

Dharmette: The Simplicity of the Four Noble Truths

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on January 7, 2015

It is the custom at IMC that the first talks of the year are on the Four Noble Truths. One of the reasons why this is a custom is that it seems the new year is a time to prepare for the coming year, and to set our sights on what is central in our lives. There is something very meaningful about the Four Noble Truths as the central teachings of Buddhism.

Some people prefer not to have the Four Noble Truths because it begins with suffering, and that's a drag. They think it's better not to admit there's suffering and better to focus on the good things – to celebrate, have joy, go dancing. But not a few people have spent years, or maybe lifetimes, cleverly – or not so cleverly – avoiding their suffering. Sooner or later, this is seen as a dead end. At some point, part of growing up is to learn to stop and see, “Oh! This is suffering.” We stop in such a way that we are not reactive to it, not caught in it, not pushing it, not troubled by it. The idea of not being troubled by trouble, not being troubled by suffering is a phenomenally wonderful thing. It does not mean we are condoning it or, as good Buddhists, suffering better. It is meant to be the beginning of healing. The beginning of the freedom from suffering. That is really the whole enterprise of Buddhism: not to be left with suffering, but to have suffering leave. We begin by having a very simple relationship to suffering, learning to be with it, not trying to escape it, fix it, attack it, or make big cosmic conclusions about yourself or the world because of it. Just very simple. That is the First Noble Truth. The truth of suffering.

The Second Noble Truth is the cause of suffering. That is usually how it is interpreted. That is a powerful interpretation because if there is a cause to suffering, then we can consider whether it is possible to address that cause. If there is no cause to our suffering, then we just have to go along for the ride. Then we are just suffering because.... there is no because. We are just suffering. You might as well just accommodate the suffering, or pray and hope it goes away. If there is a cause, then we can do something about the cause. The cause of suffering that Buddhism emphasizes is psychological. In saying that our suffering has a psychological cause, some people say, “Wait a minute! It's all in me? People are doing terrible things to me, and treating me terribly. That's why I'm suffering.” It is true they may be doing that. But it is helpful that the definition of suffering in the Four Noble Truths is the suffering that arises because of the psychological cause. If someone insults you or offends you in some way, it is painful. In addition to the pain, there might be suffering, or something that happens inside of you based on your psychological reaction and response to the insult.

So, the First Noble Truth is the suffering that arises because of your psychological response. That is the place where we can do the most. That is where we have the most responsibility, and where we can make a difference. You may or may not be able to stop someone from offending you. Hopefully you will have the wisdom to know how and when to do that. But you are the only person whom you really have ultimate influence over. To learn how to be present, and to look for the cause within yourself is part of the enterprise of the Four Noble Truths.

The good news of Buddhism is the Third Noble Truth. Initially, until we get into it more deeply, the wording appears rather unfortunate. It only says, “the cessation of suffering.” Some people think it is not good enough just to end suffering. They think they should be, or they want to be filled with delight, joy and happiness. Freedom from suffering might seem neutral. They think, “These Buddhist don't have very high standard” [laughs]. But this is really the good news, and is meant to be shorthand, I think, for *mahāsukha* – great happiness.

The Fourth Noble Truth is a path of practice, a series of things you can do that help create the conditions for *mahāsukha*, the conditions for the end of suffering. This set of conditions is also an area of personal responsibility. We have to walk the path. There is no path of practice unless we walk it. We are given these eight different areas of life where we can start taking some responsibility, and that we can engage with – and not just waiting for freedom from suffering to happen on its own. We have to do our part, our work, which is the Eightfold Path.

One of the really remarkable things about this formulation is that it is at the heart of Buddhist teaching. If we see Buddhism as a religion, it is the core principle and teaching of the tradition. It is free of the supernatural, free of metaphysics, free of complicated abstract philosophy, free of beliefs that you have to accept on faith. It is free of things that may give rise to doubt metaphysically, spiritually, or supernaturally. So what is this? It is almost non-religious; or maybe it is non-religious. It is so basic. If you suffer, there is a cause. It is possible to bring that to an end. There is a way to work on that. I think it is quite remarkable that something that simple lies at the heart of this Buddhist tradition. One of the beautiful things it does is free us from Buddhism, which I will mention more.

I think of the Four Noble Truths as a framework or perspective that is portable, and useful in many, many different settings. It is meant to cut through the complications of many things, so we can get to the core and the simple way to end the suffering. If you are suffering in some way, and you are asked, "Why are you suffering?" and you respond, "Well, in my religion of upbringing, there is a belief about X, Y and Z, and I'm not living up to X, Y and Z, although it says I should in the great scriptures of my religion." It gets complicated very quickly: going back through the scriptures, speaking with the religious leaders, or thinking that you have to change the scriptures in order to be happy. It gets complicated, and we continue to suffer. Or, perhaps we are suffering and rather than being religious, we are Freudian. We start going to a Freudian analyst, and reviewing our childhood – for years! – trying to understand all the dynamics of what happened. Sometimes can certainly be very useful to do that. But it can be very expensive!! [Gil and listeners laugh.] The idea is the Four Noble Truths are meant to be much simpler, much more direct. Ideally, this teaching goes right to the heart of where we can make the most difference – if we can really see it through to the end. It is applicable in so many different areas.

Here is an analogy that I love for the Four Noble Truths. You go to the savannas of Africa as a wildlife photographer, and you want to take pictures of lots of wildlife. You could just wander around the plains looking for animals to photograph. That's one way, for sure. But another way would be to set yourself up with your camera at a watering hole. Sooner or later, all of the animals have to come to the watering hole, and you can easily get pictures that way. In the same way, sooner or later, every important issue in your life will come visit you if you sit at the watering hole of suffering. If you are paying attention to your suffering, everything you really need to know will appear – if you study that suffering and ask yourself, "What is really going on inside of me when I am suffering? What is my contribution to it?"

The condition that Buddhism is most concerned with, and the one it points to most as what will help you become free, is what is called thirst. Thirst is a certain kind of compulsion or driven-ness. If you are operating under compulsion, then you can't be free. This is part of the reason that suffering is suffering: because there is no freedom in it. You are stuck in it. It is claustrophobic. That thirst is a particular kind of desire, which is compulsive. Some people like to translate the word not as thirst, but as craving. What kind of desire are you caught in that leads to that suffering?

Here we are not looking at metaphysics, nor at complicated spirituality, nor at some great idea of cosmic truth. We are looking at something very simple and psychological: "Oh!! I'm attached to something. I'm caught in something." If you can stop justifying the value of being caught – and some people are brilliant at justifying why it is important to stay caught in the desire and be attached to it – if you can let go of it, then you experience the release, the freedom from that caught-ness. You experience the release from the suffering that came out of that caught-ness. That freedom creates space in the heart, space in the mind for ease, for peace, for happiness, for well-being, for being able to meet the next situation in a fresh way. It is not a small thing to end our compulsion.

It is not a small thing to put down how we are caught by desires of any and all kinds. We do not have to give up desires, but we do have to give up being caught in desires. To not have the suffering that follows in the wake of being caught by desires is a phenomenal thing to experience. When it is done thoroughly and completely, it is maybe *the* greatest happiness – the greatest sense of wellbeing a person can ever experience. It comes with a lot of benefits, one of which is that you become a person who is a gift to others – because then you have a heart that is open, a heart that is connected. You have no barrier between an open, loving or compassionate heart and the world around you.

On the simplicity of the Four Noble Truths, there is a Chinese story of someone – perhaps the governor of a province, or someone who thought highly of himself – who asked a monk, "What is the core teaching of Buddhism?" The monk replied, "The Four Noble Truths." The governor said, "Even a child of six knows that!" The monk said, "Yes. But even a man of ninety doesn't necessarily know how to practice it."

It is a very simple thing, but it is the support, the heart, the key that keeps Buddhism simple, direct and relevant in so many different situations, without extra complications. It also frees us from Buddhism, because as soon as you get attached to Buddhism, you are suffering. If you get attached to your practice, you are suffering. If you get attached to the results of your practice, you are suffering. So, if you are always ready to look: "Oh! Where are the Four Noble Truths in this situation?" – then you'll see "Oh! I'm suffering. I'm tense because of how I relate to Buddhism. What's the cause of that? Well, I'm attached! Might as well let go."

Don't let go of the practice, but let go of the attachment. The Four Noble Truths will protect you from Buddhism. May you be well protected! [Listeners laugh.] Thank you all.