

# 2012-01-22 The Four Noble Truths As Practices

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

clinging, four noble truths, buddha, cling, holding, suffering, people, life, person, questions, snowstorm, view, practice, road, mind, peace, settled, deeper, liberated, cars

## SPEAKERS

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Last week I gave a talk on the Four Noble Truths as the custom in the beginning of every year. And I wanted to follow up today, talking more about the Four Noble Truths, partly showing how central it is in the teachings of the Buddha. And then seeing how central is perhaps it'll challenge you or prompt you to reflect on how useful and how these these four truths are in your life. So the Four Noble Truths are central teachings that are said to be useful teachings are useful practice. Maybe it's more useful to think of the Four Noble Truths as practices in there as teachings as teachings, if we think of them as being central religious teachings, people sometimes are predisposed to see them as beliefs as fundamental principles or tenants over Religion and then they get people in get easily confused. But if you see it as practices, then you approach we have to be a little different. And the Four Noble Truths are useful practices at the beginning of practice, at the middle of practice, and at the end of practice, you know, that the whole the whole range and the simplest way that I found to refer to the Four Noble Truths is by restating of them as this way that if you cling, you will suffer. And if you let go of that clinging, that suffering ceases. So, if you cling, if you hold on if your grip on tight, anything, you will suffer. And if you let go of that, clinging the suffering comes to an end, to state a little bit more in a traditional way, the Four Noble Truths begin with a problem and In that they start with a problem. Buddhism starts with recognizing we have a problem, as opposed to a religion that begins with a principle. In that the Four Noble Truths are a practice, they begin with an area that we can engage and make a difference in practice with, as opposed to pointing to an area of life that we have to believe, like a tenant of belief or something. And so it starts with a problem, a problem that can be addressed. And the problem is traditionally called dukkha, which sometimes in English is called suffering. And then, then it goes on to the second level of noble truth. It says there's a cause or condition from which this problem arises. And that condition that cause is thirst or craving. And then it then it has the good news. And the good news is that all that currencies can come to an end the session come to an end that was conditioned to which gives rise to it, the clinging can come to an end. So that's good news. It doesn't sound so good because the way it's worded, it just says the truth of cessation. The truth of the end of it all doesn't sound, celebrate, celebrate Tory enough. And then the fourth noble truth is the cure or the solution that's offered for the problem. And so, here especially it involves a series of practices that we can do, that allows us to shift and change in our heart and mind. So the problem can come to an end, so that the clinging the grasping, the craving, can seize and so therefore the suffering can cease. And the result of this practice is that there's no more suffering, which stated in positive terms is most often characterized as peace. But somehow the heart The mind is at peace with itself and rested itself. And peace, profound experience of peace shouldn't be undervalued and how precious it is how valuable it is how satisfying it is. And so this possibility of finally being addressed in ourselves settled in ourselves in a very peaceful deep way, is the end result of this path.

And, and so is that enough, you should there shouldn't be more to a religious life than just, you know, your neighbors have, you know, they belong to other religions and they have this, you know, their religions have this great lofty beliefs and cosmic dimensions to it, then great communion with the deity and great emerging with ultimate consciousness. There's all these lofty, wonderful things that religions promise to point to Buddhism doesn't, you know, it's pretty, pretty simple. Like if you cling to let go, you know, you know, you're not going to get, you know, your your neighbors are obviously going to realize that how profound This is how significant is this? Oh, there's Oh, I see. Okay. Well, you know, maybe you'll get the message later though. There's something much more wonderful than that. So this kind of this this happened to a monk in the time of the Buddha, there was a monk by the name of Sunakkhatta. He was ordained by the Buddha. And he decided to disrobe said enough of this. And he said, you know, the Buddha is not so special after all. And now he's not so special. But all he teaches is suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering and the path into suffering, that's all. So I'm going to go Because certainly their more lofty religious goals in that. So and so then someone went to the Buddha and reported this. And when the Buddha heard this, he would have said, Well, this man is misguided. He's angry. And his what he said is spoken out of anger. Thinking to discredit the Buddha, he actually praises him. So thinking that by saying that all the Buddha teaches his suffering and the end of suffering, he thinks he's discrediting him. But from the point of view of Buddha, he's praising him. This is really cool. So then, in a different discourse in the same text called the middle length discourse. There's a very interesting discourse number 112. Where it describes the questions you can use to test to someone to find out whether they're taking the Four Noble Truths As far as they can go in your life, if a person has really applied the practice of the Four Noble Truths, such a degree, that they've really succeeded in uprooting, their clinging, so they become free. And this is called someone who's conventionally in English we say someone who's enlightened, sometimes in Buddhism says sometimes someone's awakened. The description often is given to someone who has done what had to be done. And done, what had to be done here means that the, what had to be done is the end of suffering. And so someone who succeeds in doing that isn't done with had to be done. So they've succeeded. So the path the traditional path of Buddhism has an end. The path is only relevant until while you're clinging while you're suffering and when you come to an end of suffering, you know, walking the path anymore because you no longer needed. So there are people that who claim to have come to that end happen at time of the Buddha as well some of his disciples. And so, the Buddha said, there might someone might come along and claim that I've done what I had to do. If that happens, the Buddha said, neither approved nor disapprove. Without approving or disapproving what this person says, a question should be, you should question this person. And your question as follow. So this is interesting. So, if you come across someone who says they're enlightened, you can carry these in your pocket these questions like the test, so you can start questioning this way. Friend, there are four kinds of expression rightly proclaimed by the Blessed One by the Buddha, who knows and sees to four kinds of ways of speaking, what for talking about the scene as the scene talking about the herd as the herd, talking about the sense as the sense and talking about the cognized as the cognized.

This is a very simple thing where so when you see it when they something you see, you talk about it, as you see it, which is not so usual often will be involved in the world and we perceive something, it's very easy to overlay on top of that, a lot of extra stuff. So we overlay on top of that, our judgments, our commentary, our desires, our aversions. We don't just see something as it is. We see it through the filter of what we want, or we don't want of our conditioning of our projections. transferences is a lot of things that we see that we add on top and so here for expression that's approved by the Buddha is simply is the ability to see when you see something, to see it for what it is, as opposed to seeing it with all the active projections of the mind that goes on top of it. And so this is a fundamental aspect of mindfulness practice. And mindfulness practice is a training to learn to simplify our perceptions enough,

that we're not overlaying a lot of concepts, ideas on top of what the experience is. So and then same thing for the herd. When you hear something, you say, this is what I heard. And some of you know that the discourses of the Buddha always begin thus have I heard and one of the reasons I believe that it starts this way, is that the people are trying to be, too, they're not saying this is how it is, which is making a statement that maybe they can't. Isn't warranted, I think so I've heard this. And I'm going to report what I heard. As opposed to what I believe or, you know, so he probably many of you have noticed situations where people kind of, you know, played with people playing the game of telephone, where, you know, it's, you know, it's not quite accurate, how it's repeated. So then in the sense, he talks about just what sense in the cognize just what's cognized when you have a thought, you see it as a thought, and just let it be that way. So you're walking down the street. And you see someone who looks is really really big. And, and maybe, you know, muscular, so I know what big and so maybe the first time you're perceived the person you perceive the person through your conditioning or what what do people mean? Big people mean dangerous people perhaps. And so You feel some fear. But there's no necessarily any danger in that person. So it's possible to watch in the mind that there's the perception of a person as possible to watch there's a thought arises in the mind, this is a dangerous person. And in seeing that the thought and the person are two different things, to question a thought to hold the thought more likely to, you know, maybe I need to look more carefully. Is it person, in effect, dangerous or not? But often when people see they're seeing is meshed with their ideas of what they're seeing. And we see often through the filter of our ideas. So some people don't see the difference between the thought that's a dangerous person, and this is a dangerous person. And in that, because they're meshed we you know, we have less time To kind of question and look more deeply and find out what's going on. And probably all of you have been the receipt recipient of something like this where you did something in the past, maybe something, maybe not so nice. And your friends now or your, your people, you know, are now seeing you through your past actions. Whereas you've already left those past actions behind, you've reformed yourself. And you know, and so you can see they're still they're still holding that and how they see you as opposed to recognizing, I have this idea about you based on the past. I see you as you are now, let's try to hold this in a fresh way, and exploring question what's going on. So, for the Buddha, as someone who's awakened, has the capacity to begin differentiating between what's seen what's heard, what sense and what's cognized. So each of these domains is seen clearly for itself, as opposed to being meshed together and confused with each other. make some sense what I'm saying. So given that

so someone who says that they've done what had to be done someone who says they're awakened, how does that person how does that person see regarding these four ways of talking? So that through not clinging, his mind is liberated. they would they would respond this way. Regarding the scene I abide attracted unrepaired independent, detached free with mine rid of barriers. So, how do you so what's your relationship to the scene is the question for someone who's awake and you ask them things, you see what's your relationship to them and the relationship is that You no longer cling to them. And then what's your relationship to what's heard? The same thing is said again, really shift to what's heard. I would I abide and attracted and repelled independent, detached, free, with a mind rid of barriers, resistance or something. And then if the same thing about the sense in the cognized, to what why this is significant, I think, is that it's talking about. So the way that someone's going to talk about how they're awakened, is not about what they're awakened to, in terms of some ultimate truth, some ultimate nature of reality, some ultimate nature of consciousness, some ultimate nature of the cosmos, some ultimate nature of God or the divinity. Now, I know that ultimate truth, it's in some ways, it's more more simple, maybe maybe I would say maybe a little more humble. They're saying that When I see something, I don't cling to it when I hear something I don't cling to it when I think something I don't cling to it.

So the underscore here is that it's pointing to the freedom from something as opposed to some metaphysical or great printed metaphysical principle about reality. You see that difference? So it doesn't say anything about reality or the nature of the mind or the nature of consciousness. So the ultimate meaning of life. It doesn't make any big grand statements. It says, When there's when there's, I think, something I don't cling to when I hear something, I don't cling to it. So this again, echoes back to the Four Noble Truths where the point of the Four Noble Truths is to learn to become free to find out how to be free of clinging and the result of it is this That when you hear something, you don't get agitated or upset or resistant or worked up, you just hear something. When you think something, you don't get caught by it, you don't get resistant to it, you don't get confused by it or agitated by it, you just have a thought and the heart the mind doesn't get agitated as a result. Is this enough? Is this enough? Are you going to be like that monk, you know, you know, the Buddha only this Buddhism only teaches, you know, suffering and the end of suffering, surely must be more. So then it goes on and says, you have to question you should question them further. And so in, asked us a question about what's called the five aggregates, five aggregates in the ancient India in a very simple way, and it's not completely accurate, but the kind of the way that we identify or get person analyze our life or identify, create identity for ourselves is based on five different categories of how we experience ourselves. We can experience our body, we can experience our feelings, we can experience our perceptions of things, we can experience kind of the whole inner mental landscape of mental activity, and we can experience awareness or consciousness. And what the ancient Buddhist tradition says that one of these five areas is when people identify this is who I am. It's in one of those five areas. Some people take their bodies be themselves This is who I am, spend a lot of time looking in the mirror. Some people, you know, it's their opinions. That is who they are. You know that they hold on to the pain some people it's their, their feelings, their level of pleasure and displeasure that these folks wrongly are attached to some people's consciousness that they're attached to it, this is who I am. These five areas. So if Someone says that they're awakened. They should, you should ask him to what is your What is your relationship to these areas of life. And so then the person should respond this way. In knowing my body knowing my body is fading away, fleeting. With the destruction fading away cessation giving up and relinquishing of attraction and clinging regarding my body with a relinquishment of mental opinions, beliefs, and underlying tendencies regarding the body, I have understood that my mind is free. So in relationship my body, one understands there's none of these forms of clinging in relationship to feeling with the destruction fading away sensation, giving up relinquishing the kind of emphasize the importance of this right? You know, letting go of clinging by all these different synonyms destruction, fading away cessation, giving up and relinquishing of attraction and clinging regarding feeling with the relinquishment of opinions, beliefs, and underlying tendencies. In regard to feelings, I know that my mind is liberated. So here again, I want to underscore that it's not saying that in becoming awakened or liberated, you've now understood some principle about the reality metaphysical ultimate principle about the nature of mind nature of divinity of the cosmos and the meaning of life. Here again, it says, when you're liberated, what you know is you know, that your mind is no longer clinging. So then it goes on further, there's more questions like this. I'll give you one more. So in the ancient world, they had a belief that there are six elements There's air, water, earth, fire space and sometimes they sometimes that six one I think it's a little confused myself but consciousness sometimes they miss four sometimes they lift six. So then you supposed to ask What's your relationship to these six elements, these six effects and so then the answer should be to me giving you the answers right in case you ever get tested.

Friends, I knew the answer should be I have treated the earth element as not self with no self based on the earth element with the destruction fading away cessation giving up and relinquishing of attraction and clinging based on the earth element, with the giving up of mental opinions, beliefs, and other Underlying tendencies based on the earth element, I understand understand, I understand my mind is free. So in relationship to each of these elements, person understands that I'm not going to cling to any

of that I'm not going to resist it, the mind is free in relationship to it. So now I think you get the gist of these questions and the answers right? It's the answer is always going back to not clinging to what's there. It goes a little bit more like this. It also talks about in regard to this body with its consciousness and all its ways of experiencing it. I'm making my making and the underlying tendencies of conceit have been eradicated, come to an end. And how is this done? How is the then it describes the process by which the path by which someone eradicates the clinging to self Because it's one thing not to cling to, what you hear what you think it's one thing not to cling to us many things that we don't cling to, but a very deep tenacious, place of clinging of holding, because it's so connected to the desire to exist to survive, is that clinging to conceit, which in this tradition is called, The simple feeling of being I am, does not conceited, the English way of being better or worse than other people, but that the attachment to just I the emptiness and even that was very deep feeling, it can feel very beautiful, actually wonderful to settle into a simple experience just to em. But even that in the Buddhist tradition, there's a little bit of attachment to it. So this process, what's the process of becoming free, especially something so subtle as that? So then it describes in a stereotypic way, a path of practice where a person first practices, ethical practices, leaves, lives a ethical life and then begins to meditate. And we learn to meditate and first begins to put aside the five hindrances. Put aside enough, being being driven by desire being driven by aversion, being driven by, or agitated by agitation, restlessness. You put aside these, what's called the five hindrances, so that the mind can begin calming down so the mind can begin getting concentrated. And so then as the mind gets concentrated in still, then it gives us a vantage point from which to see how clinging operates, what we're holding on to that sometimes it's very hard to see if we're very, you know, agitated or busy or very active. So a year ago, I went up skiing up in this heroes. And I happened to come back in the midst of a snowstorm. In fact, it was so bad that I think about, I don't know, just a few cars after we went through the checkpoint, they closed the road. And it was so bad that that storm was so strong that I could barely see the taillights the car in front of me. And sometimes I couldn't see that. We were just creeping along. It was pretty, you know, and, and the road was icy. And I didn't have chains on my car because the car I was using was four wheel drive. I thought I didn't need it, but I should have. So you know, it's just creeping along, creeping along. And so, you know, you can imagine that kind of situation where there's cars behind you in cars in front of you and you can't see and the road is slippery and wind, you know, it's like, so I was driving along At some point, we managed to get out of it enough. And we got enough, then I noticed, boy or girl, you're tense. I was kind of like very intensely focused with trying to see what I could see. And I was holding on to staring really, really tight.

And it wasn't until we came out of some degree of safety that I you know that I was so fixated on driving, driving safely. I wasn't noticing how I was when I was driving. And so then I noticed Oh, yeah, you're you're pretty holding on to general pretty tight. You're kind of like, you know, pretty tense with your eyes looking. I think it's safe enough now I think you can relax. So I relaxed a little bit. You know, it didn't grip so hard. And then we kept driving for a while. And after a while, I came to a place where there was no more snow. It wasn't snowing anymore. And the road where you can actually drive on asphalt and cars picked up Speed, there was much more distance between cars, they weren't just a few feet apart from each other. And you had to be a few feet apart in the snowstorm because you had you couldn't see the road. So the only way you can know where to go was to follow the tail lights in front of you. And if you didn't see the tail lights you know, you had to you had to keep up. Because if you stopped and they kept going, how are you going to find the road afterwards? kind of exciting right? Anyway, so finally we came to play through his asphalt and it wasn't you know, and then in a bad time, I wasn't gripping the stereo sharing world I wasn't looking so much. But by that time I noticed that I was carrying this more subtle tension deep in my body, kind of leftover a little bit maybe fear kind of feelings that I was kind of like you know, I conditioned myself or I kind of have this remnant this leftover kind of little bit. Anxiety from this was still being held. And it wasn't that easy to get the hands on the steering



wheel. I could relax. But this deeper holding you know, didn't just gonna go will go away like that I had to breathe and be present and give it time to somehow to unwind. If I'd spin in a snowstorm, I wouldn't have seen that subtle clinging and holding there was there. Make sense? So the same thing happens. So this is one of the things that happens in meditation. It's not snowstorm necessarily, if you're free of, but as you as we get settled in calmer, calmer meditation, it allows us to see places that were clinging and holding, that are very hard to see in daily life, in fact, are maybe not even recognizable in daily life. And so it's kind of like a misplaced mixed mixed fortune, you know, to get concentrated and still in meditation. On one hand, it feels very good to have the peace in the column meditation. On the other hand, you get to see things that you know, maybe you wish you weren't there. But that's part of the function of is start seeing the deeper functioning of clinging and holding, and not get sidetracked by philosophy not to get sidetracked by trying to experience some ultimate nature of consciousness or reality or something. But rather to keep the focus on the Four Noble Truths, keep the focus on is there whereas the clinging and can I let go that clinging that's the focus. And so if you so one of the things that people cling to is the practice itself. And it's okay to cling to practice and people desperately holding on to practice for dear life. And they need to because their life is so difficult. But luckily, as you know, because life's their, their their life, just the mere life. Maybe it's like a snowstorm. But as you get calmer and more settled and settled, then at some point you realized, boy, I'm clinging to the steering wheel of the Dharma. You know, I don't need to do that. I can relax that now as well. I don't have to hold on to practice so tightly. And then you realize maybe that there's deeper levels of clinging as you go deeper and deeper. One of the, some of the deeper places of clinging that you discover is clinging to self self identity, how you want to be seen by people how you want to see yourself all the different ideas that we kind of have taken on some of them taken on because we've been trained to take them on by how we grew up with our family, perhaps some from our life experience, some from our culture. And as them what's really nice, is it as the mind gets calmer and calmer and more settled. No one has to convince you or argue, or give you a great philosophy about why it's important to let go of clinging to self. You don't have to engage in deep philosophical debates about is their self or is there not a self use feel that you know, it doesn't feel good to have the hands on the steering wheel so tight. You don't you don't you don't need a philosophy to tell you to relax the hands when you're out of the snowstorm. So When you get common enough, you'll see a female Oh, you know, this doing this self thing doesn't really serve me, you know, it's kind of like a drag. That's my definition of self. My colloquial is someone what's the self. And my joke definition is, it's a wind drag.

So at some point, you know, you don't you kind of let go, the wind drag you pull in. And so this process is course and describes this process. And so all along the guideline for this is that which helps you get settled enough communists and have strong enough perception that you begin seeing where the clinging is, and so you can let go. And when you do it all the way completely, then if you're going to stay true to what the Buddha says the four forms of expression. In this in the scene, you talk about your scene in the herd, just the herd and the cognitive The sensors to sense the cognizes to cognized. Then we're going to describe when you're going to describe what has happened to you, in that, in the fulfillment of that practice that path. What you can say is that what happened was, I was clinging and now I'm not. There was sounds, and I'm not attached to the sounds, they're just sounds. There is what there is. perceptions that I have. There's just a perception. I'm not attached to those perceptions. There's thoughts I have thoughts through simple thoughts they arise. I'm not attached to those thoughts. They float by their, their eyes and they pass that you can talk about, because that's something you can see and directly experience to say, Now, I've experienced some ultimate reality, some ultimate truth gets much more challenging, you know that, can you really say that?

So I'll end with On this talk with another discourse from the same book called The middle length discourses discourse to somewhat famous passage now, it also stresses the, the value of sticking to

the Four Noble Truths as the guideline is support for with this Buddhist practice process liberation is about. It begins by talking about unuseful approaches, if you want to become liberated and free, it's not useful to have these kinds of questions or to consider or explore it, explore these kinds of questions. So, was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been What? What shall I become in the future? Or else when is inwardly perplexed about the present in the following way? Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this been come from, and where will it go? That's a pretty great list, isn't it? If you've been involved in some of these when what then it goes on and says when one considers one's life through the vantage point of these questions, tries to answer these questions. One of six viewpoints will occur to you. There are six he claims here there's six different ways you can try to answer these kinds of questions. The view that the self exists for me arises in this person is true and established. For the view, that no self exists for me, arises in him as in the arises as true and established. So the idea that no self exists. So many of you have heard that Buddhism seems to say that there's no self and then you argue about the philosophy How could that be, but actually here it says that this, this kind of view is there is no self is is also a, a unhelpful result of asking those wrong questions. Or the view I perceive self with self arises as true and established, or the view I perceive not self with self arises as true and established, or the view I perceive self with not self arises as true or established, or else. It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there. The results of In bad actions, but the self of mind is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity. So the next passage is interesting. So the, the, these speculative views are called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, and isolation of views of federal views fettered by the fetter of us. A person is not free. It's not free from suffering, I say. Some elsewhere, they talk about it being a quagmire. Once you start to ask, trying to understand the nature of self, what is the self, the true self? You can try that. But philosophically psychologically phenomenologically all kinds of ways you tried to do that, you'll end up in a quagmire and so that you know and you could you can you read endless books. about the nature of the true nature of the self itself and how philosophers, psychologists days are trying to find it, and they can't find it. And it's counterintuitive, right? Of course, you you're here, right? But once you start that route, it's Buddha says this is not useful. So then the Buddha says, Well what is useful what is a useful approach to the path of liberation if these kinds of questions these kind of, are not useful? This is how an expert says this is what useful when attends wisely by recognizing this suffering, when attends wisely by recognizing this is the origin of suffering, when it tends wisely This is the cessation of suffering. When it tends wisely, this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. When when attends wisely in this way, three, four forms of clinging are abandoned. The clinging to what's called personality view that clinging to a view but this is who I really am.

Doubt, doubt about the network brings freedom, doubt about what the nature of pieces, how to find it. And then the clinging to hear it's translated as rules and observances. It's literally can be translated as precepts and religious practices. And so, you know, you still might need a steering wheel to drive your car. But after you've come out to the snowstorm, you don't cling to even your religious practices. So you because you realize that clinging to religious practices is not peace. So the Four Noble Truths over and over and over again is What is ancient teachings of the Buddha? They keep pointing back as the heart of it, the heart of it. The beginning, the middle and the end. And the heart of this is the value of not clinging, not grasping. Is it enough? Is it good enough? I don't know for you, how are you going to answer that? But my wish for all of you is that whatever you think is more important than not clinging.

Do it after you've given up clinging because, you know, why go through life with a splinter in your foot I go through life with suffering. And I think it's a beautifully and profound offering gift you give to the world

to the degree to which you do this inner work, and discover and understand this fundamentally important aspect of human life. The nature of clinging and suffering and our capacity for having a heart that's at peace, beautifully at peace, settled at peace, calmly at peace, justice so thank you very much.