

Thoughts For The Year - Four Noble Truth

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So happy new year to all of you and best wishes for the year. And it's the custom. It's a little bit loud. Is it a little bit loud for the year? It's all good for you. Okay, just a little bit. So it's the custom here, for me, for the first talk of the year to be on the Four Noble Truths. These are a phenomenally important and valuable template for insight, for understanding, for wisdom, for finding our way to a degree of freedom. And over these maybe more than 20 years now that I've been doing these first talk of the year on the Four Noble Truths, what how I've presented it has changed over the years.

Someone could go back and listen to all of them and track the evolution of my thinking and my understanding of it over time. And that speaks to how useful these are for new understandings, for new perspectives, for new ways of touching our heart in some important way. Rather than taking the Four Noble Truths as there's an orthodox true understanding of it, it's this very useful thing to engage in and explore and apply in new ways. And I once sent an email to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the famous translator of these ancient texts, a wonderful scholar, asking about one particular way the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths. And he replied, not that it was the true way of understanding them, he explained, oh, that was a particular application. It was being applied for a particular purpose. So this idea is, oh, these Four Noble Truths are wonderful things.

Okay. The simplest way of saying them is just an outline, really, that needs to be filled in. There is the truth. Actually, they don't use the word this. They use the word *this*. This is the noble truth of suffering. This is the noble truth of the arising of suffering. This is the noble truth of the cessation. And this is a noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. So immediately we realize that this is about suffering, which for some people is a really big word, and now only to qualify as suffering, it's like the big disasters of life. But sometimes it's been translated as stress, and then we can understand that it can apply to the smallest little things in life that are stress. In fact, it applies to anything that degree of stress, distress that we might experience that it is possible and reasonable to become free of, to bring to an end. And this is the good news of Buddhism that suffering can come to an end. *Dukkha* can come to an end.

And inherent in this teaching, central to all of Buddhism, is the idea of change. Things change. One way or the other, things change. And sometimes other people, and myself maybe at times, would have worded this differently, would have said central to Buddhism's idea that everything passes or everything's impermanent. It won't be here all the time. And that's valuable as well to say, but that also limits this understanding. But if you hear it as change, that applies to everything. Everything changes except for platonic ideas. Right? Maybe. At least for Plato. And so the things change. And the idea is to find our peace by understanding something deep about change. And you hear that in this wording of the Four Noble Truths. The second truth is the arising and the third noble truth is ceasing, the coming and going. The Buddha uses the word coming and going sometimes instead of change. Sometimes it uses appearing and disappearing. And sometimes inconstancy is used. And sometimes the word change, things becoming different.

And so there's this wonderful account of a conversation that a householder, a man had with the Buddha. His name was Nakulapita, the father of Nakula. And he came to the Buddha and paid his respects. And then he said this, I am old, venerable sir, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, come to the last stage, afflicted in body, often ill. Wow, that's quite a statement. Now remember, this was 2,500 years ago. There was no ER. There was no pain medications. There was no blood pressure medication, heart medication. There was no antibiotics. There was no surgery for the back, for the hips, for all the stuff. I mean, there's so much that happens in the modern world that keeps us going. Kind of tunes us up a little bit for a while, not because the march of change that the human body is will change sometimes.

When you're young, if you're lucky, you get stronger and more capable and more skilled. And if you're lucky enough to grow to be old, for most people, change is not a welcome thing. And we spend, people spend in this country a lot of money fending off the effects of aging. I think at the time of the Buddha, they didn't have Botox. What they had, that was maybe better than Botox, was meditation. So this is quite a remarkable statement. This man is saying, this is how it is for me. And you can imagine in the ancient world that, yes, being aged and old was you couldn't escape it. And there was no sense that you can go down to the local store and get some aspirin and some face cream and you know, just kind of shore things up for a while. And so he's just saying, this is kind of a very clear, things have changed for this man, and he's clearly stating it.

I am old, aged, burdened with years, advanced in life, come to the last stage, afflicted in body, often ill. He's not complaining. He's just saying, this is where I am. And then he says, I rarely get a chance to see the Buddha and hear his teachings. May the Buddha please teach me,

instruct me, since this would lead to my welfare and happiness for a long time. So he's asking for teachings. Here is my situation. Things have changed in this kind of way. Now please, offer some teachings. And the Buddha replied, So it is. So it is. This body of yours is afflicted, weighed down, encumbered. If anyone carrying around this body were to claim to be healthy, even for a moment, what does that do to other than foolishness? That's a kind of strange statement and powerful statement. Therefore, you should train yourself thus. You should practice this way. You should develop yourself and cultivate yourself in this way with this orientation. Even though I am afflicted in body, my mind will be unafflicted. This is how you should train yourself.

Then the householder Nakulapita, having delighted and rejoiced in the Buddha's statement, rose from his seat and having paid homage to the Buddha went to visit the Buddhist disciple, venerable Sāriputta. And he said, venerable Sāriputta, this is what the Buddha told me. He repeated the conversation. And he said to Sāriputta, it was the ambrosia of such a Dharma talk that the Blessed One anointed me. It's a very religious language, but, you know, that a Dharma talk, it was ambrosia. It was very welcome. He felt like he was given medicine, some wonderful thing. And he was anointed, he was blessed by it, by the Buddha saying, what did he say? Yes, the body can be afflicted, but you train yourself, so the mind is not afflicted.

When I was in Burma with my teacher U Pandita, he was kind of a stern, fierce, general kind of teacher. He had very, you know, different teachers have very different personality. In the same monastery, there was a guy who was just, the teacher who was just completely filled with love. And you get in his presence and you could do him wrong. With U Pandita, you could do everything wrong. But there was twice when I was studying with him, giving a talk, his eyes sparkled. And he kind of like leaned forward. And he said something like this. He said, as you age, the body just gets more and more worn out. The case. And then he leaned with sparkle. But if you practice, your mind gets brighter.

And he was getting to be an old man himself. But this could see his delight and what can happen. So he had been training himself, pretty much his whole life, this teacher of mine. And that was his conclusion, that the mind becomes brighter. So then Sāriputta said to the man, didn't it occur to you to question the Buddha further on how one is afflicted in body and afflicted in mind, and how one is afflicted in body and not afflicted in mind. You got this great little teaching. You didn't ask him how to do with it, how to practice with it. And so the man says to Sāriputta, well, maybe you'll do it. And he does, so that goes on from there. And a lot of it has to do with change. How do we live with change? And how is it we don't live with change? And that is one of the key insights, and that's a lot to do with the Four Noble

Truths.

We suffer when we lock onto something, and we're no longer living in the stream, the river of change. We get preoccupied, caught in something. This is how it is. And the way that Sāriputta presents it to this man, is when we take something in this universe, in our experience, this is who I am. If you take your appearance, in one way or another, your appearance defines who you are, this is who I am. Then when the appearance is changed, you'll be distressed. You'll suffer. If you have idea, this is who I have to be. And then you look in the mirror and you're not what you were once. I've been surprised sometimes by seeing people, a big gap, some years between seeing them. And I realized I was still carrying with me the image of them some years ago. Sometimes it's with kids that are growing. What? And sometimes seeing people who get older. I'm sure people have done that with me because I'm getting older.

And one of the curious things about my own self-image that I've seen over these decades, I do this to myself. I'm usually a few years behind with my self-image. I kind of don't quite... I kind of remember myself as how I was some years ago, and they'll assume that's the way I am. And I think it's innocent enough. I don't think I've suffered too much from that. But this orientation to have an idea, an image, and then lock onto it. This is how it should be. This is how it is. So we can do that with appearance. And we know in the society of ours a tremendous amount of suffering occurs because of how people appear, how they appear, their skin color.

It's that difference, that distinction is deadly sometimes for people. A lot of discrimination. About age, people have told me repeatedly that because they're old, because they're old and short, how much now they get overlooked. People don't even see them anymore, they tell me. And stand in line at a store, and someone comes along who's tall and young, and just kind of talks over them, and the store clerk ignores the person who was there first. Somehow they feel that they become invisible, their appearance. And then there's expectations of how we're supposed to look and how we want to present ourselves, and this changes. So there's change in our appearance, but that does not need to afflict the mind. And so how do we understand? How is the mind becoming afflicted around the changing of our appearance?

Some of it has to do with how we lock in. We have lock into what it should be. We have strong desires, expectations. We have strong fears that we have to maintain it this way. We live in the world of ideas and concepts, and we're kind of worrying ourselves around these ideas of how it should be, how we should be, and what we expect it to be. And the odd thing

about concepts and ideas, they can be platonic, in the sense that they don't change, and their expectation that things shouldn't change. So there can be resistance, there can be distress, there could be fear, all these kinds of things start arising in the mind because our appearances are changing and it's not what we want, or it is what we want. And then we maybe feel happy for a while, but it's a happiness that's dependent on that appearance. And then it passes away. Something happens and it's not there anymore.

And so how do we train ourselves not to be afflicted in the mind when there's change in the body? And so part of that is understanding what is happening in the mind and being able to live with direct presence for the changing nature of experience. And that's one of the primary purposes of mindfulness meditation is to place ourselves experientially, somatically, in the field of change. That's what's happening all the time. Things are changing all the time. And there's a song that has those lyrics. I don't know if some of you are old enough to remember, things are changing, all the things are changing all the time. Nothing known will be mine. Everything changed. I made that up. But nothing known, nothing that you know, will remain mine. Everything changes. Everything. So this identification, this is me, this is mine, this is who I am. I have to be this kind of person this way.

And so we latch on, we hold on. But what are these ideas, concepts that we latch on to? How do we step out of the river of change? And so recently I had, occasionally I have migraines and get nauseous. And this recently was relatively mild, now it can go. So I kind of continued my day. But the way that I practiced with it was to place myself in my body, in the river of change, my body, the flow of change, the movements and everything. And so when there is pain, I would bring myself to the pain. And when I bring carefully to the pain, that becomes more movement, more change. It makes it much more easy. Sometimes the pain goes away even, or it's no longer pain.

But then the reason I'm telling you this is it became a wonderful vantage point to see how I started getting, how I got afflicted in the mind, and how I got caught up in the idea, oh, this is permanent. This is, this may not be permanent. I knew it wasn't going to be forever that way, but this is not going to change for the rest of the day. I'm stuck, this is terrible, this is bad. And I could watch how that would happen. As I could watch, I could be sitting and practicing with the river of change and this body. And then if I kind of got a little bit distracted, my mind would go into my head, into my thoughts, and as I go into the thoughts, I would form this idea that shouldn't be this way. This is terrible. This is, you know, I must have done something wrong. What did I do?

And so there's this kind of these thoughts where I could start locking into these thoughts, these ideas. I had a certain amount of fear come up. Oh, this didn't get worse. And it wasn't just fear that was coming, but I would lock onto the fear. Oh no. This locking on, this grabbing onto, just kind of getting, that's where things got reified, things got solidified, and I was no longer in the river of change. I was in this idea, or a created idea of permanence. And then I could see, oh, look at that, Gil. You're locking on with the mind, around something, some ideas, some feelings, some attitudes, some resistance, something. That's what the mind is doing. It's adding something to the situation. Wow. And then I'd relax, go back into the verge age, and then it'd be okay for a while. Until I wasn't doing that. I kind of surfaced into my mind again. And then had a whole other vantage point to see what the mind is doing. They gave birth to my suffering around it.

And then I would come back in and open. I kept opening up to the body. That was my practice. Open up to the change here. Be open to how things are flowing and moving. And things were always flowing and moving. And it was fascinating also to see then also to be open to change and see that the thoughts were changing. And so I would have the thought there was something like, this will be forever. But then I would watch it. This was a very fleeting word, will be, just fleeting and forever. That word came to the end very quickly. It was just there like for a moment. And it made a world of difference to just see it as this word going through. That rather than this is going to be forever, oh, oh, forever, forever, forever. Which, you know, is succumbing to it and being caught in it and locked into it and believing it. Just for that moment, it was forever, because that was the word said, but it wasn't forever. The word wasn't forever. The thoughts were not forever. The thoughts come and go as well.

Recently also someone, I was presenting on something with a friend and my friend said, well, I'm going to offer you my thoughts, how I'm thinking about this topic. And then we'll hear about Gil what he thinks about this topic. And as soon as he said that, I thought, oh, yeah, I am thinking about it. It was the topic. And I could watch, it was almost as if I could watch the thinking kind of in the air in front of me, like a river just passing by, that had no weight, no substance. It was just a changing flow of thoughts. As opposed to sometimes I'm thinking about something, and I'm like in it. I'm locked into it. I'm concerned with it. I'm curious about it. I'm exploring it. And something about the mind has locked in. Something about the mind has zeroed in. And so that zeroing in, locking in, can provide a sense of permanence, a sense of constancy, a sense that nothing is changing.

But when my friend said what Gil is going to be thinking about, it was just a stream. It was kind of like if you got watercolors and a brush, and you were going to paint a beautiful painting.

But the surface you were going to paint it on was a flowing river. Imagine dipping your brush with watercolors to make a stroke in a flowing river. Maybe you'd leave a trail of color, but it would just kind of be washing by. You couldn't really make that picture. It was like, that's how I saw my thoughts go by, the changing nature of thoughts. Wow. So with that, there was no room for those thoughts to afflict the mind.

The thoughts can afflict our mind, not because of the thoughts, but because how we're involved in thoughts, how we lock into them, tense up, react, resist, you know, have an emotional response to it. And most emotional responses are fine. If we stay in the river of change with emotions, things are changing all the time. But if we react to the emotions, I've had self-pity many years ago. I have this wonderful story for me of self-pity. And I could, and when I locked into the self-pity, it became clear that I suffered. And my distress and suffering grew. But if I saw it as self-pity and kind of let go of it, the suffering disappeared. And the physical pain that was associated with disappeared as well. So anger, fear, there's a way in which we get locked in, we get caught in it, and we don't really see it or respect it or relate to it as part of the changing nature of life.

And I've seen it works so much better to be with my emotional life if experiences as change, constant change. And then there's much more room to allow it to be what it is. Anger arises. It's okay, but it comes and it goes. In and of itself, most emotions don't last more than a few seconds, a minute or two or something. But what happens, what keeps them going is our feeding it, or reacting to it, our participation in it. But if we can really settle into the changing flow of emotions, it's a kaleidoscope of change and movement. So the Four Noble Truths are as an honest recognition that I'm suffering. I have stress here. As Nakulapita told the Buddha in a clear, uncomplaining way, I'm old and ill and afflicted. And now tell me a Dharma talk. Give me a Dharma talk. And the Buddha said, yes, it's true, you are. And we say that for ourselves. Yes, it's true. I'm suffering. And can you see the difference between afflictions of the body and non-affliction of the mind? Train yourself to look at the mind. Look what the mind is doing.

And so the second and third noble truth have a lot to do with seeing the change, stepping back into the river of change rather than being outside of it or caught in it or holding the bucket of the river and saying, I have the river, and it's a burden to carry this heavy bucket. Put the water back into the river. Watch the rising and passing. Watch the coming and going. And be in the change. And then, they kind of, really, one of the most marvelous things about the teachings of the Four Noble Truths is the fourth Noble Truth, that if you can know the river of change and see the freedom from that, the freedom from locking in, feel the ease of

the mind or the spaciousness of the mind, even a mind that has a migraine, you can feel it. This freedom there, the psychological freedom, that in that flow, what is it like to be flowing in the current? If everything is change, your change, you are the change.

In fact, the Buddha said that at some point in practice we enter the stream. And when it was asked, what is the stream? It's the Eightfold Path in you. The stream is a way of living to be in the flow of change completely without locking on, without getting attached to anything or resisting anything. It makes us really wise. And the Eightfold Path is a manifestation of that wisdom. If you're in the stream of change in this kind of way, you're wise because you can see when you get caught, when you're trying to block the river.

Stop, don't move, don't go. When you try to freeze it up, when you resist it, when you're holding onto things, when you're taking a bucket and holding onto that, this... And that's a tremendously wise thing to see. Look at that. Just like when I had the migraine, I could see that difference. And that made a world a difference for me. I was able to manage fine with it because I could see what the mind was doing and not give in to it and come back to the river of change. To see what it's like to have the mind unattached. Right? That's the first step of the Eightfold Path, to be able to see that right view, to see that operating. If you're in the flow of that river, you see that if you have ill will, you're caught. You see if you have greed, if you have hostility, you're caught. And if you let go of that, you have this wonderful delight that of non-ill-will, non-hostility, which is often in Buddhism is defined as kindness and compassion.

If you are the change, if you are the river of change, you see how lying and stealing, intentionally wanting to harm anyone, takes you out of the river, takes you out of the change. And you can see how that causes distress, stress, suffering. Right? And so this wisdom of seeing that unethical behavior is actually a loss of something very profound, some freedom. And that's the middle steps of the Eightfold Path. And to see that when you're in the flow of the river, the flow of change in us has freed up all kinds of beautiful and healthy and wholesome qualities inside of us to flow. Integrity, that drive for honesty, for generosity, for wisdom, for patience, for equanimity. There's all these beautiful qualities that can flow when there isn't any resistance or locking in or attachment. And then to be mindful of this and to be mindful of all this and to be settled in oneself in the River of Change, these are the last three steps of the Eightfold Path.

So the Eightfold Path in this description is not exactly what you do, is what you become if you learn to relax and become the river of change. So it's not seeing change, which is the

beginning, first step. But once you see it, then your idea is to open and relax and become it. And in that becoming of it, you become a wise person. And you understand what it's like not to be afflicted in mind. You might be afflicted in body as you get older. Some of you probably will become older. And as you do, maybe you know something now about not becoming afflicted in your body, in your mind. And that's the premise of the Four Noble Truths, that it's possible to come to a place where the mind is not afflicted. Believe it or not.

So those are my thoughts for this year around the Four Noble Truths. And I hope that they were meaningful for you in some way, evocative in some way. And partly because today we have tea and we still have seven minutes at the Dharma talk time. If you're willing to stay for a few minutes and talk to someone near you, say hello. Okay. It'd be nice to greet someone and welcome them to IMC. And even if this is your first time at IMC, you're here, and you can welcome the person you're... Hopefully you'll get welcome, but you could also welcome them and say hello and introduce yourself. And if you want to say something about this talk, if anything was evocative or interesting or perplexing or useful for you, maybe share a little bit what that was like.

And so if you take a few minutes, and then I'll ring a bell, and when it's time to stop for the tea, and everyone's welcome to stay, or you can continue your conversations. The one thing I ask is that when you look around to talk to someone, look around, maybe talk to two or three people, a little group of three, just so no one's kind of alone because everyone around you turn the other way. We want everyone be included to look around and make sure everyone around you is included somehow. Please, thank you.