

## Four Noble Truths at Three Different Levels

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And so for the talk, so it's the custom for me at the first Dharma Talk of the year here at IMC, to talk about the Four Noble Truths. And this is my first full Dharma Talk here. And I found myself quite happy walking down here today, thinking about this is the topic. And so, you know, it's a little bit of a paradox to be happy to be talking about suffering.

So because it's such a deep part of the Buddhist tradition, this Four Noble Truths, some people say it's really at the heart of it. I want to just maybe for my sake, just say the central words of the Four Noble Truths in Pāli, and then say them in English, and then give a talk about it.

So in Pāli, it's dukkha samudaya nirodha, and dukkha nirodha gamani patipada. So in English, I translate this as suffering, the First Noble Truth, arising, the arising of suffering, the Second Noble Truth, the cessation, the cessation of suffering, the Third Noble Truth, and then the practice leading to the cessation of suffering. And there's many, these Four Noble Truths are both a teaching and a practice. And as such, especially since they're a teaching that's meant to be practiced, and practice is very personal. And each of us, it's our task to understand the teachings and practice and personalize it. In a sense, understand how it applies to us, in our circumstance, our life, and how it can support us.

And so there's many different meanings of the Four Noble Truths, as many as there are people here today, there's that many meanings or applications of them. And so they're quite rich, what they can be understood in many levels and ways. And what I'd like to do today is to talk about three levels of understanding the Four Noble Truths. And so they're kind of more the mind level, the heart level, and the belly level. So we'll go through, take you through this. And they all work together. And that's how one is not supposed to be better than the other, but they integrate together.

So there was a Buddhist monk at the time of the Buddha, who came to the Buddha complaining that he had not demonstrated any miracles. And then any self-respecting guru, maybe back there in ancient times, was supposed to kind of demonstrate gurus, miracles, because that was somehow proof of something wonderful. And the Buddhist basically said, "Well, I don't do this. And not for this purpose." And at some point, this monk disrobed, because he was so discouraged in the Buddha.

The Buddha did say, when he asked for miracles, he said, "Did I ever tell you to become a monk in order to become, for the sake of miracles?" And he said, "No." And so anyway, at some point, it was so discouraging for this monk that he disrobed. And then he went to town, went to city, and he was going around disparaging the Buddha. And he would tell the townspeople that all the Buddha teaches is the end of suffering. And so the news of this came back to the Buddha. And he said, "Even though he thinks he's disparaging me, he's actually praising me."

So, you know, it's that, you know, the end of suffering is really the heart of Buddhism. And there might be other worthwhile endeavors in life. And there might be other worthwhile spiritual experiences, attainments to have in this life. But from a Buddhist point of view, don't shortchange yourself around suffering. Really get to the bottom, to the heart of suffering, and bring it to an end. And don't let other experiences, other attainments, kind of distract from this fundamentally deep thing. And if anything, let, let these other possibilities, if they're important for you, let them be the cream on the cake. And the cake is this wonderful thing, this phenomenal thing, the peace, the well-being, the joy, the happiness that can come when we're free of suffering. And that's where the, and knowing this is possible, is a happiness producing thing.

So many years ago, when I was a new Zen student, I knew another Zen student who was a stained-glass artist. And that's not really an important part of the story. But she, she had very bad knees. And she was supposed to get knee surgery, I think, knee replacements. And, but what she did was she started paying very careful attention to her knees, and the pain in their knees. And by tracking the pain, the slightest little ache, slightest little something that felt off, she started walking differently. And, slowly, the pain and her challenge around her knees went away, and she didn't have surgery.

So, so I'm not, maybe that sounds like a miracle story. But it's a story of someone who paid really careful attention to pain. Really gave, rather than trying to avoid it, or trying to fix it in some kind of medical way, which sometimes is necessary, but, but, and I was really struck by that. That, wow, that, that was the first time I met someone who used pain as a teacher, as a guide. And that really, you know, you know, taught me something deep. And as a result of this, she decided to become a doctor, and applied for medical school, and was accepted. I lost touch of her, touch with her. But I thought, this is fantastic that someone like this is a doctor.

So, and then I have a friend who was, many years ago, who was teaching mindfulness-based stress reduction. A wonderful protocol that comes out of this practice, and out of Buddhism in America, and was applied clinically to people with, first in hospital settings, people with mostly acute pain. And when, when the medical world couldn't really help them with their pain, and had adopted this kind of practice, adapted this practice so that it could address people's pain, that otherwise couldn't be helped. And they had a high success rate, partly because they screened people to be more, who were motivated. But my friend was teaching it here in a small city, small town here in California, and probably there was no screening for high motivation, and there was something. But there was this, he, as he described it, this really, maybe it's not fair to describe it this way, but burly, macho, older police officer, who had a lot of back pain, that was not helped by medicine, by doctors. And so he came to, he was assigned by the doctor, used to do, take this eight-week mindfulness-based course. And so they came to the first lesson, and my friend was teaching it, and gave the instructions, "Pay it, bring your attention to the pain."

And, the guy got furious. "I'm here to not experience the pain, not to feel it." And he left. He never came

back. So one person, there's, you know, the first person focused on the pain, and found a way out of it. The other person ignored the pain, and, well, certainly wasn't helped that way. Maybe he found some other way then later.

Here in Buddhism, we want to be wise about our pain. And when the time is right, it's really important to be honest about it, and to face it, and to study it, to be present for it. And I use the word pain purposefully, because the mean, the word dukkha, which is the Pāli word that's usually translated as suffering in our circles, literally means pain. And it kind of has a little different feeling if you think of it as pain. But it's used to apply to the deepest existential sufferings we have, and the deepest emotional sufferings, and the slightest little irritations we have. The whole range. Everything, you know, things that are a pain.

And, I've certainly considered that my, my laptop is a pain. And, you know, it's not literally a physical pain. And the laptop is not causing me anything. For me to blame the laptop for that pain is, is to miss what's, you know, my responsibility, my role, my frustration, my attachments, my desires, my, you know, you know, all kinds of things going on in me. So if I spend my whole day kind of blaming my computer, shaking it, throwing it against the wall, hoping to get, you know, yelling at it, you know, whatever, the computer is not going to care. It's not going to listen to that. And I might even break it. But if I don't want to stop suffering, I have to stop blaming the computer. I have to take a good look at myself. And I have to feel that pain, feel that discomfort, and really get to know it, really study it, and find out what's going on. And find out what I'm doing that's extra, what's not needed, what's my responsibility, what's my role in that, what I call the computer is a pain. That would be the way.

So in Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths are a call for us to be honest that there is suffering in this world. There's suffering in ourselves, there's suffering in others. And some people get so happy when they hear that Buddhism teaches this. Because they grew up in a situation, in circumstances, maybe family, maybe communities, where there was a lot of avoiding of suffering. A lot of pretending it wasn't there. And they were very confused. They felt like there's all this suffering. You're suffering, my family's suffering, people are suffering, but no one's admitting it. Everyone's putting on a smile, everyone's being distracted all the time.

And, this doesn't seem right to live in this kind of, sometimes it's, some people have reported it to be a lie, this avoidance of it. And then they come to Buddhism, and they hear the thing, yes, there's suffering. Categorically, yes, there's suffering. There's no, we don't want to avoid it, we want to name it, we want to say it's here. It's part and parcel of the human condition. It's completely part of it. And so much so, that one of the orientations that we have in Buddhism is to understand that we don't have to take it so personally. It is personal in a way that, you know, the, the pain of the computer is personal, you know, I'm, I'm involved with that, causing that pain. But it's just so human to have this frustration. It's such a common phenomena, that we're maybe built in certain ways to have frustration and pain and suffering and grief and these kinds of things. That there's a kind of way in which we can be honest

about it and begin studying it, but not identify it too much closely. Not to define ourselves by it. This is who I am, or this is, this is being done to me, or something. But rather, what we do is we begin to look at suffering and stop.

So that my bumper sticker, if I had one, was I stop for suffering. And, they say, okay, let's take a look at this. Let's really be with it, this emotional pain that we have with. And then what we're doing, partly here in Buddha, in Buddhist practice, is learning how to do this in a wise way. It's not easy to be with our suffering. It's not easy to be with the suffering that, you know, conventionally and reasonably, we say it's been caused by the world around us. People grew up in war zones. And their war zones are a pain. And, to say, well, you know, you've got to look at yourself. You know, bombs are going off. And look at your frustration. Look at your fear, you know. That's, you know, disrespectful. It's harmful to do that. So we want to be very careful about the time and place. But at some point, sooner or later, we have to turn and look inside. And for some people who I've known, there clearly was conventional causes of it in the external world.

But at some point, all that was left for them to do was to look at themselves. That was the only way forward. I've known people who thought they were dying. And the conditions outside that were causing them to die were clearly outside of themselves. But at some point, they just realized, this is, I give up. I remember one man who told me this many years ago, was in the mountains and caught in an avalanche, and under layers of snow or something. And, at some point, he realized, I'm going to die here. No one knows I'm here or something. And when he let go, when he admitted this and kind of really saw it, you know, he wasn't blaming the snow. He experienced this profound peace. And then he says, a strange thing happened. That at some point, my arm punched upwards, and he broke through the snow. And then he was rescued. But that was life-changing for him, to have this profound letting go that happened because he thought he was dying.

So when we really, when are we finally ready to stop and look at our suffering in a deep way, is, is, is something we need to consider well. And one of the purposes of meditation in Buddhism, in mindfulness practice, and loving kindness practices, and concentration practice, is to provide us with the inner resources, the inner stamina, the inner skills, the inner strengths, so that we can really turn towards our suffering in a useful and meaningful way. We can turn towards it to find the freedom from it, and find our way through it. And some people are ready for that right away. Some people are ready for that after a while of practice. But this idea, yes, there is suffering here.

And then a very special thing happens. And that is that at some point, when we don't take the suffering personally in some kind of attached way, when we don't stop blaming the world outside of us, when we stop complaining, when we stop to really take a good look, at some point, the way that we look becomes the secret, becomes the treasure. To be able to see and recognize suffering without attachments, without identification, without resistance, to have a kind of clarity of seeing, where in the seeing, there's kind of a freedom. In the seeing, there's a kind of the delight, maybe it can exist sometimes,

on a clear day, blue sky day, and the windshield of your car has gotten completely clean. You think you can put your hand through it. It's so clear and so nice, maybe, after a long time of having smudge. And so to have your ability to say, oh, this is suffering. This is my suffering. With that kind of clarity, with that kind of ease and lack of clinging, this provides a very different reference point for how to go forward in life. How where the freedom is found. That freedom is possible. It's possible not to be defined by the suffering. It's possible not to have the challenges and difficulties of our life, which can be huge. It's possible to have them not be a burden we carry. They have things we have to address, but they don't have to be addressed as a burden, as a drag, as a wind drag.

So, the Four Noble Truths, our suffering, which we want to turn towards, and know and understand deeply. There's the literal word of the Second Noble Truth is the arising of suffering. It's really to be present for the appearance of it. But often it's called the cause of suffering. And then the Third Noble Truth is the cessation of the suffering, cessation of the cause. And then the Fourth Noble Truth is the practices, sometimes called the path of practice, the practices which lead to that. So, and are as a result of that.

So, the three levels. First is the mind. The mind is a little more the cognitive level. And that's where we can study the cause of suffering. And this is a brilliant thing to do. That to understand that suffering is not just without a cause. To understand that suffering is not just something that we have to live with, because it's inherent in human existence, and it's no, no possibility of changing it. But the sufferings we have, when we're able to see the particularity of it, we'll see that it always has a cause. And sometimes the cause is external, and sometimes we can address the external cause, if it's appropriate. Sometimes we can't address the external cause. But what we're trying to do in Buddhist practice is to take responsibility for our contribution to our emotional pain. And chances are, often there's a contribution you make, even if 90% of it comes externally, from external cause, the 10% that you contribute, that's what the country, that's the part of it that you probably have the most ability to change. Sometimes it's hard to change the external world and make it, you know, behave properly. And, but maybe you can do something about yourself. And that's where kind of the, you know, the work of Buddhism kind of really is at its heart.

So one of those things is to look, what are the cause? And one of the fascinating ways of understanding their suffering and the cause of suffering is to switch it around by realizing that in Buddhism, the cause is always seen to be a certain kind of thirsting for something. And they use the word thirst in the ancient language. So it's kind of a metaphor, the cause, it's a metaphor to describe the cause. And so it's for you to fill out the metaphor, what does it apply? But usually people who want to be more lit, more kind of not so metaphorical, will translate it as craving, sometimes as clinging. There's some kind of compulsion of thirsting, a compulsion of craving that goes on. So sometimes I like to translate as compulsion, because it has a life of its own. You can't drop it easily. It's like it's sometimes that compulsion, craving, thirsting, has taken over. And now we're addicted. Now we're driven. Now we're kind of, no wonder we can't end our suffering, because there's this powerful drive that keeps it going.

So the cause is to look at that drive, to look at that cause.

So to turn these first and second noble truths around, I like to say, if you cling, you will suffer. Or to, the way, if you want the bumper sticker, clinging is suffering. Craving is suffering. Compulsion, addiction, is suffering.

And so to look, so to looking at the cause then, is to look on where is my compulsion? Where is my drivenness? Where's my, what am I attached to here? Because as soon as I get attached, then we're fragile. As soon as we're attached, we're stuck. As soon as we're attached, we're contracted. And we start contributing stress to our whole psychophysical system.

I think, I would probably suggest, I've never done the statistics, but I would say that probably 90% of human stress has its genesis in this clinging, thirsting, compulsion of the mind. And, you know, maybe I'm wrong about the exact percentage. Maybe more of it is, maybe less of it is. But it's a very significant statement to make that 90% has its birth in our clinging. Because then if, when you feel stress, don't blame the world. Take a look at yourself. What can be done?

And people who meditate a lot will find often that meditation is one of those things that can quiet, calm, relax the mind. And as the mind gets relaxed, the physical stresses we carry begin to settle away. And you, after a while, it becomes a very clear connection. What goes on in the mind causes physical stress, causes the headache that I'm having, the tension headaches.

And so to look at the cause is what the mind can do. The mind is bright sometimes. It's clear. Your mind only has to be as intelligent as it actually is. You don't have to have any more. Because whatever intelligence you have, that's the intelligence that brought you your suffering. And so that's the enough intelligence to find your freedom from it. So just be happy. You know, it's not like, you know, you can do it.

And once we see our suffering is born from clinging, it isn't that we can let go of it easily, which is a third noble truth. But there's practices we can do that support us, prepare us for the day when something can be released and let go. And so these are ethical practices. Living an ethical life is central to this. There are practices that, where we began paying attention to our mind, and begin training our mind to be able to be focused, and mindful, and clear, and see what's going on.

And there are practices of intentionality, of purpose. There's practices of focusing, choosing to focus on the perspective, be oriented towards suffering and the end of it. So the second level, so this is more the mind level, which is very helpful, is to drop down deeper into the heart. And for the heart to register your suffering.

And one of the surprises for me in doing Buddhist practice was, at the beginning of practice, I suffered a lot. Every meditation session was a session of suffering. But I kind of was, I was given, with the practice I was taught in Zen was a practice of just sit with your experience and don't do anything about it. And that worked out really well for me. Because I didn't complicate it with analysis. I didn't complicate it

with fixing. And what happened slowly, that as I relaxed and settled into my suffering, my heart awoke up. It was kind of like I had, the meditation was the like meat tenderizer for my heart. I had this crust, hard crust around it. And it began to soften and soften. And at some point what awoke in me was compassion. And I was able to meet my suffering with compassion. To meet it with love and care. And to soften and meet it.

And the capacity to be open to suffering and allow it to meet it with compassion, with care. Not with anger. Not with resistance. Not with fear. But with this beautiful quality of the heart, compassion. So the second phase of the Four Noble Truths is, again, you have to turn towards it and allow yourself to not just study it and feel it and analyze it. Maybe even you want to stop that because that gets in the way at some point. From allowing yourself to feel what's going on in some deeper way. Feel below the reactivity you have. Or maybe you have to feel the reactivity as part of the complex of suffering.

To really make room for you to allow yourself to be how you are, warts and all, suffering and all. And just learn to breathe with it. And make space for it. And not try to fix it. Not try to make it go away. Just be patient with it. And this beautiful thing can happen where the heart can meet it. Maybe you can't. It's too hard for you to do. But your heart has the capacity. This emotional center that I call the heart, it's a wise part of us. It's part of our deeper, I would say, subconscious operating.

Mammalian, kind of, there's always mammalian functions that we share with other mammals. Of care for their young, and care for others. And these beautiful stories of animals will come to the rescue of humans. I'm particularly fond of the dolphin ones. People are kind of drowning at sea and a dolphin will come and carry them. And I like the stories of predators taking care of the prey sometimes. Occasionally you hear the stories like a lion is helping a deer or something. But at least they take care of their young, usually.

And so this mammalian, so it's something more than just kind of just what we think we are. But something deeper and built into our genes almost, maybe. And so this capacity to feel suffering and let the heart respond. And you'll be surprised how much the heart knows how to process this and be with it and the benefits that come.

And then we have the third level. And now we, and I like thinking of these, you're going deeper and deeper to yourself. And I call it the belly. In Buddhism it's sometimes called the source. The literal meaning, the word in Pāli is yoni. And sometimes that's translated as womb. But it doesn't quite mean womb. It means like the source where something is born. So like the egg is the yoni for the chicken. They don't have wombs, I suppose. They have the eggs. And then there are things that are waterborne in Buddhism. And so that's the yoni. So the source.

And so to drop down to some key place where there's something that's operating within us, a knowing, a way of thinking, a way of perceiving, a way of feeling, a creativity, an intelligence, that has more an emergent quality. Where it's something that's emerging from deep inside, as opposed to something that's coming from the usual, maybe, thinking mind, egotistical mind, self-centered mind. That's I have

to do something. It's happening to me. That's the kind of I that's usually caught up in its own little drama. Kind of dissolves as we drop down. And we're not trying to make something happen. But we're beginning to allow something to happen. And the difference between making and allowing.

And so the dropping really deep down. And what happens there was we have an opportunity now to allow all experiences to just be there without interfering with them. And without overlaying our judgments, and our concepts, and our stories on top of our experience. This is a phenomenal thing to do. To quiet the projections we have on life. It's a very wonderful thing to do for your friends.

To quiet your projections. And be able to see others unfiltered by all the bias we might have, or projections, or preferences, or something. But to do it for ourselves, and towards ourself. And then be there in the rawness of the present moment experience. The place where, because we're allowing things to unfold, things are appearing and disappearing. They're coming and going.

And this is where the meaning of the Second Noble Truth being arising, the word samudaya means the arising. Now we see the appearing, the coming and going of our suffering. We see the rawness of it. Just like we see, the surfer sees the coming and going of the waves. And the surfer doesn't get attached to any one wave. You know, that's just a wave of the moment. And in that, is able to ride the wave sometimes.

So to ride the experiences that are coming and going within us. To be very close. To see, to feel, to experience. That in the moment to moment experience, the rawness of experience, there's more than just suffering. There's also, in the moments, there's also the ending of suffering. There's a coming and going, the appearing and disappearing. Nothing is static. Nothing is constant. Nothing is stuck. And that's the advantage of dropping down to this deep emergent place, is to find the way of being unstuck, where everything is flowing.

And Buddhism uses a lot, has a lot of references to the metaphor of a river, where everything is flowing. And most people have been to the river. With a bucket or two or a thousand. And they scooped up the water in their buckets. And they go around saying, "Look, I have the river and it's my river." You don't have the river anymore, if you have the bucket full of water. If we cling, we've lost the flow, the river of life.

And so drop down to that place where the river of life is flowing in us. The coming and going, the rising and passing, the ups and downs of the waves of thoughts and feelings, emotions clinging. And to experience there the gaps, the gaps when we're not thinking thoughts. The gaps where we're not in our anger. The gaps where we're not in our craving and desires. The gaps where we're not holding on or resisting. The gaps where we see, "Oh, there's a peace here. There's a freedom here. There's a well-being here." And to begin then seeing that and relaxing, seeing that and letting go, seeing that and kind of allowing this emergent possibility of peace to show itself.

At such a point where the niroda, the cessation of suffering, is not a letting go. We're not doing it. But the cessation of suffering, the third noble truth, is a profound releasing that you can't take credit for.



It's something deep releases inside of something, something deep and lets go. And then this belly, this source, this emergent quality within us, begins to have a greater life for us. And that, and this is part of the great potential that we have, that Buddhist practice is supposed to bring us to, can bring us to, is this point where the release is strong enough that there begins to emerge the Eightfold Path.

Whereas the Eightfold Path is not so much practice as we do anymore, but rather a state of life, state of being, that we begin to make room for and live by more and more. So, if we're not practicing ethics, we become ethical. And ethics doesn't become a choice, but rather it's an expression of the freedom that we have. Mindfulness is not no longer something we have to do, but it feels more like something we allow for. It's like part and parcel of who we are in the deep, emergent way. Even concentration can feel like it's not something we have to do and strain for, but it's more letting go and allowing of something to settle. And then the other aspects of the Eightfold Path, all that are these emergent qualities. And something begins to grow within us. Or we start to kind of really feel like we're flowing in a river that's moving through us and going through.

So, Four Noble Truths. They're invaluable teachings. They're more than teachings. They're a framework to explore our life. It's an orientation, a perspective with which to step into to see ourselves in a new way. To not see ourselves through the usual concepts that society wants us to live by, but to see ourselves through the framework of our suffering. The cause of it, or more deeply, how it arises. To see the end of it, the letting go of it, the cessation of it. And to understand that there are practices to engage in, practices and states to allow for, that really allow for this freedom and joy and happiness to become part of our life.

This is the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha. And it's a happy thing. So don't get so happy that you don't, don't get too happy. So you don't look at the suffering. But maybe get happy enough that you say, "Okay, I'm ready to take a good look at this suffering now." Be honest, be present for it.

So thank you.