know, the crystals might be powerful. And it might be very interesting to study them. And they might be unhelpful. But you know, you could just you're distracted from doing the work of really getting to the heart of what suffering is turning towards it. And so it's very easy for people when they look at their problems, the problems of their life, to get distracted by all kinds of different solutions. And there's a lot of popular solutions. Some of them are worthwhile pursuing for their own for other reasons, but they're not going to be the solution to your suffering. And so the simple thing but the first step and eightfold path right view, is begin the habit of looking and tuning into that part of your experience, where they're suffering or stress. And I found that this is a very powerful teacher. It gets it shows you very quickly where it's useful to bring Your attention if what you want to do is not that build up stress or build up suffering.

So the bumper sticker for Buddhists is I stopped for suffering. Meaning that if they're suffering is it we're interested in noticing when there's distress and suffering and then stop and pay attention to it. When I was before I just before I discovered Buddhism, I was living at a very large hippie commune, called the farm in Tennessee. And it was started by Steven Gaskin company and he Steven Gaskin was the kind of the guru of the psychedelic scene in San Francisco, in the Haight Ashbury times. And then in the late 60s, he took a big bus load of hippies school bus, They got all the school buses and they drove across the country on tour. And then they settled in on land in Tennessee and started this huge commune. So when I got there, there were some seven 800 people living there, this huge property. And, and they gotten busted in Tennessee for, I guess, using drugs. It didn't work so well legally to use drugs in Tennessee as it did in San Francisco. So back then, so. So they decided they had to stop using drugs

and LSD, and they had to figure out something else that was comparable in power. And so I got there after they discovered, you know, this alternative. And the alternative they discovered was truth. Telling the truth. And the reason I stayed there for a while, was that I'd never been around people who were so truthful, but in a particular way. If there was any distress interpersonally between people any stress and strain Their practice in this community was to stop and talk about it. They stopped for suffering. And they would talk about it and work it through. And if you're new to the forum, sometimes they would spend hours working through it because you weren't, you know, you took a long time, long term, long time before people kind of understand themselves well enough. But people have been there for a long time, the conversations got shorter and shorter, and they got really good at being defensive. They understand themselves really well. And sometimes it got to the point where sometimes all people had to do was wink at each other smile when there was some stress or strain and was going on. And everyone said, Oh, yeah. And they'd relax. It was beautiful. So here's an example of people who his practice was to stop or suffering to look, use that as if something was important to pay attention to. And in doing that, the relationship between people was really beautiful. Same thing happens with can happen with us personally, if we have the habit of stopping for suffering for stress, and use it to learn from and change, relax it, some of the beautiful qualities of yourself have a chance to come forth when they can't come forth when we're living under stress. So we so there's the first the first kind of this eightfold path is, is to appreciate the value of looking at your life through perspective of suffering, the cause and the end. The second noble truth. Second that the Eightfold Path is that if you want to run this experiment, if you're going to run, run this kind of thing, looking at suffering, looking at the cause, and come to the end, it helps if you have the right attitude towards it all to help. It helps you kind of make yourself kind of good, good vehicle for this experiment. And it's a lot easier to run this experiment of coming to an end of suffering If you are not causing suffering and so, it to people around you, so it helps if you give up. Ill will, or give up cruelty. It helps if you give up. You know, start start changing your attitude and start having a friendlier attitude or more compassionate attitude to the world you have. You don't to force yourself into being compassionate, but lean in that direction, appreciate the value of it. And then it's important to begin changing your behavior a little bit. Something's up something's required of you. And so behavior needs to change.

And the behavior that needs to change is that again has to do with things don't cause harm. Don't cause harm, with your words by lying. Don't cause harm by stealing don't cause harm by harming other people. Don't cause harm through your sexuality. If you really want to end your suffering and stress, you're a much better position to do it, if you're not involved at causing harm anymore. It's really important. It's also it helps if you have a livelihood, a way of making your living, that its itself doesn't cause a lot of harm in the world. So, you know, it's, it's a lot more difficult to do this experiment of ending your stress and suffering if you're an arms merchant. So but it was explicitly said, you know, if you're an arms merchants give it up if you want to do this experiment, he also said things like alcohol and drugs, you know, give it up. If that's one of the few things that is really clear and categorical, you know, give this up if that these these kinds of professions. And so then, the next thing that's required To run the experiment is begin to begin tuning into how our mind operates, what goes on your minds, and begin training our mind to make the mind a more useful instrument. And so this requires mindfulness. And so there's a big, big part of Buddhism is to start being mindful, which means to start paying attention more carefully to what's going on for you. And it's to all too easy to spend a huge percentage of person's life, being mindless, and not really understanding Well, what motivates oneself what's really going on in one's mind. And so part of this, as a trainer says, paid more careful attention, find out what's going on. What are you thinking? What are you believing what motivates you? What How are you operating? One of the interesting questions to explore is what are the top three themes that you think about? You know what, those are beautiful. Have you done the you know, you kind of surveyed what you think. And if you discover what the top three themes that you think about, would you be willing to tell a group of people like this? This is this is eautifully and noble. A lot of people are a little bit

embarrassed by where their mind goes over and over and over again. And just you know what it is because if you know what your mind is thinking all the time, and you can see the top three tunes, if it's not what you want to be doing, can you change it. If your mind is involved in activity, or you're involved in an activity, which is not helpful for you, which is unhealthy for you. Then begin, begin changing that and start changing yourself to do more healthy activity in the mind, think think better thoughts, be focused on more useful things. And one of the things this process of focusing on were useful things that the Buddha emphasized was focus on having a mind that has more concentration that has the ability to be concentrated. Have a mind which where you take control of the mind, run the mind having control over you. And people who meditate can know the difference. Because many people have made it the sit down to meditate. And the mind has a mind of its own, you say, you know, you're supposed to follow the breath. And you'll spend five minutes thinking about something else. And then you come back, and the mind goes off again into its thoughts and you come back to your breath and it goes off again. And the mind has this very powerful drive to not follow instructions. So something else is in charge, you aren't in charge. And so the process of getting concentrated developing concentration in Buddhism, in a sense, in a sense involves you learning take control of your mind, learning how to relax well enough to relax that driven this relax the thirst, the compulsions of the mind, so the mind settles down again. Quiet. And so you can direct the mind. And what is one of the great pleasures of life is to be able to direct your own mind and be focused in a concentrated way to direct your mind, out of choice and, and freely without having to worry about the mind wandering off on its own.

And so you get concentrated. It's, it's, it's also a way to experience some of the most beautiful forms of rapture or bliss or joy that can come from meditation that comes from the concentrated mind. And so, we use in Buddhism, joy or rapture, military rapture, as a biofeedback system to help us then get even more concentrated and the value of concentration is not so we can experience meditative joy or bliss, but rather the value of deeper concentration is to the mind is the quiet enough, if we begin can see, at the, at the root of the mind at the bit that the source of the mind, how grasping how craving, how thirst operates. It's very hard to see the deepest roots of craving the deepest motivations that keep us spinning and stressed, deepest things that were attached to. And so we need to, it helps to have a very still mind to see clearly. And then we see that clearly, then we have a chance to put those things to rest. And that's how we come to the solution of the problem of suffering. So, the solution that Buddhism offers for those who are interested, requires you to it doesn't require you to anything You don't have to do this at all. But the solution that Buddhism offers is one that an individual is interested in it has to participate in finding solution. There are no backseat Buddhists. You know, you didn't like your chauffeured Buddhists, you know that you're going to be carried along, you know, by someone else, um, but rather if you know, so it requires something of you. And, and it's something that it's something that involves something you're quite capable of doing. It doesn't require you to believe in things that really doesn't require you to believe in much of anything. Certainly not any metaphysical or supernatural kind of beliefs some religions have. But it does require you to believe in his intent to believe in yourself, to believe that you have the ability to walk a path today. You have the ability to make a difference in your life that you don't have to be stuck with the suffering and the difficulty and challenges that you have. But you can make a difference and the difference for the better. You can live you can you can make a difference that turns your life into a happier life and more peaceful life and more productive life for our society. And so what Buddhism offers at the heart is this idea of the Four Noble Truths so I hope that that was understandable enough I hope that I'd be curious to know what you think of that. But it is nine o'clock I apologize for having talked so long I wasn't my wasn't my plan. I thought it was gonna be really easy and quick to talk about the Four Noble Truths and And so I hope that at least you appreciate how Buddhism has it is based on something empirical. And that empirical approach perhaps is attractive to you and then you wanted to explore and discover the rest of it. Which means the same thing is discovering yourself.

Now, I wasn't gonna ask you anything. I was gonna see if you had any questions. So thank you