

# 2016-01-03 Four Noble Truths

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dharma, buddha, suffering, people, buddhism, four noble truths, dharma practice, clinging, peace, nirvana, teaching, means, desire, mind, suffer, world, driven, conditions, understand, buddhist

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdaal

So good morning everyone and welcome to IMC and if no one's welcomed you yet to 2016 Welcome. It's the custom, my custom here at IMC for the first Sunday talk of the year to give a talk on the Four Noble Truths. down through the centuries, it's been one of the central organizing teachings. For people interested in Buddhist practice. The Four Noble Truths being a kind of formulation of a way to approach practice approach our lives. And it seems to be quite brilliant, the way it's put together, partly because it's so amenable to a variety of different interpretations, it seems very useful as a way of applying these formulations into our life in different ways. Can people hear okay? Just it's a maybe a little bit louder. So how's that better and okay to repeat myself, or that you hear heard well enough, okay. So I thought of one way to approach this topic of four noble truths is to tell you a little bit more generally, how the Buddha presented his teachings, or how he kind of summarize the Dharma. The Dharma is a very evocative word word in the ancient world, it meant things like truth, it meant also things like probably the closest to where if we had to translate the word religion into the ancient Buddhist language probably would have to be used the word Dharma for it. It's a very evocative language word, it also means teaching. So spiritual teachers teaching would be called Dharma, their understanding of life would be called Dharma kind of, sometimes in certain settings. In India, Dharma means duty, kind of the way you're expected to behave in your kind of world. And, but to look at how the Buddha taught, talked about teaching, it gives us a sense of what he was about what he was emphasizing. One thing he said about how he taught was, he said that what he teaches is evident, he said, what I proclaim, is clear, open evidence, and free of patchwork, this idea that it's clear and evident, meaning that it's clearly can be seen, and meant to be seen directly for ourselves, a very famous, at least in in Buddhist circles, description of a Dharma goes like this. The Dharma is well, well proclaimed by the Buddha. It is visible here and now immediate, inviting to be seen for oneself, onward leading, and to be personally personally realized by the wise. And here, this idea, again, it's supposed to be meant to be visible, visible means that we can experience directly we could know it directly for ourselves, as opposed to believing it or believing it, as opposed to being a tenant to a belief that you'd read about in the book or listen to a Dharma teacher like me, and, and think, Oh, this is it, you know, now I now understand what the belief is, because I've been told that rather, it's supposed to be something that you can touch or feel or see or sense directly for yourself is supposed to be evident in your experience. The a little bit more kind of provocative, perhaps, maybe a little bit more.

You know, maybe a little mystifying, perhaps, is the Buddha, once a man came to the Buddha in a confrontational way. And he said, you know, what is this teaching that you proclaim? And this is in that kind of context of being kind of confronted that way. The Buddha replied this guest in engine India, there was a whole culture of debate. So maybe this guy was getting ready for good debate, but the Buddha, tell me what you teach, and I'll, you know, stick it to you. And so the Buddha replied this I assert and proclaim such a teaching that one does not quarrel with any anyone in the world that that

probably took the wind out of his sails. Such a teaching that concepts no longer no longer underlie a person who buys free of sensual desire, worry, and craving for any kind of identity. So, in direct response to this man, he says that what I teach is not involved in any debate, I'm not quarreling or in conflict with anybody else's teachings. It's not a teaching the Dharma is not a teaching with which it's not like a belief for philosophy, that we're ready to have a good debate about, you know, is it true or, you know, do I have a better teaching than you are, you know, your teaching is not so good. But let me tell you about my teaching. That's not what the Dharma is, it wouldn't it's not interesting to, to hold it that way is a belief structure that way. But rather, it involves there's certain concepts that a person no longer who's engaged in the Dharma, certain concepts or ideas that they no longer operate under. And those are ideas that have to do or drive things like greed and worry, fear, maybe hate that listed here. That there's no longer any drive, or compulsion to be caught up in the world of Central of personal identity. It's fine to have an identity. But too many people are a certain kind of anxiety around it or driven ness or ambition around it, that's often causes a lot of suffering to ourselves and to others. So here the Buddha is talking about, he doesn't have a belief that you can argue, but he is pointing to a possibility of how to be in the world, how to be in the world, we're not caught in concepts and ideas in beliefs even another time, someone came to the Buddha, and had a series of questions about he wanted the Buddha to answer they had to do with metaphysics of its time, some of it had to do with Is there life after death? Is there is the world eternal? Is the world or the world of finite? What's the nature of the soul? And things like this? And he wanted answers to these questions. And the Buddha declined to answer any of the questions he, he asked. At the end, he explained why. And he said this. These views are not beneficial, do not belong to the basics of the spiritual life, do not lead. And this is the important phrases in the ancient language, do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, and to Nirvana. So the Buddha was interested in something pragmatic, that was useful for a particular purpose. And these words that I like very much the word peace, I very strongly identify with peace as a kind of a wonderful way of living in the world with a heart at peace and at ease. The way to that is through a process called disenchantment, and dispassion. disenchantment means that we're no longer enchanted. So I love this idea. In chat, that means you're under the spell of something. And under the spell, for example of our greed of our hate, under under spell of identity of what, who we who we used to be and how we had to prove ourselves or defend ourselves, under the spell consumerism under the spell of, you know, politics, under the spell of all kinds of these sorts of people get caught in and so to no longer to be disenchanted means to no longer be under the spell of these things.

This passion dispassion. The word for dispassion also means to face literally means to fade away. And when we get disenchanted with the things that we're have a compulsive relationship to, then the compulsive compulsivity begins to fade away. And that's this word this translated dispassion means that the passionate drive or compulsion begins to fade away. And this leads to peace. So these answers to certain kind of metaphysical questions, to be engaged in those and even to get answers to those, the Buddha holds doesn't lead to this kind of peace. In fact, some people are enchanted by philosophical and religious ideas. Not a few people love reading spiritual books, because they get you get kind of high sometimes, you know, oh yeah, this is great than Wow, this is so inspiring. As long as we're reading. It's pretty good. And so, but does it really lead to disenchantment or to deep abiding peace you can carry with you, when you no longer inspired a wonderful teaching from I think was a Ajahn Sumedho, an English monk in England. He said, If it's not boring, it's not Buddhism.

You all leave now. And how I understand this is you don't want to be enthralled by Buddhism, you don't want to be kind of like think, Oh, this is like the best philosophy I knew. This is the Wonder most wonderful thing. It's like Buddhism is out there this thing. It just, you know, the idea is to know the Dharma, just enough to know what the Dharma is, don't be. Don't be enthralled with the books, the

Dharma teachers, people like that. But rather, they do as sooner or later see the Dharma as a mirror for yourself, and this and really turn around and really see yourself here and see, are you enchanted? Are you caught in the grip of compulsive passion or drive drivenness? Click clinging? Are you agitated? You live in worry? How is it? How are you? And is there a path is there a way for you to get free to end up some kind of deep abiding peace within you? So the Buddha said that the Dharma something is visible, and visible means that you can experience it for yourself, you could know it for yourself. And so I like to say that here at IMC if you look around at all the corners and cupboards and closets and different rooms at IMC, you will not find the Dharma. This doesn't exist here. The only place you find it is in your own heart is here. So you said What is it? What is it? How can you see it? How can you touch it? How can you feel it directly for yourself? What is it you can know? So that you know the Dharma? What is it that makes the Dharma less mysterious, and more obvious for us here now.

So this so in the in there's one famous discourse where the Buddha, the Buddha's Foster's foster mother, his mother, right here, raised them, comes to him and asks him for to teach him teach her the Dharma in brief. So that's nice, you know, she had the inside track. They son, you know, just tell me briefly what it's all about. And so this is what he told her. As for those qualities, of which you may know, these dharmas lead to dispassion, not to passion, to being unfettered, not to being fettered, to simplifying not to accumulating to modesty, not to self aggrandizement, to contentment, not to discontent, to seclusion, not to entanglement, to aroused effort, not to laziness, to being unburdened, some, not to being burdens, burden, some these things you may understand this is the Dharma. So long list of things. But in summary, I'd like to kind of paraphrase it. The Buddha's teaching, are those things that lead to dispassion, to being unfettered, to shedding, to contentment, to seclusion, persistence, and to not being burdensome. So the Dharma is found in person in personal qualities, states of mind ways of being how we are in the world, in ourselves. And this is one way we find it. If you're content in that contentment, you find the Dharma. If you're discontented, there's no Dharma there. There's no the religion of the Buddha is not found in being discontent in an anxious way, agitated way. But even more interesting for me is this quote Hear,

when you know, for yourself that there is greed, hatred or delusion within you. And then you know, at a different time that there is no greed, hatred and delusion within you, then you know, the Dharma is visible, here and now immediate, inviting to be seen for oneself, onward leading, and to be personally realized by the wise. So, this famous quote about the nature of the Dharma, it's visible, immediate, and invites itself to be seen, again, is in yourself, you're invited to take a good look at your mind and your heart, and what's going on in there. And this is one of the reasons why we practice mindfulness. So we can have a heightened sense of self understanding, to see and feel and know not only the forces within us that are there, causing us suffering, but also to know the opposite, to know when they're not there, and to recognize it. And if you can recognize that difference between the mind that's caught in the vise of attachment and clinging, of fear, agitation, and the mind that's free of it. That's where you see the Dharma directly. That's the Dharma. That's if you want to read the Dharma, really good book on the Dharma, read your heart. That's where it's found. It has to be found there. That's what makes it visible and direct that difference. So it's not like some mysterious mystical experience or thing that somehow elusive for transcendent. Certain people have like those people, those people they must know really, they had the inside track to what the real truth is. But it's, it's something we can all hopefully access and hopefully all of you into some degree, have experienced the difference between being caught up in things that are painful, be caught up in, and then to be free of it to be lesson and to feel the difference between that to feel the relief and the freedom and the peace of not being caught. That's where the Dharma is found. And that makes it immediate, accessible. Some of you can see for yourself, here and now. And then we have this wonderful term in the bonnet, or Nirvana. And the word Nirvana can lend itself to a lot of mysterious ideas about what the goal of practice is all about. Some people are positing

Nirvana as some sort of transcendent transcendental realm, state of mind, different reality in this reality. Some people call it the unconditioned. Everything the world we live in is conditioned or constructed things with Nirvana is the one thing which is unconstructed, unconditioned, somehow kind of eternal, timeless, deathless, all these wonderful words that kind of make it all seem kind of closed and wonderful, mysterious, mystical, inspiring language for some people. So here's how the Buddha defined Nibbana the destruction of lust, hatred, and delusion. This friend is called Nirvana, Nirvana.

So the ending of greed, hate and delusion are here to word is lust and this translation. And these terms lust, hate and delusion, greed, hate and delusion, are kind of seen as the three roots for so much of the inner motivation, motivations, or forces or clothings. That is the basis for so much of the suffering in our world, our own suffering, and also the suffering of the world around us. Probably most of the suffering you read about in the paper, probably a good story, a good percentage of it is a source and someone's greed, hatred, delusion, that's been part of it.

And so, Nirvana is not again, some meant to be some mysterious as it's a very pervasive or thoroughgoing uprooting of these afflictive states, these painful states, that humans seem to be born into this life with that seems to be part of who we are a part of the package. And what seems remarkable is that there is a course of practice of mindfulness of self understanding, where it's possible to begin to uproot these forces and be able to experience for yourself the radical distinction between beings have a mind which is involved and is driven by compulsivity by attachment, by fear, by worry, by greed or hostility in all the different various degrees and those can appear to have an experience of mind without that. And to feel that that mind is a valuable mind to have that hard, it's valuable to have a mind that lessons those qualities. That's where the Dharma is found. And that's what Dharma practice moves towards. So in the, in the classic teachings of Buddhism, one of the central approaches for discovering the Dharma doing this work is through the Four Noble Truths.

And the Four Noble Truths you the way it's commonly understood, utilize a very common human capacity or understanding of cause and effect that we often look for, we have something and issue in our life, and we look for the cause of it. If you have, if the water is dripping underneath your sink into the cabinet under your sink, you look for the cause, Where's it coming from, so you can fix it to you know, stop the leak. The we look for causes, we look for the root cause and effect relationship between things. When I left home this morning, to walk down here, I looked at the clouds, and said with these clouds, they mean rain, are they going to be a cause of me getting wet? On the way home today, so we kind of look at the relationship between things.

So I think it's a pretty basic human thing to want to do this. And one of the ways to very simple, ordinary thing to do is to ask when I suffer, and what's the cause of my suffering? Is there some, something, some something there, there are the conditions for the suffering to arise, there's something that triggers it is the suffering the result of something, if self suffering was not the result of some cause, or some condition, then it would be hopeless to do anything about it, then you would just have to suffer until reality, decided you'd suffered enough. And then you may be stopped for a while. But you wouldn't have any knowledge understanding why you suffer, you just have to bear it until it fades away. I know that I've done that sometimes I've had some, some times my life had certain feelings of depression, or sadness, or grief or anger, and, and I couldn't quite get my handle of what was going on what was causing it, what's Why was it there? And I thought, well, I think I'll just have to kind of wait it out. And then sooner or later, generally kind of went away. But I wasn't any wiser because of it, I think to understand the underlying conditions and cause for why but brought it in. And so then I was, I was you know, you know, subject to terrorizing again and occurring again. So, the Four Noble Truths begin with a very simple analysis, or investigation, and that is, what is the cause or the condition for our suffering. And so the first noble truth is a truth that there is suffering, some people are feeling a little bit

oppressive, that Buddhists keep talking about suffering. And I guess I kind of grew up in Buddhism. So I kind of think, you know, I just, to me, the word suffering comes out of my mouth, like, like with this, oh, it was so easy and light, it's like, you know, it's like, I don't hardly think about it's, you know, just suffering, suffering, suffering. But because I, you know, my whole life has been, you know, not suffering my whole life has been, you know, in this, in this world, that Buddhism in this language, and recently, someone told me, that, that for some people who are familiar with the English language, that the word suffering is a really heavy word. And it's, like, you know, it's kind of like, you know, like, you know, it's like, tragedy or, you know, the big suffering means like, big, you know, terrible things. And I just thought it meant everything. every possible little, you know, from the most smallest little distress or stress or anxiety to the big things. This means the whole gamut. So now, I think maybe I should, maybe we should, I shouldn't use the word so much.

And, but I don't know what to use instead. Some people use the word stress. Instead, they say that because even things of great happiness or a stressful, there's supposed to be some statistic that one of the most stressful experiences people have in life is getting married. And it's supposed to be a happy event. So you don't say suffering here. The that comes?

Yeah. I was told the story of one of the preeminent American Buddhist teachers and Western teachers, who, first time he was invited to officiate a wedding, maybe the last time. He, you know, did the wedding part of the wedding, you know, there was a little Dharma talk that he gave. And he gave a Dharma talk about death. Preparing them for everything. So, sometimes stress, I don't know what the word is, but maybe it's better not to translate the word at all and just say, dude, it's the Buddhist word.

And when I was meditating in Thailand, there was a lot meditation huts in the woods, there was these kind of geckos that lived in the rafters of the hut. And as far as I could tell, they kept telling me to keep being reminded. So the first noble truth is the truth of Duke. That there is stress, there is suffering, there's this stress, there's unease, unease is a nice word, way of translating, maybe to unease. But that's sometimes it's too mild for some compared to some of the big things. But so all those all those kinds of work. And the second truth is that often presented as the truth of the cause, or the condition for the arising of this to come. And so the first truth, the practice around it, is to really understand it. And this is one of the hallmarks of Buddhist practice, is a willingness to take a serious and honest and direct look at our ways in which we feel unease, the ways in which we suffer other ways that we have stress, to really stop. And so the bumper sticker for Buddhists would be I stopped for suffering. Because it's so important to take a look at it, because if we don't look at it, we can't learn from it, we can't change it, we can't transform it. So then, the second truth is a truth of often described as to who the cause or the condition for the suffering. And this also should be penetrated or understood deeply, to seen what it is, so that we can let go of that cause. And here's where, again, the you know, what I find so brilliant about these four noble truths as we don't have to put them into, you know, we wouldn't define them too closely. The idea is that we look at cause and conditions that affect our suffering, and bring about our happiness and well being. And what is that that and now is that look, stop and look, what is it? What's really going on here? What's going on in this picture? In the Buddhist analysis, the cause is generally referred to by a single word. And the word in Pali is tons. And tons, literally means thirst. And it's a very kind of visceral number Dharma, something to be known directly for yourself. So you know, when you're thirsty, it's a direct feeling. So thirst is Chi, think of it as a driven ness or compulsivity to really have compulsive desire. When there's when we're caught in the grip of desire, any kind of desire for or against something, and we can't let go of it, we can't be free of it, that being caught in the grip of desire is thirst. And that grip Enos is had to be the source of our suffering. If we can let go of being great in the grip of desire, then we can let go of that suffering, we can be free of that suffering. So part of the Dharma practice is to get quiet enough, mindful enough to begin noticing what is actually going on in



my mind. In my heart, when I suffer, what else is happening here, and the suggestion Buddhism, which is a little bit outrageous, in certain circumstances, is that you would take responsibility For how you suffer, as opposed to blame other people for it, that other people, unfortunately, are often that condition for us to suffer. But in the Buddhist analysis and not to cause for us to suffer, and that's the outrageous thing. And whether it's true or not, often you're better off anyway, taking responsibility, because then you start, stop and look at yourself, what am I doing? What am I contributing to this suffering, because you have a half a chance or a serious chance to do something about it. If you're contributing to your suffering, that you maybe you don't have if someone else is doing it for you. You can't necessarily change other people so easily. But you can't change yourself. Of course, you can't, it is appropriate to stop people from harming you. Absolutely. But, but the Dharma practice, again, is always found in what you can see and feel for yourself, taking responsibility here.

So then to turn around and see what am I contributing here? And this word, thirst is one of the places to look, is there some kind of desire for or against something, something strong aversion, strong, wanting, strong compulsive thinking, something that's kind of churning away, that kind of like, has grabbed you by the neck or grabbed you by, you know, in your mind, so you can't put down you're attached to it, you're clinging to it. And if it is, then you can maybe see the connection between the clinging, strong wanting, and the desire. And if there, if you see that connection, that cause and effect relationship, then the next step would be to ask yourself, Is it Do I need to continue to cling to this desire? Do I need to do I my better off having this desire or not having it? Or am I better off clinging to the desire or having the desire lightly? And a simple, easy way? So it's a reasonable desire to have, but I don't have to have it. It doesn't have to be now. And so to start investigating, what is the nature of this desire that clinging, the thirsting? What is it that you're doing? What's your contribution, and it is something that it's possible to lighten up with, to soften, to relax around, and perhaps even to let go of and in the in the instructions around this four noble truths, the instructions are to let go of the thirst, let go of the craving, that in the Buddhist analysis is the source of our of our suffering. Then the third noble truth is a truth of the cessation of the craving, and the thirst and the cessation of the suffering. And this is members of the Dharma seen, when you see the presence of unhealthy states of mind, and the absence of unhealthy states of mind, something about seeing the absence, seeing the cessation, seeing the potential, the possibility of a mind that's free. That's real, that's at ease. That's very important for understanding what the Buddha was teaching with the Dharma is about. It's easy to overlook it. Some people who are caught up in a lot of desire, might let go of one desire only to pick up another one right away. Because it's you're getting and having and doing is what's important. But just take time to feel and be present. For a mind which is at ease a body that's at ease, to experience the nourishment, of being settled that peace. For some people. Meditation is one way to do that. Meditation if for some people as we get into it is a time where we learn slowly, to relax so deeply, that we relaxed, maybe temporarily. Our, our clinging, the cravings, the aversions degree, the hates that we have, and the mind becomes peaceful and quiet. And then take time to be nourished by that, to feel it to experience it, be changed by it, realize that it's a possibility, realize that it has maybe a greater value, to have that peace than it is to pick up again, the attachments we have that driven us we have the identities we're clinging to. It's extremely important for the Dharma practice, to have a visceral experience of this kind of release. The mind freed the mind at ease. It's not easy to do that. So the fourth noble truth is a truth of a series of practice. is we can do, they create the conditions that support this peaceful life, this experience of peace. And three of these, there's eight steps to them eight practices, three of them have to do with ethics. It's difficult to be peaceful if you're going around robbing banks, stealing from your best friends and talk these things. It's, yeah, it's you want to be ethical, not because of Buddhist moralistic thinking that, you know, they have to be a moral person. But that you generally that the reason to be more ethical, and Buddhism is twofold. So we don't harm other people. And so we don't harm ourselves, we want to create the conditions where the mind can be peaceful, have a clean

conscience, so we can settle deeply. So through our speech, through our actions, and through our livelihood, the three areas we want to have an understanding. They footpath involves an understanding

of what is it moves us towards peace, it's called the right view. And generally, it's understood to be this, take this view that we'd stop to look for suffering, look for its causes, and look for that cessation or that freedom, that peace, to really stop and look at that. And then the value of that is, we're not looking in the wrong places. If we are looking, you know, in, you know, and other people to solve our suffering, if we're looking at politicians to solve our suffering, if we're looking at crystals to solve some of our suffering, for looking towards, you know, you know, you know, I don't know why all kinds of things, people look at all kinds of things outside of themselves, then we're not really looking at the heart of the matter, where we can make the more profound change for ourselves, where we take responsibility and grow up, to really be able to take and really see what's going on and live a life of taking care of ourselves in a deep inner way. So right view, which is basically the view of the Four Noble Truths themselves. And then there's the right intention. And this says a lot of, you know, a very nice teaching for the beginning of the year. What are the intentions you want to live by, and what the Buddhist analysis is, if if you want peace, if you want this freedom, that the Buddha is pointing to, you want to avoid, not just behavior, which is cruel. You want to avoid into intentions, motivations that are cool. If you want to, you want to avoid not just behavior, which is hateful, you want to avoid intentions, motivations, which are driven by hate, or ill will. You want to be free of lust, and they've been caught in the grip of that kind of a kind of desire, strong desire. And instead, you want to have intentions of compassion, loving kindness, and a frightening word, renunciation. The desire to be simple to relax to let go, not hold on so much. And then finally, the last step of the Eightfold Path last three has to do with cultivating the mind, developing right effort, making an effort to live more at ease, caught by things, to cultivate mindfulness. So we can have a strong, strong, stronger and strong ability to see what's going on, right down to the depths of our hearts. And the third, eighth is concentration to develop a stable mind, steady mind. So the mindfulness can be penetrating, really penetrating, really effective. So with the Eightfold Path, as the foundation as a support, then it's easier and easier to see how we suffer, how we have stress, how we have dukkha how we have unease, and we're able to catch it earlier and take it seriously earlier. Not so we can suffer better. But so we can start looking at the causes of it or the conditions of it understand the cravings and the cleanings that underlie it. And then we can let go. Or we can set a certain place the conditions and allows the letting go to happen on its own. We don't have to be the one always in charge of letting go. The wonderful kind of practices of mindfulness of concentration and meditation reveals a very powerful Enter a process that can unfold, independent of our orchestrating it, independent of us in charge of it all the time. And this is one of the reasons some people find it so amazingly satisfying and profound to be involved in Dharma practice, is that it seems that there's some deep inner, or outer, inner outer doesn't make any sense process that goes on, that allows that moves us towards spiritual health and moves us towards the freedom if we can get out of the way. So we learn to be present, we learn to let go of clinging, we want to get on the way, and then we move towards or move into the Dharma. So the Dharma is something that's visible here and now to experience directly for yourself, it's immediate

and available. It's not mysterious. But it's something that you can find that you have access to. And if you understand the basic principle of the Dharma, then you then what you have is a path, a path that will move you towards freedom to peace, to well being, to living in the world in a compassionate way. And the Four Noble Truths is at the heart of this formulation, understanding. So I hope that this was a nice way of beginning the new year. And perhaps for this year, if you're interested, you can take this very simple formulation of the Four Noble Truths and reflect on it, learn about it, think about it, and see how it applies directly to yourself. So it doesn't become some foreign idea that someone else teaches.

who becomes your own idea because you've seen for yourself, how meaningful and effective it is.  
Great. Thank

you.