

2018-01-01 Four Noble Truths

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Oh, first, I welcome you to the new year. And it's my custom for the first talk of Monday nights in the new year to give a talk on the Four Noble Truths. It said that when the Buddha was awakened, he was awakened to the Four Noble Truths. And then when he first started teaching, he taught the Four Noble Truths. And in the classic description of this, it talks about that with the experience and teaching the Four Noble Truths, there was light. There was a vision and there was knowledge and that that light and vision and knowledge is something the Buddha then offered to the world and least for Buddhists, that was considered to me a very momentous occasion, the first his first teaching that he gave. So the Four Noble Truths are for rather simple statements. And the first statement is that there's the noble truth of suffering. The second noble truth is a noble truth of the arising of suffering. The third noble truth is a noble truth of the cessation of suffering. And the fourth is the noble truth of the path for the cessation of suffering. So, we have this idea of suffering, the arising of it, the appearance Give it, the ceasing of it, and a path for the full ceasing of suffering. And it's customary to when we go into more detail of what this might mean or how it's understood to begin with the first one, and then go through 1 2 3 4. And today I'd like to go the other direction. So the fourth is the noble truth of the way. And it's usually described as or explained, and by the eighth Noble Eightfold Path. So the way to the cessation of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path the Buddha taught. In fact, when the first the Buddha first taught, he didn't begin by teaching the Four Noble Truths. He had a kind of introduction where he taught first the Noble Eightfold Path And he, the story goes that for about six, seven years that Buddha was an ascetic. He was searching for the spiritual truth, liberation and the ways that were available to him in ancient India. And one of the ways was asceticism, if you starve yourself enough, and suffered enough physically and that you somehow would exhaust your bad karma and somehow be free. And so he tried that, and he had companions. He had five companions he did that with at some point, he decided this was not the way the classic story is that he collapsed and maybe into a river he was so thin that he can put his hand on his belly and he could touch his spine. And is he now you're so mad misstated. He would collapse and people thought he was dead he was and then he would kind of revive and stumble around. So at some point he said, You know, this doesn't make any sense, you know, no one's done. asceticism as well as I have and the only next step is to die completely and that doesn't work. So this is not the path forward. And then he had a memory of a time when he was a very young we think maybe around six, seven years old, where his father It was kind of a local chieftain was leading the spring plowing festival. So the first plowing of the spring in the fields and the, the Buddha to be was a young boy was left kind of unattended at the edges of the field under the shade of a tree and some sitting there contently and peacefully in this nice setting. He dropped into a very deep state of concentration There was a very pleasant, very harmonious, unified, connected, delightful to be in peaceful.

At the end of his ascetic practice all these years, he remembered that occasion and he thought to himself, maybe this is the way forward, I do not need to be afraid of this kind of pleasure. And the

reason he said not to be created this kind of pleasure, there was an idea in ancient India, that part of the reason for asceticism than any kind of pleasure was somehow defiled, polluted somehow part of it world of attachment and clinging and so you weren't supposed to have any pleasure. If you're really on the path seriously, that's so you, you're left just to be an ascetic. So he said, maybe, you know, I said, it's, it doesn't work. And this pleasure I had as a young kid, it wasn't sensual pleasure. Like you normally think about it. It wasn't like he got wonderful food or wonderful sex or wonderful massage or wonderful music. It just sat there peacefully and something shifted inside of him, where he became unified, connected whole and felt very good. Maybe this is the way forward. And so he decided to eat food and to be able to sit, be refortified to be able to sit meditate in this way. At this point that his five companions, who were also ascetics were thought that he had given up the true way that he would now you know, he reverted back to the problems of sensual desires and overindulgence those things, so they abandon him. They left and the Buddha was left alone and then he proceeded to meditate the way he had as a young kid. And he found that this was actually a powerful way to go forward to practice. And, in fact, you don't have to be afraid of this kind of pleasure, he said. And so he discovered deep concentrated meditation. And when his mind got very, very still, then he became liberated. After he was liberated, he wanted to share what he discovered with someone who would understand. And he finally settled on that his five companions they would understand. So he went and found them. But when he arrived to see them, they saw him coming in the distance. And they said to each other, let's none of us stand up when he comes when our old companion comes, because he's reverted to the kind of defiled life of sensual pleasures and so they may disappear. All right, then we're going to stand do anything. But when the Buddha approached, he was so radiant and so peaceful, it's clearly been transformed in such a way that they couldn't help themselves but the stand up and they made it misete and brought him water and sat him down and then they were willing to listen to him. So, his companions are living in the old paradigm of that time, that there were two extremes, that there was extreme of sensual pleasure, or this extreme of asceticism. sensual pleasure was defiled was impure. So the way to go was through asceticism. So when the Buddha sat down to talk to them, the first thing he said was, there is a middle way, there's a middle path between sensual indulgence and ascetic so the Buddha didn't accept this hard dichotomy or duality that existed at that time. There's an alternative, he called the middle way. And that middle way, is a Noble Eightfold Path. Because what the Buddha had discovered was to live a life and live away in the world, which was not, asceticism is not indulging in sensual pleasure. And he was going to describe to his friends, this is the lifestyle I discovered. And he called it the Noble Eightfold Path. And it's a different aspects of human life that come together as a unified whole. They're not necessarily sequential. But they all come together and support each other for how to live an enlightened life or a wise life or Complete Whole life.

And it begins with having a perspective The right usually is called right view in English, but a right perspective, certain way of seeing this world of ours. An essential record to this way of seeing the Buddha had was to see in some kind of deep moment, a moment way that our world begins and ends, repeated repeatedly over and over again. It arises and passes, rises and passes. The year comes a year goes, day comes, a day goes, a breath comes and breath goes up, what comes at thought goes, that there's constantly made up of this coming and going phenomena that goes on. And it's hard for human beings to really appreciate the fine detail of this moment to moment rising and passing. Because we're telling ourselves stories, stories about our life story, what's happening with concepts and ideas that kind of keep a semblance of things kind of being more stable than they are. Were kind of like there'll be like magicians who are kind of conjuring up a projected virtual reality of our world. That's accurate enough because we don't usually don't bump into things. But, but it what it kind of overlays a sense of permanence on experience. That's much more of a projection onto it than what's actually there. At least in our moment to moment experience of life. Things are constantly shifting and moving and flowing and changing. coming into being and passing away coming and going arising and passing.

And this was the core aspect of this right view perspective to really tune into the constant change. And the reason for see this constant change is that other air to really Graca to really see it and proceed without things constantly shifting. There's something about that inside that perspective that makes it difficult to cling to grasp. And it's very hard for any of us to learn to really first of all to discover that we're clinging. And deeply it's kind of in the core of our operating system. clinging to self clinging to opinions into stories, clinging to desires, aversions, clinging to suffering, all kinds of things. And to really see it and then also then, even to see it as it's hard to imagine how do I release myself from it? How do we not be contracted by the kind of clinging, the grasping attachment that we have? And so there's something about sitting very, very still and quiet, concentrated mode and seeing the birth and death of the world over and over again, moment by moment. That's it. comparably helpful for settling, settling back and letting go, that holding on letting just kind of be part of the stream or the flow. So that perspective of impermanence the Noble Eightfold Path the second factor of the eight is usually called the right intention, the right attitude. And this is to live a life where we no longer has intentions or reflections or thoughts, attitudes of scent of sensual attachments of sensual pleasures, sensual cravings. No longer is caught up in having aversion towards people in other places, and no longer is caught up in having hostility to the world. Instead, one is interested or attitude of simplification or letting go of renunciation, an attitude of kindness, an attitude of compassion. This new life the Buddha discovered was a life of simplicity, a life of kindness and a life of compassion. The next three factors of the Eightfold Path have to do with an ethics, an inner integrity, ethical integrity. A person has the right action. To have this new life the Buddha discovered is to not be involved in killing anything, not to be involved in taking what is not giving and not be involved in sexual misconduct.

To do this really thoroughly, is something the world is still discovering. To do, unfortunately, you think 2500 years, you know, we've had, we got the message 2500 years ago, not only from the Buddha from other people, but somehow Not everyone gets the message. But there are some people who discover how to live this way. And so the Buddha's enlightened enlightenment brought him into this new world new way of living, no killing, no stealing and no sexual misconduct. In this case it was to be celebrated. The next factor they fall path is right speech. And this is to have truthful speech, to live a life to live a life where your your speech is truthful, where your speech does not divide people in a divisive talk. And your speech is not harsh. And then there's no frivolous speaking. So that's a new way of living they discovered and then also This a death factor is right livelihood. So how we live our lives, how we sustain our lives, how we support our life, is somehow is one that doesn't cause harm for the world, for other people for other animals, so to live a life that's harmless. And then the last factor is that they felt that the sixth, seventh, sixth, seventh, and eighth, have more to do with inner cultivation of the mind. And this has to do with being able to write effort has to do be able to track and see what's going on in our mind and make choices to let go of unskillful unwholesome thoughts, ideas, desires, but to pick up and be involved in skillful ones or wholesome thoughts and maintain them. So we've kind of be able to make a distinction see clearly the kind of movements of the mind Which are not healthy, and those which are healthy, and be able to choose the healthy ones to live live from that place. And then there's right mindfulness. And so this is now you're attentive. This new way of living was a way of living, whether we're attentive to what's happening present for life as we're living it, and then the right concentration. I'd like to think of it as that right? unification. Concentration has a lot to do with being whole, and not being so fragmented or spinning or agitated, that all the different pieces of us come together, to be at harmony or be connected. I think it was sometimes when we sit down to meditate, and we've had a busy frazzled day. Like all the puzzle pieces of our life, are separated and spinning out and can't find each other. We sit down to meditate and all the public All pieces come back together and snap in and we become whole and settled again. So that this concentration is a lot to do with us, coming in and being connected to ourselves. So to the Noble Eightfold Path, this life that the Buddha discovered was beautiful life, a wonderful life, profound life, the life of kindness to the world, doesn't

cause harm in the world, connected to ourselves in a deep way. And, and when there was happy that we're talking about it being a happy life, peaceful life. So that was that's, that's the fourth of the of the Four Noble Truths as this new life the Buddha discovered. The key for discovering this new life is the third noble truth, which is the cessation of suffering. But how that cessation comes About is described as the cessation of craving. craving comes to an end kind of forces of craving is considered more more fundamental than clinging. You crave first and then you cling. And so this very deep movement of compulsive desire, which the word in Pali, and Buddhist language, the literal word is not craving, it's a thirst and kind of biological, you know, if you're really, you know, thirsty, and you have this thirst for water is compulsion, this, you know, or thirst for power. There's three different things we say. It's kind of this almost compulsive desire that, you know, get out of a drivenness that's there.

And some of our clinging some of the things we're attached to some of our desires. have his quality of being compulsive or driven in such a way that we're not in control. They have us, grabbed us by the nose and pulling us around or grabbed us for the throat or kind of just propelled through us. And occasionally people will know better than some of their desires, they have to know better than the net out to act on them. But sometimes people act on them anyway, even though they know they shouldn't be doing it. And so it's the cessation of this craving. That's, that's the third noble truth. With the cessation of that craving, there's something about the freeing of this compulsivity, the freeing of the heart is settling in that happens then that naturally leads to living a different way. Because many of the ways that we live are unhealthy or unwholesome or you know, many ways of living, many people based on attachment, clinging, craving. If the craving falls away, how would you live? Probably you live much more peacefully. If you live more peacefully How would you live? Probably live much more ethically. So, with the craving, a whole new inner sense of being, could arise for a person. And that deep new sense of inner way of being, then becomes the guide for how to live the Noble Eightfold Path was described by the EightFold Path are represented by it. So then, the second noble truth is a noble truth of the arising of suffering, which is craving. The craving itself is the Genesis craving itself is a form of suffering, creating itself. is kind of embedded in all our suffering, the arising of craving as all different forms, all the things we can crave for. That's the arising of suffering. Without craving, there would be no suffering. Some people hear this and they protest. But you have to kind of kind of go along with it, how the Buddhists are defining this. What the Buddhists call suffering is the experience of pain, certain kind of experience, a pain that we feel, that comes with craving. So therefore, it can when craving ceases, that suffering ceases. There are other forms of pain that people experience. Like the can be grief, a sense of loss, someone dies and we feel sad or grief and mourning. You know, we don't come around During a course skipping down the streets, you know, whistling and singing songs and you know, after someone's died, you know, that had an effect on us. That wouldn't be called suffering in Buddhism. Unless there was some kind of craving or compulsive activity or attachment connected to that morning. The critter is suffering that Buddhism is concerned with is this as a psychological sense of, of dis ease psychological sense of unsatisfactoriness psychological sense of something is deeply off here. Psychological suffering that's born out of this craving. So, so, the second noble truth has a lot to do with beginning to appreciate or see clearly, the role that craving has or if they were creating doesn't mean much For you clinging or attachment or compulsivity or drivenness or some other good words that are related desire, hunger, grasping, as creative as we get with her one thing dissatisfaction and, and they say that things like a version stronger version and hostility and resistance can also be effective. craving, yes, yearning, yearning can be so strong it can kind of eat a person up from the inside.

So, that's the second noble truth. The first noble truth is a noble truth of suffering. It doesn't say that life is pervasively life of suffering. It says that in this life that we live, there is suffering. There's also happiness, there's also peace. But there's something very if if you want to become free of that suffering, you have to take it seriously. And stop and look at it and really slow down. So we kind of get underneath

the kind of the operating system underneath it, the craving, it's underneath that. And, and, but we don't you know, we're not it isn't like we're studying Buddhism, too. suffer better. So it isn't like you're stopping, stop and pay attention to your sufferings because, you know, we really want to, you know, do it well. But we stopped to pay attention to suffering so we can somehow end it somehow overcome it somehow dissolve into it, untie it. And so, I kinda like to think that this is very strong. Something very wise and very mature about what the Four Noble Truths are asking us to do. And that is not to deflect, not to deny, not to avoid the places in our life where we feel this ease, we feel uncomfortable or feel distressed or stressed or, or we feel the suffering when we feel something's wrong, something's Often some kind of way. Don't distract ourselves. But to stop and take a deep look at this beam in it. And one of the values of meditation certainly, as we all know it, I think at least popular literature these days emphasize how meditation helps us to relax and have less stress and, and be more efficient at work and it's good for your, you know, your, your nervous system and all kinds of, you know, wonderful benefits be read. It's very seldom in the popular literature, they say that meditation helps you to just sit in the middle of your conch. It helps you to sit right in the middle of your difficulty. But that's a very mature thing to do. To stop running, and say we're here I'm going to sit and I'm going to fail. I'm going to look at this and really wake up with it and be with it. Get to the heart of it, heart of the matter. And if you can do that, and this go the training of Buddhism is to be able to sit really well, which means to sit really still still means to sit and not be agitated by what's going on and not be reactive to what's happening. Not before and against what's happening. Not be adding stories and fears and desires on top of what's going on, but rather to settle deeper and deeper. To quite quiet the middle of it. It's kind of like sit right in the middle. It's kind of like eventually becomes the guy said that I've never been there but they say that I have the hurricane is calm. So you sit in that you know the calm center of your Hurricane of your life, which is a great place to sit. And then you sit and you see that everything is swirling. Everything is arising and passing, coming and going. And to be able to sit still sits, learn to sit still with confidence, and just sit still with tremendous faith, love, a sense of goodness, a sense of wholeness, a sense of being connected, all the puzzle pieces that come together inside of ourselves, and to sit really still in that confident place. And to be able to see the comings and goings of our life coming go of every thought. Every perception sensations we have the feelings that come and go is a way Beginning to slowly kind of the grip of the heart as the mind has and our clinging begins to loosen in the flow and the change the coming and going.

Because in order to really cling well, there has to be the illusion that there's something solid there that we can hold on to. But when there's nothing solid there to hold on to, and we just see the all these things are coming and going. At first, sometimes it can be a bit frightening. But with time we realize this is where safety is found. Safety is found in this calm place, where we can see the coming and going. But we are not the comings and goings. We're not troubled by the comings and goings. There's freedom in the midst of the comings and goings. And to sort of sit in the middle of this world of ours, find a calm still a place to walk Watch the comings and goings is kind of the key. It is the key kind of to what the Buddha was teaching. And if you can do that, and then slowly over time begin to let go the clinging, the cravings, the grasp things, then you become something different. And what the Buddha said is you become the Eightfold Path. Isn't that guy nice? Maybe there's all kinds of former identities that you have, which won't seem as integral or as, as close in or as core as the values or the lifestyle that is represented by this thing called the Eightfold Path. Somehow that's who we are. The stream of the path. So the Four Noble Truths, one of the most important teachings of Buddhism, there's a variety of different interpretations of it. It's a wonderfully rich kind of set of teachings that lend itself to looking at our lives in different ways. And I offer it to you here for the this first day of the year. And perhaps you can think about it through the year use it as a reference point for the year or explore it and study it. Here with different teachers have to say about it, read with different books have to say about it. Because the point is not to memorize other people's idea of the Eightfold Path other people's ideas of

the Four Noble Truths that he has discovered them what they are for you. And it's a wonderful thing to make them your own. When when what they do when they made it when they made anything your own, is they free you and you find a freedom, a confidence, a joy, that is portable and you can take with you in any circumstance at all. And that confidence can come with you into all the joys and sorrows of this life. So the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and they pop up so we have about 10 minutes if anyone would like to ask a question or make a comment or offer a testimonial, about this if we can have the mic over here.

So, Gil, I've listened to a number of versions of the Four Noble Truths that you've given. There's one motion where you talk about there is ease. There is a way to Lucy's, you regain ease and there are different ways by which you regain the ease. And for some people there they relate more to suffering. It's just the way they are. And I'm one such person, because I inherently feel that pain is king, even though I know it's not true. And there are some people who relate better to ease and you've told that many times there's nothing wrong. That's how people are built. But the Buddha chose suffering to address this and for me, when I first listened to this, it was profound it helped me. Is it because the Buddha knew that humans have a negativity bias because in psychoanalysis and in neuroscience, it's well known that the way we evolved is by negativity bias. We tend to all the our forefathers who are very chilled out Zen and all that they all perished. Those were very careful they want. So did the Buddha know that? Is that why he used suffering to address or to depict the Four Noble Truths?

So before I answer your question, the way that you've asked that, I would like to challenge you a little bit to suggest that maybe ease is a more important part of your life than you realized, have got blinders on. And so maybe if you took the blinders off from suffering, you will actually see that in you already, is more ease than you've accounted for. So you're out to answer your question.

What I've suspected about that, you know, the answer to your question is that when you have a goal, which is stated in the positive, so ease is a positive goal. It's too easy to get attached to it. And it's too easy to make. It's something that you start to talk yourself into or imagine is there or get attached to in some various ways. But when the goal is stated in the negative, then people are less less likely less less likely to get attached and they got this is it Now I know what it is, and go around holding it. And so freedom Suffering is a negative statement. And so it's the absence of something without positing the presence of anything, because it's possible with the absence of suffering, there's many options for what's gonna be present, not just one. Occasionally it might be ease. But there might be other times when it's compassion. Other times where, you know if our wonderful friend nearby, the senator is fault. If it certainly goes one of these days, we're around here. And we're not, we don't perish in it. I hope that all of us get to work and try to pull people out of the rubble and do what needs to be done. And I don't, I don't know if he is the right word for how we're going to be working at that time. So for almost 30 years, I'm a good Buddhist. I'm going to take take people out with a lot of ease No, that's weird. But I'll dig it. I'll try to dig it out without suffering but I'm going to work hard. Anyway, so I think there's I think there's actually actually the two have their religious goal, the golden Buddhism be the absence of something gives us our lives in a much richer way and gives us actually more freedom than if we make it a positive thing. They pretend to a thing. So that's okay. One more, Trudy Thank you.

When experiencing grief, I got the impression that it can be

without craving. It can be suffering without

waiting without quick grief without clinging

without clinging. And

that's what Charlie Brown has.

Well, I don't know Charlie Brown secret.

They're young I

think it's late.

But I you know how to tease that out how to separate it out, to be willing to suffer the grief and not muck it up with craving. I think

that's great. That's the idea. Don't be afraid of grief. Don't do shouldn't be afraid of ours or you know our emotions and our cause on our life. The Buddhist said one of the interesting things is Buddha said he said about his teaching, he said my teachings are for people who feel my teachings are for people who feel they can mess up a little different than what we think here in English. When we say feel But that's okay. It's close enough. And so, you know that you know, so to feel to feel our lives if there's grief to feel it, if there's sadness to feel it. And then when we're practicing mindfulness, the idea is to feel it. But to be mindful, be attentive to what's going on to see if we can start noticing what's extra. What's a burden why you know that is there clinging is there resistance is there judgments is there reactivity to it, that can be considered extra. And slowly we can learn to simplify and a certain kind of way purify our emotional life. And so grief at some point, can be pure grief without the all this extra stuff that we add on top of it. And it can be, you know, it's not enough is the right way of saying it. Probably there's a better way of saying it, but you know, there can be a feeling of profound rightness and feeling certain kind of grief. Of course this feels right. In some ways it's painful. It's, you know, sad, but it's not like I'm not justifying it exactly or you're not glorifying it, but it's real. I'm here in a real connected way and I'm not fighting it or resisting it or swallowed up in it, simply here with it.

But I think if I may say I think that you've grieved enough

Okay, so thank you all. And I hope that the Four Noble Truths can be a guide for you