

## Four Noble Truths

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So I would like to talk today about the Four Noble Truths. At the beginning of each year, I like to take that as a topic to kind of begin the year with. And also, right now in the *pāramī* practice group, we're doing the Perfection of Wisdom. And wisdom, one of the primary expressions of wisdom in Buddhism, is in understanding or the application of the Four Noble Truths. It's said that the Four Noble Truths contains all of Buddhism within it, that if it's not somehow related to the Four Noble Truths, then it's not Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths are kind of like the core essence of Buddhism, not the common denominator, but in a sense maybe the common, what's the opposite, the common, not the lowest common denominator, but the highest common denominator, that's the way to say it—the highest common denominator.

There's a lot of interesting things about the Four Noble Truths as the core formulation of the Buddha's teaching. One is that the Buddha didn't present it as something to be believed, but rather something to be acted on. And so there were certain kind of practices, or sometimes called duties, in relationship to each of these so-called Four Noble Truths. So not taken as beliefs, but it's meant to be taken as plans for action, ways to apply ourselves in our spiritual life. A lot of people associate meditation with becoming calm, stress reduction, attaining a certain level of joy or well-being in one's life.

And it's part of, certainly, the joy of meditation is to be able to release a lot of the stress, a lot of the anxiety, a lot of the tension in the mind, the heart, the body, and to discover a capacity for the body, the heart and the mind to be quite soft, pliable, relaxed and at peace. But the function of meditation in Buddhism is not simply to become calm or peaceful in some kind of conventional way, but it's to use the level of calm or peace or well-being that can come from meditation as a springboard for developing greater insight or greater understanding of our

life. It's like calm or meditation is a vehicle for greater insight. Maybe the analogy could be something like someone who's hungry goes to the trouble of baking bread. And they make a beautiful loaf of bread and they put it out on the table with, I don't know, butter, almond butter around it or something.

And they just sit there and look at it. And they come by every few days and admire their handiwork. Well, it's really great. That loaf of bread looks really great. Over the days and weeks it gets harder and harder. But it gets well preserved, right? It's sitting there, and the person gets hungrier and hungrier. The bread was made in order to be used and not to be eaten. So in the same way, developing a strong level of calm or concentration meditation is not an end in itself, but is a tool that can be used.

And one of the primary ways it's used once you establish yourself well in meditation is to apply what's called the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths can be understood by a school child. The basic idea is very simple. But the full application of it is considered to be quite hard. And only someone who's fully awakened fully understands the full import of the Four Noble Truths. And in the classic instructions for meditation that the Buddha gave, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, he lays out a whole series of practices that can be understood as building on themselves.

And it culminates with understanding the Four Noble Truths or applying the Four Noble Truths to our experience. So it's easy to explain but difficult to apply or to understand its full ramifications in our lives. And I think one of the great joys for me in my practice at times is this continual unfolding and discovery of the Four Noble Truths and how it applies to my life and different areas of my life. So the Four Noble Truths can be stated very simply. They are, kind of conventional way of stating them is that there is a truth of the existence of suffering. It's hard to deny that if you look around you'll find suffering.

The second is the truth of the arising of suffering. What is it that gives a rise to suffering? The cause of suffering, which is usually defined by this interesting technical word called thirst. And then the third noble truth is the truth of the cessation of the suffering, the suffering that *dukkha* can come to an end. And the fourth noble truth is the recognition that it's not easy to do that, but there's a path, a practice that can be done to fulfill this possibility of bringing *dukkha*, suffering, to an end.

It's the first teaching the Buddha was supposed to have given after his enlightenment. The sermon that he gave, where he gave the teaching of the Four Noble Truth, is called Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma. And the Dharma sometimes is likened to a wheel. And

it's a little bit interesting, the symbolism, because it has a number of different symbolic meanings, but one of them is that a ruler, an emperor, a great kind of monarch in ancient India, was called, the word for it was a wheel turner. Sometimes in English it's expanded and called the wheel turning monarch. And the mythology is that the symbol of imperial power is a wheel.

And it comes from the idea that a chariot, a war chariot, a war chariot in ancient India was mostly just a wheel. Because the wheel, the place you stand, you go with your sword or your bow or something. And there was a time in India, ancient India, when there were no wheels and apparently the wheel, the chariot, was introduced by invaders coming in from the steppes of Russia called the Aryan invaders. The Aryans came in some 4,000, 5,000 years ago, I think, I'm not sure exactly how many thousands, many, many thousands of years ago into India where the reasons they were so successful in conquering much of India was they had the chariot and so this chariot was probably a very frightening thing a symbol of power and then it seemingly became a symbol the chariot wheel became a symbol of the monarch's power authority and the myth is that the Buddha had two options kind of career options when he was born and it was kind of prophecy stated mythology of it all and one was that he was either going to become a wheel turning monarch or he was going to become a renunciant, a spiritual seeker.

He renounced the world, kind of a monk. And his father tried to prevent him from becoming a spiritual seeker, a renunciant, because, you know, you want your son to go into the family business. But the Buddha didn't become a, going to the family business, didn't become an emperor or monarch, but rather became this renunciant. And rather than turning the wheel of power, of political power, he turned the wheel of spiritual power, the spiritual wheel. In a sense, rather than conquering India, he conquered himself. He conquered the truths of liberation, of freedom, as he understood it.

So the Dharma is sometimes symbolized by a wheel. Occasionally, in a few places, there are Buddhist flags. Sometimes the Buddhist flag has a wheel in the middle of it. The Indian flag, I think, also has a wheel in the middle of it. So I say this as a prelude to talking about the Four Noble Truths. We're talking about something that is very powerful. Something that can, in a sense, conquer. Something that needs to be conquered.

The Buddha often talked in very powerful terms about the possibility of practice, the way a person would engage in practice in a very diligent way. It was kind of like a warrior spirit. It wasn't necessarily just about stress reduction. It was about something much more noble. That's why it's called the Four Noble Truths. Some people call it the Four Ennobling Truths.

Engaging this truth is what ennobles a human being.

So, the Four Noble Truths. A structural background for the Four Noble Truths. It might be interesting to understand, is that from the point of view of the Buddha, all conditioned things arise and they pass away. They're impermanent. All our mental formations, all our mental activity that we have, arise and it passes away. At some point it is arisen, and sooner or later it will pass away.

That's the nature of mental activity. Some mental activity continues through time, it seems like it's permanent, but in some ways it's either gotten frozen or locked in there, or we're continually refueling it and feeding it over and over again until it stays in place. But in and of itself, when it's not locked or not being refueled, all mental activities have the nature of sooner or later passing away. Things arise because of causes, and when the causes disappear, those things go away. The rain arises, it happens, it doesn't rise, it falls, because the clouds came in. Very simple understanding.

When the clouds go away, the rain stops. So mental activity, or psychological activity, has the same nature. Certain causes and conditions come into place and certain activities arise. Mental activities, mental formations. When those causes go away, those cease. So that's a very simple structure, is then inherent in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

That the mental activity of *dukkha*, of suffering, arises because of causes. And when those causes go away, then what has arisen will also go away. The suffering will go away. Because the Buddha understood that correlation, he was quite convinced, or he realized, I guess, and became quite convinced, that this thing called *dukkha* could be eliminated if you somehow eliminated the cause. So if you have a pebble in your shoe and it's irritating your foot, if you get rid of that pebble, then you stop the irritation on your foot and your foot gets better.

So if you somehow can remove, pluck out of the heart, the pebbles, he called it the arrows, that were irritating the heart, that were the cause for the suffering, then the suffering would go away. It was a very, in some ways, it was a very radical teaching because it was so thoroughgoing. That's partly why it's so challenging to many of us. It's the idea, it's kind of the idea of perfection. That it's possible to eradicate completely from the heart all the arrows, all the pebbles, all the irritants, all the causes that would give rise to what the Buddha called *dukkha* in our hearts and our minds.

So, not everyone's convinced about this. And even though a lot of Buddhist teachers are not completely convinced that this is the case, that you can do this work that thoroughly. Or

some people think, well, it's not so interesting to believe in that because I'm never going to go that far. I can go a little bit with this and use it, but I'm not going to go all the way. That's not something in store for me, but I'll just take it as far as I go.

But the Buddha was pointing to the possibility that you can go all the way. You can really do this work and somehow purify the heart and the mind from these irritants so that *dukkha* doesn't arise. *Dukkha* is the word, the Pāli word, the Indian word, that's usually translated as suffering in English. But suffering has a kind of very strong meaning and it's not really adequate for translating *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means anything, any movement of the mind, any mental activity, which is short of our being fully happy.

To be able to attain the fullest kind of capacity of happiness that human being can attain. So even things which are kind of happy are sometimes characterized as *dukkha*. Or sometimes people like the translation unsatisfactory. They're great in and of themselves, but they're unsatisfactory in relationship to what's fully possible. Sometimes minor irritants are also called *dukkha*. Suffering seems like a big deal when we suffer.

But if you feel a little bit uncomfortable, that's *dukkha*. The definition of *dukkha* given in the first sermon of the Buddha, he said, birth is suffering, sickness is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering. Being together with what is unpleasant is *dukkha*. Being with what's unpleasant is suffering, or *dukkha*. Being away from what is pleasant, what is pleasing, is suffering. Being with what you don't like is suffering.

And not being with what you like is suffering. And not getting what you want is suffering. And all the ways in which we identify or get attached to our psychophysical being as being ourself is also a source of suffering. That's a classic definition. It's kind of thoroughgoing. So now to kind of change a little bit the direction of this.

Some people complain that in talking about suffering and putting that as the first noble truth, Buddhism is kind of a pessimistic religion. Kind of a party pooper kind of religion. But the purpose of focusing on suffering is to understand it so that we can be free from the causes of suffering, so we can be really happy in some thoroughgoing way. You have to understand the illness in order to know what the cure is going to be. Also, understanding suffering is an act of compassion. And I think it's necessary to have, I think it's helpful to evoke a sense of compassion as we begin exploring the Four Noble Truths.

That's somehow the background or the foundation for studying them. Remember what I said earlier, that meditation is a springboard for applying the Four Noble Truths. So you get

yourself, you know, into meditation, practice, and you can get yourself into a calm, stable, maybe even happy place in meditation. And from that perspective of that happiness, or that calm, or that subtleness, that is the ideal time to begin looking at suffering. That's really a party pooper, right? You're in a good place, finally.

But it isn't to make things worse. It's actually so you can go further in this endeavor. You can take your meditation further and go deeper into your capacity for freedom, for happiness. So the first duty or the first activity in relationship to the Four Noble Truths is the instruction to understand suffering, to study it, to get to know it really well. The second is to abandon the causes of suffering, which is this word *taṇhā*, or in English, thirst.

I like it because I don't think of it as a technical term, so it's meant to kind of evoke a wide variety, it's kind of a vague word, kind of an umbrella term, for a wide variety of human mental formations, mental activity that is of the nature of thirsting or grasping or being driven or being compulsive. When people talk about thirsting for power or thirsting for, I don't know what, you know, thirsting for power or thirsting for money or thirsting for, there's kind of a grasping or clinging or attachment inherent in that kind of activity. So the cause of suffering is the thirsting of the mind, the drivenness and compulsivity of the mind. So, the second instruction is to begin to relax that, let go, to abandon that compulsivity, that drivenness. And it's very humbling to practice mindfulness, to pay attention to what goes on in the mind, because it's humbling because you realize how difficult it is at times to let go of the drivenness of the mind.

If you meditate a lot, like you go on retreat, you'll see this in the nature of your thinking mind. There seems to be a kind of addiction to thinking that human beings have, and it seems innocent enough if you're walking around ordinary life oftentimes. But if you really pay attention to your mind moment by moment, you realize the degree to which you're not really free because your thoughts are pulling you around, dragging you around this way and that way. You're trying to kind of direct the mind to be present and your mind has other ideas. The mind has a mind of its own.

So there's kind of this tremendous drivenness or compulsivity to our thinking mind. And that compulsivity has a quality of *dukkha*, of unsatisfactoriness, of being uncomfortable, of being unpleasant, or being somehow undesirable. So that's just through our thinking, let alone other things that can be strong desires or wishes or fears or resistances we have to what goes on in life. And so part of the practice, part of the issue of looking at suffering is that we can begin discerning the causes of it and in seeing the causes we begin to relax. And relax deeper

and deeper, let go more and more thoroughly.

When we do it thoroughly we realize the end of the suffering. Some sufferings, there's a kind of one-to-one correlation. If I'm attached, it's so nice, all the variety of ways. It used to be kind of boring, but now, you know, it's the same sound, but now it's kind of a different tune. So some attachments, some source of suffering, it's a very simple attachment and you can let go of that attachment. Some sufferings are much more deeply rooted and they're more difficult to let go of, to release.

And the image that's given in Buddhism is that of a root. And the idea of a root to me is, it looks like a plant that has many branches coming off, you know, out of the root. And if you pluck off one of the leaves, or you pluck off one flower or one branch, the plant will keep growing. But you need to somehow reach down to the ground and pull off the root, pull off the root in order to stop the plant from growing. So certain forms of clinging or thirsting are like roots. They're the root of a lot of other things.

So if I desire, say that I desire, someone told me I should never give this example again. My mind doesn't have much of an imagination. So if I desire a Ferrari, right? Like, it's really, that's what I really thirst for. Right? Nice, red, convertible Ferrari. Might as well. We're going to go that way. And it's really important. I really want that. And I see that I'm suffering. Okay. I'm suffering on Ferrari. That's silly. I'll just let go of that. Thank you. Fine.

The next day, what I really want is a Porsche. And I see that they're suffering. So I let go of that. Great. The next day, what I want is, I don't know, I run out of, I don't know much about cars, so that's better what I know. BMW. Oh, that's, you're being modest. Lamborghini. Lamborghini, okay. So after a while, for three or four days of this, you know, I begin thinking, wait a minute, it was easy to let go of those different cars on those different days, but why do I keep desiring these cars, these fancy cars?

And they looked more carefully and said, oh, you know what? Now that I notice, I want these cars because then I think I'm going to be the hottest meditation teacher in California. You know, it'll increase my status in the Buddhist world. All my friends, you know, will envy me. And it's just kind of like, you know, it makes my ego feel really good. So I can go around, I can get around faster in places and tell people to let go of your ego. So that's really good.

So the desire for the car is not the root. That's the branch. And if we simply let go of the branch, the root is there to sprout. And the root here now is some kind of clinging to self, some self-attachment that might be there. So one of the functions of meditation is to get calm

enough and concentrated enough that we don't just see the branches, but we start seeing the root of what it's all about, what this clinging is about.

And there's a lot of wonderful lists about different kinds of roots. One list that's sometimes helpful to apply, you might apply this to your life, spend a week or so, and think about this list of four kinds of clinging and see if you ever kind of succumb to them. One is the clinging to sensual pleasure. There's nothing wrong with sensual pleasure but the clinging to it is a source of suffering and so do you see that correlation do you have desire for sensual pleasure is it innocent and pain free or does that desire for sensual pleasure cause you suffering or the avoidance of discomfort the craving for food the craving for sex craving for security, they're craving for companionship, they're craving for many things, often have their root in a very simple thing, wanting to be comfortable, sensual pleasure.

And some people are really driven, they orient most of their life around trying to figure out how to get sensual pleasure or avoid discomfort. It's very, very motivating for human beings, the attachment to sensual pleasure. The second is the clinging to our opinions. And opinion sounds kind of philosophical. Maybe kind of in California, it's better to maybe say cling to our stories. And we have all our stories, all kinds of stories, interpretations, assigning a meaning.

But certainly opinions and views that we carry with us, and we cling to our stories, to our views. The stories about who I am, the stories about what happened to me, what's going to happen to me, what needs to happen to me, who the other people are, what they're like. All these stories, all these opinions and views. And people cling to them quite tenaciously. So part of this investigation is to begin looking at how views and opinions operate in our lives and how our relationship to them adds to our suffering.

And a lot of wisdom in the Buddhist tradition comes from looking at our stories, our interpretations, our assigning a meaning, and realizing how they're constructed, how they're arbitrary, and how they're not needed. They're not needed. You know, probably 90% of the time they're not needed. The third clinging is one which some of you will love, because you're ready to give it up, especially after hearing this talk. And this is the clinging to religious practice, spiritual practices, and to virtue. Isn't that strange? That the Buddha said that? I love it.

It's kind of like this safeguard, you know. People who get involved in spiritual traditions, it's really common to get attached. To get attached to your ego, you know. What can be? I'm a spiritual person. I'm the most spiritual person in my block. And if I have a Ferrari I can really



show that to people they can really notice me and the Ferrari halo effect and then the so the people who get attached to spiritual traditions practices because it gives a sense of security and they know what's true and what's not people are often driven to religion because it gives them a sense of certainty.

They know what's true, what's really going on. And there's an attachment there. The story religion gives them. So there's a safeguard built into Buddhism that even Buddhist practice, you have to be very careful that you don't get attached to it. Buddha doesn't say, he's not telling you, don't do spiritual practice. He's saying be very careful you don't get attached to it because that attachment creates suffering.

The very thing that's supposed to free you from suffering is causing you suffering. Isn't that sad? So you should never come to Buddhism and suffer because of your contact with Buddhism. Many of you do, I know. They start practicing, start meditating, and you're supposed to get concentrated, and then you bear down, and then your results are not what you expected, and then you feel disappointed, and you feel sad and upset and angry with yourself. There's many ways in which people get attached to a spiritual practice, and they suffer because of it.

The other half of that is attachment to virtue. Virtue, ethical purity, is very important in Buddhism. But the attachment to it, the clinging to it, is a form of suffering. Certainly for you, but for all your neighbors even more. You know, it's a lot of pain that's created in the world when people then impose their attachment to virtue onto people around them, the neighbors in their society. And then the fourth clinging is this clinging to self.

Clinging to self-identity, self-representation, self-image. The whole kind of constellation of stuff that we build up around this idea of self. There can be a tremendous amount of attachment to that. You're not expected, you know, not told, you know, don't have a self, don't be a self, be a nobody. You're not told that. You're welcome to go around. Remember, the Buddha was a warrior.

And he, Buddhism associates him with this symbol of power, the wheel. So he wasn't this kind of like self-effacing kind of quiet man who kind of went in the back room and just kind of didn't, you know, was kind of quietly spiritual. He was actually, he talked about having a lion's roar, you know, when he proclaimed his liberation. He's very powerful, kind of a confidence in himself. So the teaching of not-self in Buddhism is not a self-effacing teaching, but the clinging to self, the attachment to self is one of the roots for suffering and in order to be free of suffering we have to somehow abandon that root.

Part of the meaning of root is that it's latent, it's not always there, it's kind of there in the background ready to operate. I let go of the Ferrari one day and I'm happy for the rest of the day but there in the background, latent, is this idea of my self-attachment and association of cars to my well-being. And so that pops up the next day. The next day, the next day. So this latent, again, means it's not easy to see. And that's why it's very important to practice something like meditation that gets the mind good, calm, and concentrated.

So you can really see deeply and well. It's kind of like having a telescope or a microscope or something that allows you to see things that normally you can't see. But the telescope or the microscope has to be on a stable surface. The telescope has to be on a tripod. It has to be well stable. But if it's agitated or a moving object, like if you're trying to use a microscope or a telescope on a motorboat, you can't really see very well. You need to have something that's really still.

So when the mind is agitated, you can't see very well. So part of the function of meditation is to get the mind still enough so you can see clearly, in exactly the same way that you can see clearly when you have a tripod, when you're holding a telescope. So then abandoning or letting go of clinging, thirsting, grasping, attachment, leads to the third noble truth, which is simply stated as the cessation of suffering, the ending of suffering. It's considered the highest ideal in Buddhism, but stated that way, it seems like not much, the ending of suffering. But the corollary of that is a level of peace, of well-being, of happiness, that is greater than, at least what the Buddhist tradition says, greater than anything else a human being can experience in human life.

It also opens up the doors for compassion in a way that nothing else can open. A realistic, healthy compassion that doesn't drown us. Without the clinging in the background, when we experience suffering in the world, in others, it's not going to squash us or distress us or create anguish. But rather, it's going to stimulate the healthy forms of compassion for us to respond to that suffering in the world. So some of the most beautiful qualities of the human heart have a chance to reveal themselves or show themselves or be there when the clinging is no longer present.

That's why some Buddhists, but not all, like to make a metaphysical claim that all of us have inherent in our heart something that they call Buddha nature, some tremendous beauty or purity or essence or luminosity that's there, always there, but it's clouded over, it's covered over by the clings and attachments that often we live by. If we just kind of clean away the attachments, then this luminous core of who we are will show itself. Not all Buddhists are

happy with that kind of metaphysical idea because it's metaphysical. And Buddhism don't like metaphysics so much. At least they're not supposed to, according to Gil. That's my metaphysical view.

And so the cessation of suffering, bringing that clinging to an end, and then it's not considered easy to do that, it's easy to say but not easy to do. So the Buddha then offered the path of practice, the Eightfold Path, that made it possible to get down to the roots and do this work really deeply. And it's kind of a little bit, I understand it as a kind of a developmental model, that you slowly kind of develop yourself to create the right conditions in your heart, in your mind, around you, in your body, so that you can become still enough, or concentrated enough, have insight enough to be able to see down to these roots and do this work of letting go.

And also have the strength of character that when you begin to let go, you can handle that. And there isn't a strong sense of character, a strong sense of inner qualities, inner strength. It's actually very disorienting and very frightening to let go of the things we are attached to. And the things we attach to kind of give us a sense of meaning, give us a sense of who we are and how to orient ourselves to the world around us. And our attachments are there for good reasons. And to let go of them without having a kind of inner stability or strength to hold us up without them can be very difficult for many people.

So part of the idea of a developmental model in practice is also to create this inner strength so that when we let go and let go and let go, we come to a place where we can realistically stay rather than go there temporarily and then ricochet back. So the path of practice is the Eightfold Path. It begins with wisdom. It begins with appreciating the value of understanding our life through the framework of the Four Noble Truths. Now, this is a useful way of looking at our life. It's like just a framework. Again, it's not a belief system.

But if you want to get rid of suffering, then it's useful to understand the suffering itself, the cause of the suffering, and the possibility of ending the suffering. If you're interested in ending suffering, being liberated from suffering, then you don't want to go look in the wrong direction. So, the Buddha said there's a lot of wrong directions which don't help with liberation of suffering. To make it really simple, he said, as simple as possible, the wisdom factor that you bring into your practice is to understand your experience from the point of view of the Four Noble Truths.

If you don't like doing that, because it seems depressing, or it is depressing to look at suffering, put it off. Wait. Don't do it right away then. Do the other parts of Buddhism. That's

what partly the path is about. Practice loving-kindness. Practice concentration. Get some stability, some calm, some joy in your practice. Resolve some of the issues in your life that get in the way of developing that calm and concentration. And then once you're calm and concentrated and have some level of well-being in your meditation, then, bring in the Four Noble Truths.

Oddly enough, in some of the most deep places you can go in meditation, places where, you know, quite... I guess I can't change the language. I was going to say, you know, the deepest or the highest, you know, the furthest reaches of meditation can take you. The greatest levels of joy or peace, you know, in the conditioned world, when there's a tremendous sense of well-being and peace, equanimity, that's when applying the Four Noble Truths is maybe even the most useful because they're the thing that's going to push a person over into what's called the unconditioned.

That part of the psyche or the mind, that dimension of the mind, which is not about constructed activities of the mind, constructed activities of the mind, nothing to do with the conditioned activities of the mind, but it has to do with that part of the psyche which the Buddhism called unconditioned. The awakened mind. The awakened dimension. So the Four Noble Truths is the wisdom part of this path.

Then, to support that or to be able to realize that the Buddha said it's really important to look at your behavior. Before you start meditating look at your behavior. There are other ways that you can improve your behavior so your behavior supports your ability to look deeply. So if you go around killing other people, stealing from other people, lying to other people, harming other people with your sexuality, or spending a good part of your time drunk, your mind is going to be so agitated that you're not going to be able to sit down and meditate. No way. So, you've got to stop doing those things.

And the more you clean up your behavior, the more you create the conditions in the psyche where it becomes easier for the psyche to be at peace with itself, not agitated, and so you can start doing the deeper work that happens through meditation, through developing the mind. So, in terms of behavior, the Buddha said it's very helpful to look at your speech. Pay attention to your speech. Be mindful of your speech, and try to clean up your speech so your speech is not harmful, it's not counterproductive to the process of clarifying the heart, of purifying the heart, of doing this deep work.

The Buddha said it's important to look at how you behave in terms of precepts. You know, killing, stealing, lying, and all these things. And he said it was important to look at your liveli-

hood. Most people spend a good part of their day earning a livelihood. A good percentage of their week and the months of the year involve in livelihood. It has a big influence on our hearts, our psyche, how we make our livelihood.

Is our livelihood in harmony with the goal of freeing ourselves from suffering, of attaining this level of liberation, of moving towards this unconditioned place of awakening? Some professions, some livelihoods are counterproductive, go against the grain of following a path of liberation. I'm not going to go through the list. The Buddha gave a list. But one of the things he said was, well, I'll go through it best I can remember. Livelihoods that have to do with killing, like being a butcher, is counterproductive.

Rivalry hoods that have to do with buying and selling human beings, that's counterproductive. Rivalry hoods that have to do with trading or being a merchant of weapons is counterproductive. Dealing in poisons, as a weapon I guess, is also counterproductive. And the fifth is five, the fifth one. So that's a pretty strong thing to say. And I know some people have to negotiate this issue. It is my livelihood when I work for some of these electronic companies.

There was a man here who sat with us for a number of years. He worked as a machinist, more or less, for a local machine shop. I think it was a big, fancy kind of machine shop. And he got a phone call from the Air Force on a foreign country. And they wanted a certain part made for their aircrafts. And he went to his boss and he said, You know, I'm a Buddhist. I can't make this part for this military aircraft. And his boss said, You can go back and tell that government official whatever you want.

So he went back and said I'm sorry we can't do that here. So he felt that it went against the grain of his spiritual life to making weapons supporting or making pieces for weaponry. So I don't know how different people interpret this but the idea is to look at the livelihood and see if the livelihood is in harmony with the direction a person wants to go in their spiritual life once one person has kind of gotten their behavior taken care of looked at or began working on it.

Then the Buddha said, talked about the last of the Eightfold Path, which has to do with inner development. So first you start with outer activity, how you behave. And once you kind of begin working on that, then we talk about inner development. Then we talk about mindfulness and concentration, working on the mind. The mind is malleable, changeable, plastic. It can be changed. The mind is not a fixed thing. It's not solid. The mind is like software, not like hardware. The brain is hardware, but the mind is software.

And some of you, I think, are software engineers. And you can easily manipulate things and change things around. Pretty easily in software, can't you? I don't know much about it. Anyway, the mind is software, and so it's quite elastic and plastic and malleable. It can be changed and developed. And that's kind of like the good news that Buddhism teaches.

And so then we start taking responsibility for our own psyche, our own mind, by practicing. By moving the mind, moving the heart, to a greater and greater state of great, great possibility of awakening, of freedom. It's a process that is done, traditionally it's understood it involves steps. I like to think of it as mostly taking a lot of small steps. Occasionally people will take a huge step, which is very nice. But mostly, realistically, I think it's best to take small steps. Small steps. Small steps to understanding, where is my suffering right now? And how am I contributing to that? What's my role in the suffering I'm feeling right now.

Rather than blaming the situation, even if the situation is responsible, don't pay so much attention to that. Turn around and look and see how you're contributing to your suffering. Because that's where the heart of Buddhist spirituality is about. Being taking responsibility for how we contribute. And doing small steps. Next time you're attached to a Ferrari, maybe it's easy to let go. Don't underestimate the value of letting go of what's easy. It kind of builds the muscle and builds the insight that allows you eventually to take the big steps of letting go of some of the big things of some of these deeper roots that we have.

The last thing I want to say about the Four Noble Truths is the formulation of it. The classic formulation of the Four Noble Truths has no pronouns in the formulation and the wording of it. It doesn't say you or I or we. It just gets left out. There is suffering, there's a cause of suffering, there's a possibility of ending suffering, and there's a path to the end. I myself am very fond that there's no pronouns. Because what it means to me is that, what it points to is that Buddhist practice, in Buddhist practice, that we're as sensitive to our own suffering as the suffering of others.

We can only take responsibility for our contribution to that suffering. But we can be compassionate to the suffering around us. And it's equally important to have the compassionate concern go in both directions. That we have a compassionate concern for ourself and our own suffering. That we treat ourselves with compassion. With a kind of care when we see our suffering. And that looking at suffering in ourselves and trying to resolve it is a compassionate act for ourselves.

And being sensitive and open to see the suffering of the world around us is a compassionate act that extends out away from us to the world around us. And not having pronouns in the

Four Noble Truths is talking about the flow of compassion in both directions equally. And that for me is a really central part of at least what's possible to a mature spiritual life is to have our compassion flow in all directions fully. And the Four Noble Truths is one of the ways of manifesting, applying, expressing our compassion. So that should give you enough to work with for the year. Thank you for listening.