

## Four Noble Truths All at Once

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So the custom here at IMC is to dedicate the first Dharma talk of the year to the Four Noble Truths. And it's said sometimes that all of the Dharma of Buddhism can be found within the Four Noble Truths. So, in a sense, all the rest of the teaching that's going to come in the course of the year is a continuation or an expression or an aspect of these Four Noble Truths. They're a really wonderful rubric, wonderful four little phrases, occult truths, pragmatic truths that are interpreted in a number of different ways. That's part of the richness of these Four Noble Truths: they can be applied in different ways, understood in different ways. We work to help us reflect and think about our lives, and offer a new perspective for understanding what's going on for us.

I celebrate the various different interpretations that have occurred in Buddhism down through the ages, and also the various ones that exist here in the modern world. I think of them as the inexhaustible noble truths, that there is no exhausting all the different ways in which they can be applied and understood for our lives. So I'll offer you a little bit of an interpretation, a little bit of understanding of them as we go along. As I said in the beginning of the meditation, the primary characteristic of the Dharma is harmlessness, is non-harming. One of the forms that takes is the desire to not harm anyone, including oneself. To understand how we harm ourselves, how we inflict or bring about suffering on ourselves, is one of the great tasks of a lifetime.

The Dharma practice is really getting to the bottom of ways that we unnecessarily inflict suffering on ourselves, stress on ourselves, and come to the other side of that, where instead of suffering we experience happiness and peace. It's a challenging statement, of course, to say that we're trying to get underneath, below, or really work through the ways in which we inflict suffering on ourselves, because the very idea that we would do that seems counterintuitive, and for some people may be even a little insulting. They think that they are causing

harm for themselves, especially when there are so many people around you, maybe you are causing harm. A whole society could be causing harm towards you in the way that societies do so many terrible things. But what the specialty of Buddhism is, is to really understand what we're doing, what's happening within us, what is our contribution to our suffering, because that's where we have the most ability to make a change. Whether or not we can change society in the world around us or other people, certainly at times we should, sometimes passionately.

But whether we're successful or not, that's an open question. But we can have much more success with ourselves. It turns out if we can really delve deeply in ourselves and really understand the roots of self-inflicted suffering in ourselves, really, it's transformative. That transformation changes our relationship to the difficulties of the world around us, and changes those relationships dramatically, so that maybe we become more porous or more free in the context of people who may be even harming us. We have much more ease. So this idea of turning inward and looking at the Four Noble Truths.

In Buddhism, we celebrate the Four Noble Truths, which are sometimes considered to be the core teachings of the Buddha, and in celebrating them, it's possible to want to say they are the greatest and most wonderful and so important. But I'm not going to say that. One of the earliest teachings of the Buddha is to be very careful not to take any spiritual teachings as ultimate. The idea that somehow Buddhism has some ultimate teachings, or better teachings than other spiritual traditions or better philosophies, is such a big trap that we fall into. Human beings, we want to be part of the best and really be, you know, better than others or something, because we want to be involved, the best, most helpful or something. As we see in the earliest teachings of the Buddha, there are really clear, explicit teachings not to do this.

Don't hold up your philosophy, your religion, your spirituality as being better. Don't demean it. Don't diminish its value. Just don't play the comparison game, and just let these teachings be what they are for you. If they're beneficial, great, and that's wonderful, and there's no need to consider them the best going. So in this regard, then it might be useful, rather than saying, beginning by saying what they are, and it may be, I'll say briefly what they are, the four as if you've never heard what they are, and then talk about what they're not.

The Four Noble Truths are four statements having to do with the nature and the potential around suffering that we inflict on ourselves, suffering that we somehow contribute in ourselves, that happens within us, in our own little psychophysical ego system. The first statement is that there is suffering, there is personal suffering, there is stress and distress in this

system that we have, and that suffering. The Second Noble Truth says that suffering has an arising. It arises. A very strange statement in English, just as it would be in Pāli, that it's the Noble Truth of the arising of suffering. What this arising implies is that suffering is not permanent.

It has a beginning. It arises. It gets born. It comes out of something. Sometimes the Four Noble Truths put a lot of emphasis on what it comes out of. Sometimes the emphasis is on the very fact of its impermanent nature and constant nature, insubstantial nature, but also what does it arise out of, which is often described as the cause. So people will look at the cause as part of the Second Noble Truth.

The Third Noble Truth is kind of the good news of Buddhism, and that is that it's the cessation of the suffering, that suffering, the inner internal suffering, the inner ways in which we inflict suffering to ourselves, comes to an end, a radical, thorough kind of ending. That's the good news. The Fourth Noble Truth is described as the way leading to that end. There's more to say about that way, and I'll do that later. But these are the four statements of them.

So what it is not sometimes, because in popular English writings about the Four Noble Truths, there is a statement that the First Noble Truth says life is suffering. Now, this is a very depressing statement, and the Buddha never said that life is suffering. What he said was that there is suffering. But that doesn't mean that that's all there is. "Life is suffering" implies that you have to just live with a suffering life, because there's no alternative. But there is suffering, and there is an alternative. There is a possibility of bringing suffering to an end.

The statement "There is suffering" is meant to be an encouragement to stop and look at it, to stop and take it seriously, to really recognize the suffering, the stresses we live under, live with, in order not to suffer better, but to really see it all the way through to the other side. But it requires admitting it, stopping for it, recognizing it. The other thing that the Four Noble Truths are not: they are not a belief system. They are not like, "You have now to believe these Four Noble Truths as a tenet, a part of the creed of Buddhism." They are more like a frame of reference. They're more like a perspective that we adopt. It's a reference, an alternative perspective to some perspectives that we commonly go through life with that don't really serve us too well.

One of the most common perspectives that many people have is the perspective of me, myself, and mine, of self, that everything is seen through. That goes on—what happens to us, how we experience things, what goes on inside, what we do and don't do—from the point of view of me and the self. I'm the one who is experiencing something. They said something to me, and it affects me and my sense of self. I want something. I have an opinion. This is my

opinion. This is my experience. So all this, me, myself. Of course, it's not an unreasonable category to use ideas of me, myself, and mine, or be concerned with oneself. But if that's the sole perspective we use to understand our lives, then we end up in the trap that sometimes a self-help program or a psychology gets into, that there's no end to fixing the self, because the self ends up to be primarily, or a big part of it, a construct of the mind. There's the story of the self that we live by. It's a story that's constantly changing, never ending, never can be perfect, never can be finished. If we're always looking and measuring our life from the point of what it means for me and the impact on me, it's a rather limited perspective.

The alternative to that is the perspective of these Four Noble Truths. Rather than looking at our experience through the vantage point of self, we're looking at our experience through the vantage point of suffering and the end of suffering. Whether there is or is not a self is really incidental, not that important to this new perspective. What's important is to really be able to point to the real issue, what's really at the heart of suffering, if we want to find the heart of freedom from suffering. Sometimes, if we look through the vantage point of self, me, myself, and mine, it actually limits our ability to see the underlying nature of suffering itself. We're kind of one step removed. We've interpreted it, we've applied it, we've essentialized it in relationship to a self.

It turns out that it's just a lot easier to not take things so personally, to not measure suffering about me, myself, and mine. There's a strong, almost addictive habit of seeing things through the vantage point of self. It can seem just so second nature, so natural to do it. But in fact, it's possible to have a whole different perspective, and to ask, "Where is the suffering? What's the suffering right here?" Not, "How am I suffering? What's my suffering?" but just, "What is the suffering?" The complications of self and self-consciousness and self-definition kind of get loosened up. So it's a framework for understanding our experience that's simpler than the framework of self.

Another idea that comes is that it is some people's idea that the Four Noble Truths are a rather limited or narrow perspective to use, or teaching, that there's so much more to life than the Four Noble Truths. Certainly that's true. But they're not so narrow and so limited. What they do is they bring us very close in to see suffering itself. It turns out that when we suffer, suffering is intimately related to so much of our psychology, so much of who we are, so much of what goes on in the world, that it's a fascinating and important doorway to deep self-understanding, to understand the full range of who we are suffering. It is related, is connected to so much of our inner life, our personality or psychology, our emotions, our body. Studying suffering really opens up to a real wealth and richness of who we are in a fantastic way. Or

we discover by turning into suffering that the issues that we're looking at, what we think are important, turn out to be not so important after all.

So, for example, I don't know if this is a good example, but the question, "What is the meaning of life?" That seems like it may be a good question on the surface. But if we ask ourselves and ask, if we explore in asking that question, where does that question come from inside of me? Does that question arise out of fear? Does the question arise out of greed or out of some kind of anxiety? Am I suffering in some way? Am I uncomfortable in some way? That's why I am asking the question. If there is any inner discomfort that's prompting the question, then Buddhism would say, settle that inner fear, anxiety, or discomfort, that whatever inner turmoil there is that might give birth to that question, "What is the meaning of life?" can be settled without answering the question. That's why this deep insight into the Four Noble Truths is so helpful.

If there is no inner turmoil, if there is no anxiety and fear or suffering relating to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" it's good to know that. Then you can continue exploring what the meaning of life is. But do so happily and with ease, and without a lot of weight, and a lot of conceit, and a lot of looking for the ultimate, so that you can know the ultimate better than other people. Knowing the ultimate just becomes a nice project to understand that.

Some people complain about these Four Noble Truths, that it's a selfish teaching because it's kind of looking at your own experience, turning attention inward to see your suffering, the cause of suffering, and the way out of the suffering. It's not really selfish, partly because it's really taking a very different path than me, myself, and mine, that self-occupation, but also because selfishness itself is a form of suffering, is a form of stress and distress. As we study the Four Noble Truths, we will root out selfishness, the selfishness of wanting to be involved in a great religion and the best religion and have the best. You now have the best religious teachings, the best spirituality, the best spiritual experience of anybody on your block. All these ways in which we want to be special, or all the ways we're threatened easily. Our sense of self or sense of conceit or sense of selfishness is threatened by what goes on in the world, is questioned by the Four Noble Truths because we question the underlying malaise, the underlying tension that gives birth to any kind of selfishness, including the kind of selfishness which is to demean oneself and to limit oneself and think oneself less than others. It is a kind of self-preoccupation. All these are forms of suffering. The Four Noble Truths, hopefully, gently pop the bubble. They probably show that this is not really so interesting and so useful. There is another way of living that doesn't have the suffering of selfishness or self-preoccupation.

If we pop that bubble, then it becomes more natural to come into that perspective of the Four Noble Truths, which are four perspectives that have no, in and of themselves, are free of the perspective of taking things personally, so they're not selfish. The other thing is some people say, "Well, it's kind of a party pooper, these Four Noble Truths, because we're supposed to look at suffering, really get to know our suffering." The bumper sticker for Buddhists would be, "I stop for suffering," and it doesn't seem like a great advertisement, you know, to come to Buddhism and get to look at your suffering better. I mean, not too many people would come off the street to a Buddhist center if that was the main teaching that they heard. But the classic teaching around these Four Noble Truths is that all four truths, even though they are kind of talked about one at a time—the first, second, third, and fourth—because that's the limitation of language, the insight into them, the deeper insight into the Four Noble Truths, is you see all four altogether. They're seen simultaneously. So that means that as we see suffering, we see the cause of suffering. As we see suffering, we see it as insubstantial, as something arising, passing, as something that's not permanent and solid and stuck. We also see the cessation of suffering. It's a little strange, but you can, in the very suffering that we have, also see the possibility or the actuality of the end of that suffering, the freedom from that suffering, and we see what it takes, and it takes a radical letting go, not clinging to anything.

To see all those four together makes it more of a happy occasion to see the Four Noble Truths. If we're only looking at our suffering, it can be a little bit depressing. It can be distressing. But if we remember, we can learn to understand these Four Noble Truths as a unitary perspective, then the very encounter with suffering shows us a path and a possibility that's quite inspiring and encouraging to us. There is a possibility to get to the other side of it.

Now, it also means, though, that there is a certain idea of calling each of these Four Noble Truths gives a certain kind of sacredness to each. Not that suffering is sacred—I never want to say that—but there's something sacred about bringing our mindful, caring attention to how we suffer, to stop and really be there for it. There's something sacred about stopping and taking a good look to see the cause of it, what's giving rise to it. There's something very sacred about seeing the cessation of it, seeing the possibility of freedom from it. It's kind of like seeing the space that surrounds the suffering, and realizing we can live in that space rather than living in the suffering. There is something sacred about the way leading to it, because it's noble. What makes it sacred for me—this, you know, is not exactly a Buddhist word, sacred—to use the word noble, which I associate with being dignified and very dignified or highly valued. But what makes it sacred is that it's kind of fundamental to all our life, and it applies to all our life. It's all-pervasive, this idea of the Four Noble Truths, because either

we're touching into all the different ways in which we feel suffering, and we also discover a sense of peace, a sense of cessation of suffering that also relates to all the different ways that we live our lives. So it's comprehensive. It's completely inclusive of all our lives.

There's something very dignified and valued and noble, sacred in learning the capacity to take a good, honest look at our suffering. But doing so knowing that this is not the end of the story, knowing that this very looking, this very stopping and being present for it is a special act. It's not being lost in the suffering or caught in it. It's actually the beginning of finding an alternative to the suffering, the freedom from it, so that we don't simply just fall into some spiritual bypath of just being kind of not suffering in some way because we're holding ourselves away from the world.

The Second Noble Truth is so important because the Second Noble Truth includes looking at the underlying cause of the suffering. One of the primary causes that the Buddhist tradition emphasizes is something that's called in Pāli, called *taṇhā*, and it's usually translated into English as thirst. But I kind of like to think of it as hunger, that we're trying to consume something, and the mind, in order to feel good, the heart, to feel good, wants to consume things, to hold things. Its theme has a certain kind of compulsion, a drivenness to consume, to want, to have. There are four things that the mind will consume in order to feed itself. It's feeding itself a certain kind of suffering when it does this.

It's the thirst or the hunger for sensual desire and sensual comfort, the hunger for our stories, our views, our opinions, our philosophies, certainly our stories—many of us, stories of our lives and what happened to us. The hunger to hold on to that, to make an even story, to assert that story, to tell everyone the story, to live that story, the hunger to do so. There's the hunger for anything and everything that's going to help us get over our suffering, a hunger for practices and rituals and, you know, all kinds of things. This striving for practice is things of spiritual practices. It's very kind of paradoxical that Buddhism offers spiritual practice, but not only does it not want us to take anything Buddhist as being ultimate, it also doesn't want us to hunger for, be attached to the very practices Buddhism teaches, partly because the practices are just a means, not the end. So this hunger for spirituality, for being right. Then the fourth of these consumables that we're hungry for is identification, identifying, creating, defining a sense of self for ourselves, having a view and idea of who I am or what the self is.

Now, it can be innocent enough to have these ideas of self and views of self, but there can also be a hunger for it, or a drive for it, a compulsion, a need for it in order to feel safe or complete or fulfilled. So these four hungers are often seen as the primary cause for suffering, and understanding how they might be the cause—these four, limited to these four—takes

some kind of reflection and thinking and looking deeply into the nature of what motivates and from which our suffering arises. So to look deeply at suffering, to look at it as something insubstantial that's arising, that has a cause, that arises from something, to see that it's possible to lay down the compulsions, to have them cease completely. So the very roots for the suffering wither up, dry up, dissolve, and the suffering itself vanishes. It's a fantastic thing to discover how thoroughly and completely it's possible to have a suffering-free heart, a heart that's deeply at ease and at peace with itself, content, not needing to consume anything, to get more, to change anything for its own well-being.

And then there's the path. The final thing I'll say is the path. The Fourth Noble Truth has two essential meanings. One is those practices and means that help us let go of our suffering, let go of our clinging. The other thing it means is that it's the wide open path that opens up when we realize the freedom from clinging, freedom from suffering. When we realize that this, too, is possible, it's possible to have a heart that's at ease and free and suffering-free, and then to have a feeling for that, have a vision for that, a sense of that, and see that this is the way forward, and it's coming like now. The path forward from this freedom is an expression of the freedom, and a path to freedom, and a path that expresses that freedom in our life. So all these four can, as we mature in the Four Noble Truths, be seen simultaneously at the same time. Doing so is inspiring, and hopefully brings you a sense of happiness, and maybe a smile on your face, and a wonderful smile that you might have as living the Four Noble Truths, the smile of being content and happy.

Not to take Buddhism as being ultimate and special and wonderful and better than anything else. And also this wonderful smile you can have when you don't take yourself as being ultimate and special and the most wonderful thing going. We just can be alive, just alive, peaceful, content, happy, perhaps, hopefully, living for the welfare of all beings. May all beings benefit from the Four Noble Truths. Thank you.