

# The Four Noble Truths

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So today is the first, my first Dharma talk of the year, and the custom is to give a Dharma talk on the Four Noble Truths, and a kind of like this is often seen as the heart of Buddhist teachings and the centre of it all. Some people have said that everything, all of Buddhism, flows out of the Four Noble Truths, or is contained within the Four Noble Truths. And I find the Four Noble Truths, the formulation of them, brilliant and ever adaptable. Lots of perspective, lots of new ways to understand it and to live with the Four Noble Truths. To understand them enough, the formulation, the basic ideas of it, and have them reoccur in your life, and your reflection, and how you see the world, and how you see yourself, I found phenomenally supportive, helpful, and profound. And it is what Buddhism, as I know, is often considered to be the heart of Buddhism, especially a kind of Buddhism, that of Theravāda Buddhism, that we practise here.

And one of the kind of images, I guess, or analogies I have for learning the Four Noble Truths is that of a—well, first I'll tell you what they are, and then I'll give you an analogy. So the simplest formulation of them is made in four statements: that there is the Noble Truth of suffering. There is the Noble Truth of the arising of suffering. There is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering. And there is the Noble Truth of the way, the method, leading to the cessation of suffering.

And so at the heart, this is the idea of suffering, which some people are very happy to hear that Buddhism is going to address this directly, and people for whom everyone around them is constantly avoiding suffering and painting romantic pictures, nice pictures. You know that things are all good and not really addressing what's going on. It can be a relief to come to a religious practice where we really put it at the centre. Other people get quite discouraged, maybe even depressed by this. You know they're suffering enough in their life. And now they're told that suffering is at the heart of it all, and have to look at it.

And they came here hoping to get away from it, and to offer inspiring teachings that would just come, your leaves full of hope and delight and joy, and riding on a cloud, and feel really spiritual for the rest of the week and don't have to deal with suffering at all. So the analogy is that you are being attacked—not attacked, but a vicious monster comes at you, barking. And for these kinds of monsters, you can't run towards it and attack it. That just makes it more ferocious. The monster is really big, huge. So you can't run away, because if you try to run away, it just excites it.

You become, you know, a wonderful target. You're more likely, you're easier to catch because it can just take two steps and gobble you up. So you can't run towards it. You can't run away. You can't just crawl up in a fetal position, because then it's just more delicious. And what you can do is you can hold your ground, stand in the middle of the situation without offering any animosity, hostility, without any fear, and just calmly hold the ground and look the monster in the eye.

And that's what disarms the monster. That's when the monster doesn't know what to do. It doesn't do anything. Or the monster just sits down at your feet and is, "Well, you know something I don't know. Want to teach me what you've, how you've learned to, you know, feel that way?" I mean, everyone else either attacks or runs away, but you've learned something. How can you just kind of hold your ground, and look at it calmly, steadily, and be there with me?

So this idea of sitting in the middle of our life, completely in our life, is, I think, what I'd like to think the Four Noble Truths are about. None of our life is excluded. This is not running away. It's a kind of holistic way of really stepping in, living in this messy, complicated, difficult, maybe in a certain perspective impossible life. It's just right in the middle of this monstrous life, and standing upright, and looking at it directly, without attacking, and without running away, without giving up, and just kind of just holding and looking at it directly. Sometimes the monsters turn into sages.

Sometimes it's not monsters that appear for us. But there are sages that come. Wise people—turns out what the wise people want from us, they want us to meet them. In the same way, sages don't want us to be afraid of them. Sages don't want us to run away. Sages don't want us to collapse and give up, and expect them to give us all the answers. Sages want to meet other sages.

Sages want to meet the people who can stand upright and have the ability to look them in the eyes, just, "Here I am. I see you. We're here together," hold your ground in a certain free way, peaceful way. And then the sages have come to play with you, to enjoy this life together,

and this contrast, this duality, if you like, to use a terrible word in some circles, between the sage and the monster. That's much more the Buddhist kind of distinction as opposed to the sinner and the saint, or between purity and impurity. But to become a sage, to become a wise person who has the ability to be in the midst of this complicated life, and have the sense of freedom, have the sense of calm and peace, and really participate in it, to really feel part of it in a full way, but also in an independent way.

And so the Four Noble Truths are kind of, you know, is kind of pointing to this or being this as another introduction to this topic of the Four Noble Truths, because suffering is really at the heart of this. And some people say, you know, Buddhism is kind of a party pooper, you know, talking about suffering all the time. And someone once saw—I think it was Sharon Salzberg in the nineteen nineties—went to Russia to teach, and I forget what it was. No, it wasn't suffering. It was compassion. So she had a translator, and she is like the great embodiment of loving-kindness and compassion, books on it, and was giving this retreat over there in Russia about loving-kindness and compassion.

And every time she said the word in English, "compassion," and it was translated into Russian, the whole audience would just kind of like sink, like get depressed. And somehow the English word was not being translated in a way that the way she meant the word to be translated. And so there was a cultural gap there. And so, you know, when we keep using the word suffering for the Buddhist word, maybe we don't understand what the Buddhists mean, maybe we're not conveying what it actually means. But one of the associations I have to this topic of *dukkha*, of suffering, that I often think about, was there was a Tibetan monk who came to the United States once, and someone brought up a question about suffering to him, and he just broke into this huge smile, and was just so happy.

And then he says, "Oh, yes, the noble truth, the holy truth of suffering. It has to be holy. It has to be sacred." And everyone, "Well, what do you mean by that? You know, now you're glorifying suffering." Absolutely not what he was doing, but rather, I think what he was doing was saying, if you turn toward suffering and really see it, you'll see through it to the other side, to freedom from suffering. And that's what makes it noble. Not that the suffering is noble, but the insight, the ability to hold your ground and look at it clearly and directly, and not run away and not attack, but just be there with it, and you can see the other side, the other side.

What is that? Sometimes it's called happiness, sometimes it's called peace, sometimes it's called—many times it's called freedom and liberation. The advantage of the words freedom and liberation is that it's a little more difficult to make liberation or freedom a thing, whereas

happiness and peace is more like a thing, like, "Oh, now you can measure yourself against it, and your happiness is not the right happiness," or all kinds of things. But liberation, freedom is kind of like an absence, and so it's not quite a thing, and so it's easier to stay free when you don't get anything, just the absence of clinging, attachment. So Buddhism puts, you know, this idea of a sage and the monster, the idea of the suffering and happiness come up at the centre to Buddhism.

As far as I know, Buddhism is the first time in human history that we have records of where the concepts of suffering and happiness were placed at the centre of a religion or philosophy. And this is not the only time this has happened. And to give you some kind of appreciation for why suffering and happiness is kind of at the heart of Buddhism, and why it's not just some kind of self-indulgence or something, I like to think of that in this world of ours, there are two kinds of religion, and this is a gillism. So don't go look it up. Two kinds of religions, and religions—I define religion here as the ultimate values and purposes and meaning that humans live their life on. And so, if there's meaning, ultimate means, it applies to all our life, every corner and cranny of our life. These values, these meanings, these understandings are applicable when we apply them, understand them.

So that sense of ultimate ultimacy is what, you know, that kind of way is what I call a religion. So there are two types. There are those that are theistic, divine. We posit some kind of transcendent being, some transcendent reality, something that's quite removed and separate from this world of ours. And then there's the humanistic religions that are not theistically based. And this is where some people would quibble with me calling this way. And Buddhism is one of those theistic religions.

The heart, the centre of Buddhism, is not theistically based. And I would say it's not transcendently based in terms of some transcendent reality that's beyond and outside of this world of ours. But there are other theistic religions that most people wouldn't call religions, that people tend to call them philosophies. So one of the first that's kind of contemporary for Buddhism is the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Epicurus was, I think, the closest thing to a Buddhist in ancient Greece that I've come across. The only main difference—there are a few differences—but one of the main differences, he didn't seem to have a meditation practice, and so he was teaching many of the same things. But maybe he couldn't point people to the depth of the mind, depth, psyche, to really see where the subtlety, the depth, the almost subconscious areas of attachment, clinging, and suffering have their roots.

But he, for him, being a humanist—rather, he was clearly countering the theistic ideas of his time. He said he didn't believe in them, I think, and so he was looking for something that

could function as the foundation for the good life in Gilster language today, the religious life. And if you're not looking for transcendent answers, you're not looking for the answers that come from some god, which tend to be things of purity and sin and things like that. What's very humanistic, that can be experienced and known for oneself, is one's happiness and suffering, that can be known, that's experiential, that doesn't require some authority in some book that will tell you, "This is what the purpose of life is." That's actually—the purpose of life, and the meaning of it, can be found and discovered and applied and clarified in your own lived experience.

Then one of the next people who at this gills humanistic religion is John Stuart Mill, one of the founders of utilitarianism, one of the very important philosophies for the modern world. And he was very important because he's also a political philosopher, trying to build a philosophy for politics, and how people get along, and how to live. And lo and behold, trying to find something humanistic maybe that people could agree upon, and everyone can have experiential reference to point to that. You can't, if there's a pluralistic society, of many different religions, and people have their own transcendent ideas of what's ultimate. What he posited was happiness and the absence of harming. And one of the wonderful things he said, he put the goal of life or the purpose of life is to be happy and not to cause harm. And we have to remember that second one.

If it's only about being happy, then it's all too easy for that to unconsciously, unintentionally, or justifiably spill over and cause harm for others, to others and to oneself. And then a little bit, and maybe I'm not talking even more, but what I don't know about, but I find it interesting that that seems like Sigmund Freud also, you know, he was a psychologist, but he also is looking for an understanding of human life that had some kind of primacy or centrality or something at the root of it all. And he also had the pleasure principle, and he also used these kinds of very fundamental ideas of what you can experience as his guide for understanding what was going on. So the Buddha, in emphasizing suffering and freedom from suffering, was not alone in human history. And if you're looking for a religious life not based on transcendent ideas or on theology, this is one of the kind of really kind of reliable bases for finding a good life or successful a religious life of freedom. What Buddhism emphasizes. John Stuart Mill also wrote, I think his famous book is called *On Liberty*.

So maybe not a surprise that these people who focus on suffering and the end of suffering and end of harming, suffering and happiness, that are also kind of people appreciate the idea of liberty. And so that's kind of the background for why this idea of the Four Noble Truths and addressing suffering is so central to Buddhism. And it's not meant to be depressing. It's

meant to offer a lot of hope. There are traditionally four tasks associated with these Four Noble Truths.

- The first one is the task to understand suffering.
- The second is a task to abandon or let go of the cause, the underlying condition, the root of suffering.
- The third is to realize the end of suffering.
- The fourth is to develop, to cultivate in oneself, in one's own being, what's called the Eightfold Path.

So to understand, to abandon, to realize, and to cultivate. So this idea of understanding is kind of enough. Maybe it's counterintuitive for many people that the task is to understand our suffering. This is the idea of turning towards the monster, holding ground, and really looking and seeing it there. It is this willingness. I think of it as a willingness to be fully human, a willingness to be really here in this life of ours.

It helps if we don't take it so personally. One of the ways we get hooked and caught by our difficulties and challenges is the degree to which we measure it in personal terms—me, myself, and mine—and take responsibility, take blame for it. I feel it's all about, you know, for me to get better or something. But to just appreciate that in this life, the human experience, for everyone involves suffering sooner or later. And sometimes, unfortunately, it happens sooner rather than later, and it just comes with it. And there's all kinds of reasons for it, many causes for it, many, you know, the different ways of addressing it and dealing with it we have to do.

And there's many, many ways in which we be wise about our suffering and act on it. They are different than what Buddhism emphasizes. This doesn't mean that Buddhism says, "Don't do those other things." Those things need to be done. If the monster is literally putting a hammer on top of your head, then don't stand there and look the monster in the eye. That's then. That's stupid, you know. Then maybe you should be doing something else, but what Buddhism offers. That's not supposed to be the only thing, only way to relate to suffering. But if what you want to do is to see through it, to the other side, to be transformed by it, to become free, to really and to understand, you have to understand your own contribution to the suffering.

It isn't that you have to understand everything about the causes of it in the world. Sometimes you do. Sometimes other people are responsible for the challenges you have. You have to understand that and address that. But to the degree to which you're walking the Buddhist path, the Buddhist path involves looking at your contributions. So if the monster is hammer-

ing over your head, and you have time to look at your contribution, you might see that you are filled with self-righteousness and the idea that this is really wrong, and you have to attack the person in return, or keep blaming the person as they hit over the head. So you're making the whole situation worse. It's bad enough as it is, but your self-righteousness and your attack and your blame and complaining about the monster just make the whole situation worse than it has to be. That's your contribution. Doesn't mean the monster is not doing it. Doesn't mean you shouldn't call out the national guard and, you know, to come and help.

But the Buddhist path of the Four Noble Truths is found by taking a good look at suffering, stopping and taking a look at it, and then understanding your contribution. Now, this stopping and taking a look is a very interesting movement of the mind. Remember, the story of the monster. There's something—the magic or the key is standing your ground and looking at the monster without animosity, hostility, without fear, just holding, looking at it. Maybe you put your hand out to show them that you're harmless. But then there's something about how we look, how we stand, how we be that is the key.

So understanding suffering, I think stopping and looking and trying to see what's going on does not necessarily mean that we have to analyze it, probe into the depths of it, tease it apart, understand all the different aspects of it. A big part of what we're learning to do is to stand and look at it, to find the freedom of a way of seeing, a way of being, a way that doesn't take it personally, doesn't complain about it, doesn't attack it, but finds a certain freedom and deep satisfaction, deep sense of meaning in the ability to just stand there peacefully and look at it: I am depressed. I am sad. I'm angry. There's anger here. Maybe we don't even say, "Oh, well, there's anger here." And to find this freedom in the seeing, "Oh, this is what's happening here."

And you will learn—people who practise mindfulness will learn over time the difference between seeing something like anger or sadness or grief, seeing it. Just seeing it is almost like it's something you're free from. Just seeing it there, versus getting entangled with it, being pushed around by it, taking it on as glasses you put on, coloured glasses you put on, and you see the whole world by it. It's more like, "Oh, here it is. Oh, of course I'm a human being. Now this is the flavour, the thirty-two flavors of suffering. Now I have this flavor. It's like this. Now let's look at this. Let's just hold my ground and really see it and be with it."

So, you know, suffering takes many, many forms and shapes. And one translator prefers to translate the Buddhist word *dukkha* as stress. And I think one of the nice things about the word stress is that it's not so big, the word. For some people, the English word suffering only means the big stuff. Stress means, you know, even the small, even the smallest stuff is

stressful. And it also suggests that how radical a transformation is of the Four Noble Truths, that even stress kind of gets eliminated or reduced or something. It's not just the big stuff, even the idea of being stressed by what's going on. It's a radical idea.

The second noble truth, I think of as the heart of the Four Noble Truths, really the key or the pivot point, or the real thing that we want to look at. And depending on the context of our lives, depending on the situation we find ourselves in, or the state of the mind, the clarity of the mind, the stillness of the mind, how we see the second noble truth varies. In ordinary life, everyday life, going about our life, oh, it's fairly common that we understand the Second Noble Truth as being the cause of suffering. That's a pretty sensible and ordinary category in which to understand our lives. What's going on? What's the cause here? What am I doing?

If you know you really want something, and it's really important for you, you know, you really want it, because just you have a strong desire like sense pleasure. You really want something, to have something, and you're being frustrated as not being provided, and you're not getting it. The person you're with doesn't want to do it, whatever, and you feel upset. You get angry. You get resentful and all these things. And then you say, "What's the cause here?" The cause is, I just really want the sense desire. That's really obvious. I've a strong desire, and it might be obvious, but that's the cause. Why don't I just give up the desire? You do it as if it's easy, and lo and behold, that suffering goes away. Well, that was pretty cool.

Or you really don't want something to be there. You know, your least favorite relative showed up at the party and then sat down next to you at the dinner, and this is like, you know? And so you feel, you know, this is the last thing you wanted, and you're frustrated. You're angry at the host who placed you there, and on and on it goes. And after all, "What's that? I'm really, you know, struggling here. I can barely taste my food. So what's going on here? I have a strong wish not to sit next to this person." That seems to be pretty qualified as the cause. What happens if I somehow put that aside? I can't let go of it. But what happens if I take a deep breath? Be patient with it. Try to kind of come from a different place inside of me, in relation to this person sitting next to me. Let me just ask them how their year has been. And so we see the cause, what we can call the cause, and we somehow come to terms with it, and reorient, and find a different way of being. I think it's a very wise thing to do. It's a very helpful and useful thing to do.

In a different state of mind, a different situation, we, especially people who do mindfulness practice, who meditate, the idea of cause doesn't quite work. A cause often is associated with me. I am the cause. Someone else is the cause. Cause is often quite limited. It's just a narrow, small sliver of what's the bigger picture situation of what's going on. And so when we start



getting quieter and can see more deeply, we tend not to see the situation in personal terms, in what I'm doing, and we start noticing there is actually more going on here. There's more conditions. There's more, the Buddhist word is conditions. There are different conditions to come together with that cause. And so, rather, the Second Noble Truth being about the cause of suffering, it's about the conditions of suffering. What are the different things happening here that are contributing to this?

So I really want this sensual pleasure thing, and I can't get it. I can let go of the desire. But if that was really just a tip of the iceberg, there's actually deeper parts of my psyche involved in having that desire. I think that I'm only a successful, dignified, card-carrying member of the human race if I get a certain number, a certain amount of sensual desire every day. And so it's really my sense of self-worth somehow is tied up in this, and this self-worth is not the cause. The cause more is the desire itself. But the condition for that desire has to do with this underlying idea of self-worth that I have, or lack of self-worth I have. There might be many things like this that go on. It might be that one of the conditions is that I spent too much time watching commercials. And the commercials are, you know, telling me that I should have lots of things. I should deserve them. They're telling me I should deserve these things.

And my wife and I a few days ago watched a wonderful—well, she wouldn't say that anymore—she told us, this wonderful documentary, hour-long documentary about crafts, and wonderful craftspeople, and "Let's watch it." So we did, and it was kind of inspiring, parts of it, until we got to the end. Wait a minute, wait a minute, a long section, an end, and it was basically a one-hour, very fine—so I thought—sophisticated commercial for a car manufacturer. There was building up to the car being great, crafted in a beautiful way. We got, you know, we got pulled in, you know, to this, you know, I know. So it was kind of disappointing at the end, but you know, this idea that, you know, you must know. So if someone else could have left that movie and that documentary, so-called documentary, and said, "Yes, if I could just have that kind of car. This would be the epitome of refined, crafted, you know, beautiful human life." And, you know, that's desire, and the condition, idea of participating in a crafted life, and a refined life are all these conditions they are building, coming together. And so watching that movie would mean the conditions.

So life gets broader. When the mind gets quieter, and you really take a good look, and you see the broader conditionality, it gives you a lot more choice. It gives you a lot greater ability to address what's going on, because if you are only looking at the cause, I'm calling that a narrow sliver of the whole picture. Sometimes the cause, like a strong desire, is hard to let go of, might be a lot of attachment. But if you start seeing the wider field of conditions

that contribute to that cause, some of those other conditions might be easier to deal with. Stop watching—doctor, we may be called doctor commercial gentlemen, I know, you know, or, you know, stop hanging out with, you know, conditions that are keep, you know, fueling your desire, fueling your desires. And it might be easier to cut and take care of the conditions than the actual kind of when it's become a compulsive desire.

The third meaning of the Second Noble Truth that happens for people who are really—generally most accessible, but not only in a really deep way for people who are really meditating deeply, deep states of stillness and quiet. And that is that the third noble, the Second Noble Truth, is a truth—literally, means the arising of suffering. To be present, to really be present at the moment, the initial initiating moment, when suffering appears, and it reappears, and reappears. And it turns out that suffering we have, when you are really still to watch, it is not a constant, steady stream of suffering. It's something that keeps arising and passing and arising and passing. And there's a lot of the wisdom. Becoming a sage in Buddhism has a lot to do with beginning to appreciate all the different ways that our suffering comes and goes, comes and goes.

Certainly this can be seen in everyday life, and there's plenty of people who become very wise, and recognizing how it just comes and goes. Here it is again, and it won't be here tomorrow or some point, and just watching the changing nature of it. But to watch it in a momentary way, the coming and going is the heart of what a Buddhist meditation of *vipassanā* meditation is pointing to, because when you really see the moment of arising, it's a lot easier not to grab on. And if you can see there and not grab on, then you can—then there's opportunity to settle back, open up, relax, let go in a deeper way, which has to do with a third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering. Certainly if you let go of your desire or your resistance to your desire for your sensual desire, or your resistance of your relative that's sitting next to you, that you can feel the relief in letting go. But when you really let go in a profoundly deep way, Buddhism points to that—for this you really want to settle back. Learn how to settle back. Look directly, hold your ground, and really start recognizing how things are just passing through, how things are just rising and passing, the stream of life. Even though some things might stay for a while, it's part of a stream of things coming and going, arising and passing. And when the mind is still enough, then you can see this arising and passing happening much more often. I see it actually kind of, you know, in terms of minutes or seconds. Even things that persist for days has a quality of kind of coming in and out, oscillating, changing. And that's where some really deeper kind of cessation, letting go, opening up freedom, can happen.

And this letting go of suffering is to let go of what John Stuart Mill talks about—causing harm. In the Buddhist analysis, the deepest happiness, the deepest peace, has to do when our hearts can be open. Hearts are free to just beat and flow and feel and be and think without any kind of clinging, attachment, any kind of cause of suffering interfering with it. So this idea of seeing suffering and letting go of it is not a diminishment of ourselves. Doesn't leave us with nothing. It leaves us with a happy heart, leaves us with a peaceful heart. It leaves us with something wonderful.

And so the Buddha talked about this suffering and happiness thing in a very interesting way. He said he pointed to a path of practice that doesn't just lead to, you know, momentary happiness, momentary suffering just for today. You know, I feel better because I let go of my whatever. He was interested in what he called a long-term happiness and the long-term ending of suffering. So something gets persistent that can last. And for that, to really have that third noble truth of cessation really cannot carry us to the full potential of freedom, of some deeper happiness and well-being, a real penetration of the suffering, a powerful ability to be a sage who can look at suffering directly, at the monster directly.

The Buddha then offered the Eightfold Path. He offered a set of practices that are supposed to be practices—or the word practices probably doesn't do justice for what this Eightfold Path is, because they're supposed to be something that lives in us. They're not supposed to be something we just take on like we do, like some, like a little device we pick up and use, like a tool. It's supposed to become who we are. We're supposed to keep, you know, in terms of, for example, the third of the Eightfold Path is right speech, wise speech. It isn't like we take it on like a coat, a good coat to go round with. Wise speech, we become wise speech. It isn't that the right action, you know, that we don't, you know, you take on like a coat, like another coat, you know, not to kill, not to steal and such things. It becomes who we are.

So to develop this, to develop ourselves, to be transformed in a deep way, to become, in some sense, different in how you were, different in how you were that contributed for you your suffering, your stress, that you don't feel moment to moment, a deep abiding sense of peace at home, comfort, a sense of meaning, value in this life that allows you to then look at this messy life we have, that we see in this difficult world that we all live in, and gives us the ability to look at it wisely, compassionately, clearly, and perhaps even so that we can make this world a better place. So suffering and the end of suffering for ourselves and for this world, to become sages, to become wise. Don't try to be a saint. It's not enough.

So maybe next week I'll talk more about the Eightfold Path since I've just touched on it, and so hopefully this will give you something to chew on the rest of the year. That was kind of

my inspiration in giving this first Sunday of the year was to emphasize how important this is. And you're not going to go wrong if you chew and reflect on, think about it over and over again. And if you know, if you happen to like my talks or something, you can go back over the last fifteen years. I probably have thirty of these talks on the Four Noble Truths since the beginning of January. And maybe you could see how they've changed over the years, how I've been reflecting on it and developing it and changing over time. It's a growing thing. It's, you know, if it's something it evolves, and we develop, and we kind of in every year. Curious to see where—where am I this year? Thank you very much.