

2017-01-02 The Four Noble Truths

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsda

It's in the custom here at IMC that the first talk of the year. Monday talk of the year is on the Four Noble Truths. The four noble truths are or encapsulate much of what the Buddha had to teach the purpose of Buddhism, the heart of Buddhism. It's a wonderful and brilliant kind of encapsulation of the whole Dharma, the whole teaching. And it's a wonderful thing to have a sense of understanding of, and all those different dimensions, and to reflect on and frequently, and to use it as a way of looking at one's life, one's experience of life, how we walk through life, how we live our life. And in kind of using it as a template, a guide for our life, it can bring a tremendous benefit, it can help us live much more peacefully, happily at ease, it can help us understand ourselves more deeply. And in a way, it can also help us understand the world that we live in. So we can live in the world with much greater wisdom and be peacemakers in this world rather than war makers. The sort of four noble truths are said to be the first teachings the Buddha gave after he became awake. After he was enlightened, he went searching for some companions. And that he'd known and he thought these are good people to teach this to. And so he went and taught them and it made a big difference for them, it said, some of them woke up and hearing this teaching. And the teaching centers around suffering. At least that's what how we say it in English. The word in ancient language is dukkha. And it's not clear exactly how it should be translated into English. Literally, it means pain. And, but in English, we can use the word pain for many things, which are not physically painful. You know, my colleague was a pain today, you know, and you know, that maybe it would maybe what we mean is the person was irritating for us or just annoying or something. So we said that word pain sometimes encompasses much more than just physical pain. And same way in this ancient language goes much wider than just the physical pain. And so some people most commonly translated as suffering. But I've been told that many people in English, it's suffering is it's a really heavy word. And it's reserved for like big things. Whereas the word dukkha applies to the whole range of, of challenges, difficulties that are painful. And so some people use the word unsatisfactory as a translation, unsatisfactory, some answers factories nests of life, some people use it use the word stress. And stress encompasses many, many things, even things which are supposedly happy, can be stressful. That's one of the advantages of translate translating to a stress point, and people who'd like to translate it a stress as one of the most stressful things in people's lives is getting married. But you don't you're not supposed to say that suffering to get married. But, you know, it can be stressful. So it has to do with this suffering. And some people think that Buddhists solo or they like to talk about is suffering, suffering, suffering. And it can be pretty, you know, pretty depressing to hang out with Buddhists who know how to suffer well. But the idea of suffering well means that we suffer in such a way that we're moving to freedom from suffering, that we kind of shake it off, and find a whole other way of living a life that's not based on it. But it's the path to it is in Buddhism is to understand our suffering really well. The, with a context in which the Buddha first taught suffering, his own context, how he was, how he walked through the world, was really he was the embodiment of the opposite of suffering opposite of dukkha. And what we think the opposite is, maybe it varies from

person to person. Some people see that the opposite of suffering is happiness. And so the Buddha sometimes said to have been, have great happiness.

More often the opposite of this word dukkha, that's presented in the ancient texts is peace, that context in which the teachings on dukkha, suffering, were offered was the person teaching it to the first time was a person who was deeply at peace. So happy, peaceful. The Buddha was radiant. The descriptions of the Buddha, as he left his place of awakening, to go find his friends to teach this teach him to was that his, his skin was clear and radiant. And he said, there's something about him that got people's attention. And people would stop and say, oh, what's, who are you? And what are you about. And the way the story is told, is he did find his five companions. But they had been dismayed or discouraged, or a boy, by what, by the Buddha, because they had been six of them with the five people and the Buddha had been practitioners of asceticism, and asceticism, they'd starve themselves, they stopped eating, they tried to hold their breath and not breathe as long as they could before they fainted. They did said the Buddha was one of the great aesthetics of his time, and he took asceticism as far as it could go. Before he felt like if I go any further, all that's left is to die. And there's no point in doing that. At that point, he decided, I think what I'll do is start eating, because I think I need some strength in order to, you know, find a different way rather than asceticism. And at that point, his companions left him. And because they were still devoted to asceticism, so he went to find them. And they saw him coming in the distance. And they said to each other, let's not, let's ignore him, let's not offer him an offer a seat, at the where they're sitting in the forest. And as he came closer, they couldn't help but to stand up and make a seat for him. And treat him with respect and kindness. There was something about how he was that, just how he was always walking up to them, that changed their decision about you know, to rebuffed him and not paying attention to him. So this man who is radiant, who somehow had a sense of, I like to think of a piece of clarity, of kindness or compassion, that that caught people's attention. So people wanted to listen to him. And in this happiness, peace, compassionate state that he was in, he started talking about suffering. And it didn't make him sad. Rather, he was teaching from this place of happiness and peace, teaching a path teaching a perspective that would guide people to attain what he what he had experienced, or he was experiencing. And so even though we talk a lot about suffering, and Buddhism, the hope is we do it in a happy way. So we'll see if I can do that today. But that's the context for this. That's the kind of purpose of it now one of the reasons to talk about suffering so much, is that is very close to the reason why when you go to your doctor, and something, ails you, you have some illness or something. And so, you know, I got to my doctor, it's 10 minutes or 15 minutes that I'm given. And so I show up, and my doctor says, Oh, Gil, it's nice to see you. Have you been following the 49er's this year, and kind of sad what they're doing. And let me tell you about who I think they should hire next year for the coach and for the two players. And I have a list here I want to show you and I'm looking at my clock, you know, like that I, I have 10 minutes with this person, you know, and I think I need to get to the point. And I want to get right to the point because, you know, I don't want to talk about football, especially a losing football team. That's really suffering. And so and so. So let's get to the point so we can really take care of what needs to be taken care of. So it's, I think it's in that kind of way, sometimes we want to go directly to where the issue is, and address it. In the in spirituality like Buddhism, there's a lot, a lot of different theories, ideas, concepts, some of them which are quite abstract, some of them which are quite metaphysical and transcendent and all kinds of things, that oftentimes it's very easy to hear these things, and they leave ordinary life behind. They leave a grounded, direct connection with our experience behind because they're so lofty and so ideal. And by the Buddhist teaching, the whole tradition of Buddhism begins by the Buddha evoking the idea of suffering to point right In a grounded, clear, concise way, this is where you this is what you want to address. This is where the issue is, this is the doorway to freedom to look at this and so he started off by talking about the stoop gasps and he said that now you have to kind of you can decide how to translate to go.

So, birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, illness is dukkha, death is dukkha, being together with what is displeasing is dukkha, being separated from what is pleasing or what is dear to you is dukkha, not getting what you want is dukkha. And in brief, five, all the aspects, all the ways in which the human being operates all the operating psychophysical ways we operate, if there's clinging associated with those, is to come. So this took so the first is called the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering. Noble Truth, the dukkha. So he describes what he means. But to get a better sense of what he means we have to look at the second noble truth. And the second Noble Truth is, its variable, how that's also translated. Again, we're dealing with ancient ancient words from 2500 years ago. And in the 2500 years of Buddhism, a lot of interpretations have arisen about this core teaching. You can imagine, right, the central teaching, you know, that everyone wants to take, they have a different perspective. And that's part of the richness of it. In the modern world here in the West, one of the most common ways of understanding the second noble truth is refers to the cause of suffering. And it's a powerful idea that, that we can discuss and we can uncover the cause the origin of what brings about the suffering. And then the way the Buddha describes the cause, can tell us something about what he's doing what this suffering is so concerned about. It kind of defines it. And he says, The cause of suffering, or at least if he was teaching in the modern West, he'd say the cause of suffering is the craving, which leads to further becoming the craving that leads to further becoming, it's kind of a technical thing in Buddhism is a further becoming, what does it mean, actually, is literally becoming again. And one way of understanding is, is that what's really suffering is when we take on a way of being in the world, an action a thought and identity, a craving a clinging, that doesn't just end in itself, but gives rise to as momentum as continuity in what we're doing. And that continuity gives rise to more so for suffering in the future. So if I'm feeling lonely, and this happened to me when I was younger, things lonely or depressed or something. And one of my solutions, brilliant solutions for loneliness and sadness was to eat. And I would eat, they often ate bread. And the consequence of that, I create had a craving for food. And for temporarily, I didn't feel so sad or so lonely anymore. But that craving did a strange thing to me where it just made me feel worse. And so what do I do when I felt worse? I just craved more. And so I would crave more, and I'd eat more, and me feel worse. And I was like a vicious cycle for me. So those are the kind of craving that led led to further craving to be more to be more, more.

And so there's certain way of being in the world some way of clinging or wanting so strongly. There's a way of being that creates a condition that kind of shapes us conditions us to kind of keep staying kind of stuck in a rut or keep staying kind of caught up in cycles of thinking or cycles of being or wanting or avert averting or version, which kind of becomes self perpetuating, that kind of keeps us kind of oppressed or closed or contracted or tight. And so this suffering that the Buddha was talking about, was not necessarily just a momentary feeling of pain or disappointment, or something. But it was more insidious. It was a way in which we got caught up in whatever was going on. And it led to further becoming that it that it was perpetuating a way of being in the world. And we can see that sometimes with cravings for identity. For some people that they really want to be seen, have a certain Daddy, I'm this kind of person. And so, but it's never satisfied. So we want to have that way, be that kind of person. But it's a relative, any kind of identity we hold on to and cling to, is actually quite fragile. The more closely we cling to it, the more we have to kind of keep shoring it up and keeping it going and defending it and making sure people see it in that kind of way. And so, once we're clinging to identity, it leads to further becoming the sort of doing it more and more. And sometimes it can be skipped. Got ahead, because we're trying to do this whole social gymnastics to try to get everyone to see us, as we want us to see them as we want them to see us. Even though chances are they see right through it. You know, so we're trying to create this persona. So this clinging craving, is said to be the cause of suffering. Because it but the so the part of the task, in reflect reflecting on our life through the lens of the Four Noble Truths is to notice, when we feel unease, that's another translation. We were dukkha when we feel unease, I like the word unease a lot because it means you start tuning in to even mild sense of

unease. And the mild sometimes is not minor. The mild sometimes is a fantastic door into getting into what's going on in us in a deep way. It helps us to catch what's happening early, when we're feeling uneasy about it, before it becomes a major catastrophe. So part of the function of mindfulness is to help us be present in the now not so much that we can enjoy the now the whole mindfulness, modern mindfulness movement is a little bit over the top in terms of celebrating the present moment. And enjoy enjoying the present moment as you go to your spa. The is a little bit overdone. But in Buddhism, part of the one of the primary purposes of being in the present moment, is so that you can catch a notice, when you feel unease, when you feel suffering when you feel something's off and wrong. Not so you can feel suffering better, but rather, so you can then stop for it, look at it, and start becoming wise about the causes of it. What's going on inside of you? What's happening in you. Now one of the ways of dealing with suffering is to look outside of oneself, and assign blame elsewhere, the cause must be elsewhere. If I'm suffering somebody else's responsible, something else has to happen some exchange out there. And that's certainly a times a reasonable approach. Sometimes, you know, someone's hitting you over the head with their hammer. You know, please assign blame there. You know, please kind of take care of it. And at that level, you know, stop that, you know, take the hammer away or something. But, but when you're using the Four Noble Truths as a lens to look at their life, we stop assigning blame. But rather, we look to see what is my contribution to that suffering.

And, you know, unless you're being harmed actively the you know, you have to take care of things in the world in a wise way. But the task of the Four Noble Truths is to look at your responsibility or your contribution to how you're feeling. So if you feel uneasy, if you feel stressed out, if you feel like you're having suffering, it's a very mature thing to do. Thanks very grown up thing to do, to take responsibility for your role in it and to be curious interest, what am I doing here, even if 90% of the responsibility of the whatever the challenges is in the other People, you still want to take care of the 10% that you're doing. Because it's only in you that you can find how to be psychologically free. Your freedom is found in your own heart. And if you're only involved in fixing the world around you, and taking care of other people to get them all just lined up, right, you might miss yourself. And you might be successful in cleaning up the world. So no one ever irritates you again. But it's kind of unlikely. And so, you want to at least you know, you challenging being in the social world is huge for everyone. Even the Buddha had his challenges with people. But the challenge of being with yourself, it may be big too. But the challenge, at least with yourself, you can make a difference. And you can make a lasting difference with yourself, that you can carry with you much more thoroughly, that you can make differences in the world. And the heart of our suffering, the heart of our happiness, the heart of our agitation, the heart of our peace is found in our hearts. And so part of this turning the Four Noble Truths is that part of addressing our life by turning attention towards ourself. thing where what am I doing is causing this? What's my contribution? What am I holding on to what am i clinging to? What am I denying and pushing away? What am I contracting around? What am I resisting? What's going on here for me. So the third, so the third noble truth, is finally the good news. And the third noble truth is that the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, the ending of this kind of stress, or unsatisfactory feeling, this ease unease that we have and the third follows in the wake of the second, if you understand the cause, then you see, you put your finger on the issue in yourself, that cause that movement to the mind, or the heart of clinging, of craving, of clinging, of contraction of whatever it might be, what I'm holding on to, that is something that I can release that doesn't have to be there. craving, clinging is optional. It's not built into the hardware of our mind and body. It's the software, it's the that's operating, and you can shift and change it. And so part of the advantage of seeing the cause or the main advantage is then we can work on releasing that cause releasing that clinging. So it said that there are the Buddha said there are four primary many areas of clinging, but he talked about four primary ones. One of them has to do with craving or clinging, getting attached to pleasure, essential pleasures of any kind. And that's another

place where people hear about the Buddha and not as he talks about suffering, but now he's down on sensual pleasure. I mean, this guy's a party pooper. Don't take him to a party.

And, but if we just it doesn't take a lot of a lot of analysis. I think in most people's lives, even people who are quite poor, to realize how much of the life is spent trying to sometimes be comfortable or get pleasure. And many people in our society here probably spend more money on buying things that than you really need to you know, you probably buy a little bit nicer clothes and the absolute minimum that you have to get over more, maybe have a slightly better car, a newer car, then you have to have, maybe you have a little bit bigger home, then you have to have, you know, it goes on and on, you buy your food, you probably buy you know, just buy, you know, brown rice and vegetables or something you don't just try the simplest possible food. But many of us in our, you know, circles, I think probably buy food, which is a little bit you know, additional to what's basically will need to survive well, because of pleasure. We want to be delighted. We want to feel comforted. We want to feel there's a lot more that we want. And so this pursuit of pleasure is actually quite huge in human society and this is one of the things I had to put up with To the even back in his time, 2500 years in India, that concern preoccupation with pleasure was something that was quite big in our society, then peak human society. And there can be a lot of craving and clinging and contraction and suffering around being comfortable, and avoiding discomfort. The second he talked about, has to do with in the ancient language, he called it views, pinion. Usually that meant to philosophical understandings of life. But in the modern world, it just any opinions and stories we have, but anything at all, people get attached to their opinions attached to their stories, personal stories, and they want to, you know, hold on to them at all at all costs. And it can be a lot of suffering in the world that we inflict on others, by clinging to our opinions and our views. The third is clinging to self, it's a kind of one of the stories we tell ourselves is a story of our identity story of what's mine who I am, what my true self is, and there's a lot of attachment around, I mean myself in mind. And so the greater the attachment, the greater the clinging and the contraction around me myself in mind, the more it's a cause, for continued continued becoming, becoming, again for suffering. And the fourth is, seems a little bit odd, maybe, and then is sometimes said to be clinging to ignorance. And I love this idea that some people would prefer not to know so strongly that they're not going to pay any attention, they're going to turn away. Some people practice the ostrich approach to living life, or ostrich approach to, to challenges in life. And that means you put your hand head in the sand, and just pretend it's not there. So instead of ignoring is not just ignorance, because you don't know, it's an active movement of choice, to not pay attention to not be awake, not notice what's going on. Maybe for some people it's not, they're not going to notice suffering, they're gonna pretend it's not there. I've known people who've had tremendously powerful stories, views about life, that were that life is rosy and wonderful, and flowers and the hair and everything's nice. And their lives were the most difficult ones that I knew. And they created kind of havoc around them, and people stayed away from them. And they didn't know why they were so alone. And one person I'm thinking about had a lot of anger. But the surface was everything was so wonderful and peaceful and nice. And and, you know, very strong attachment, not only to a view, but also to avoid really seeing what was going on.

So to be able to see this, to see our attachments, to see our clinging to see the causes of suffering, the possibility of releasing it, working on to let go of it. Sometimes letting go can be easy. But sometimes for the court, the core attachments we have, it can be quite difficult. And so the Buddha, then in the fourth noble truth, offered a path of a, it's called a path of practice, that leads leads to the cessation, this ending of attachment ending of clinging ending of suffering. And it's an integrated set of practices that work together, that are meant to encompass all the different aspects of our life for a lot of the range of who we are. It encompasses our cognitive life and understanding our intentional life or what motivates us in our lives. The attitudes we have that we live by. It includes how we speak, how we live ethically in the world includes our livelihood, and what we do there, and includes how we care for our mind, our heart depending how you want to call it. And that caring for heart includes doing things like practicing

meditation, developing concentration, developing mindfulness. So kind of working on these multifaceted multi these multiple different areas in our life, and getting them kind of aligned so that they support a way of living a life that makes it easier and easier to see suffering, see the cause and to be able to let go of it. So there's a quiz through the eight. There's a right there are called all start with the prefects some, in some ways, usually translated into English as right? up at the retreat center in Marin County called spirit rock. They translated there as wise. And it's right, you know, rubs some people the wrong way. But it kind of more more literally can mean complete. And I like the word complete. They continue to do this completely. Is there a feeling and doing it right? So I'll go with the rights and that's how it's usually done in English. So, first one is a right view, right? orientation. The second is right intention. The third is right speech. Right action, right livelihood. Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Right View has a lot to do with using the Four Noble Truths, as the orientation about how we, the perspective we use, we're looking at our life, the framework in which we look, it's so amazingly effective to constantly come back and look at this very simple lens. Do I feel at ease? Do I feel this ease? Do I feel uncomfortable? Do I feel suffering? Let's look at it more carefully. Let's let's focus on that. And look at the cause. Before we pull out the crystals, before we pull out the tarot cards before we pull out all kinds of things, which are a little bit further away from the core issue. Let's go and look at it, guys. That's the orientation that the Buddha offered. And then the right intention has a lot to do with the attitude in which we kind of want to walk through this world in turns out just happens to be maybe built into the structures of our hearts, that it's very hard to see ourselves well. And to begin the important work of letting go of our clinging and grasping, if we spend a lot of time being cruel, or unkind, or for caught up in lust. So you want to have an attitude that is more conducive that supports you to do this deep inner work. And it turns out that inner work is that works a lot better. If we spend more time being caring, compassionate, kind, and living a life of simplicity, where we're not complicating ourselves with too many stuff and things and things. just a coincidence that works better that way. So part of right intention is to kind of try to find those attitudes and live by them more. Then right speech, being careful with how we speak is how we speak is a is an expression of the heart of what goes on inside. And if we speak lies, it's hard really to kind of live truthfully on the inside. If we speak harshly unkindly, it's hard to kind of discover this deeper way that is conducive to peace.

Right action has to do with living ethically, it turns out that it's actually quite hard to just discover a deep inner peace and happiness if you go around killing people. So use your best to avoid that. It's hard to have this deep inner peace if you go around stealing, it's best to avoid that. It's hard to have this inner peace, if you miss your sexuality cause harm with your sexuality. So be sexually ethical. And then also those three other ones that are mentioned. And then right livelihood means it's hard to do this deep inner work, cleansing work, freeing work, if you do the livelihood, which seems to go the opposite direction. And so the Buddha said you should really avoid selling weapons and being involved the whole weapons industry. He says hard to do this stockpile. Right Livelihood. It's hard to do this in your work if that's what your livelihood is about every day all the time. If it's hard if you're selling poisons, to kill people, it's hard if you're involved in a trade of human beings and slavery or things like that. So certain certain professions which he said are just don't just go against the grain. how we interpret that in our modern world, I think has to be very personal for ourselves. But do we look at our livelihood look at how we live our lives. It's a big for some people. It's a big part many hours of the day. Is it conducive as supportive? for moving ourselves towards peace moving ourselves towards this freedom that we talked about? Or is it Are we really going in the opposite direction. And then the last three have to do with very much with meditation, understanding what goes on really looking inside, getting to know our minds really well. Starting studying our minds, and being able to start making adjustments with how we think, what motivates us, and what kind of activities go on in our mind and hearts. We don't let our minds kind of just have free rein to do whatever they want. Because sometimes that's just like they can wreck havoc. But within reason without repressing anything without denying anything, or covering anything

over is beginning to kind of turn the ocean liner in a different direction. So that we start having thoughts and mental activities and ways of being which are more conducive to the deep inner work of others freedom from attachment. And to help us do that. There's cultivating mindfulness, strong ability to be in the present moment, and cultivating concentration, strong ability to be still and peaceful, as we look. So the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. The first thing he taught, after his awakening, he taught at a time, when he had discovered for himself, how to be deeply at peace, and happy and compassionate. Imagine yourself at a time in your life, when for you and relative to what your life has been like, when you felt the most peaceful, the most happy, the most contented, the most compassionate care, the most kind of settled and sense of well being. Maybe it was when you were a small child, sometime or maybe two knows when, which is the time for you. Imagine that time. And imagine that time, kind of you're centered, you're settled in it. And you're feel quite safe, maybe even strong, capable, stable in it. And then, from that stability, and that sense of well being that can make you very sensitive. to notice, when there's a tendency, to get caught up in some craving, to get caught up in some contraction, some clinging, some wanting some resistance. And you can feel, how that craving that clinging, that resistance begins to diminish the peace, happiness well being that you have.

And so you have a choice. Do you like a fork in the road? Do you now go with the clinging, the grasping that's beginning to come up? Or do you want to stay with that peace and well being that you are finally in touch with? Which way do you want to go? That's the context which the Buddha was teaching the Four Noble Truths. He knew something a new way of being knew that we have some, perhaps we have the capacity to find a place of choice in that fork. And keep coming back to the place of wellness keep coming back to a place of freedom keep coming back to the place where it's more peaceful, where there's less suffering. And as we do that, we discover the places of deep abiding sense of peace, happiness and well being and it becomes our own. The peace of the Buddha can be our peace, and that becomes a stronger, stronger reference point. And as for the Four Noble Truths, the greater or peace, the greater our well being and happiness, the more valuable the Four Noble Truths become, the more they become a protection, you're a guide or support for going in that direction. More and more so the Four Noble Truths are suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The person who taught it was happy. May you be happy and 2017 and the Four Noble Truths support you. Thank you