

# The Four Noble Truths

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So I'll begin with, for this new year, a story to set up the topic. I met a woman many years ago who told me this about her teenage years. She grew up apparently in Menlo Park, so close to here. And when she was growing up there as a teenager in the maybe mid-60s or maybe slightly before, what many of you don't know is that Menlo Park was one of the epicenters for the whole LSD psychedelic rock and roll music. And the Grateful Dead got started in Menlo Park. And Ken Kesey and his magic bus got started in Menlo Park.

So it was kind of a very historically important place. And so that's where she grew up. And so she and two friends had heard that there was a Zen master in San Francisco who could teach you how to get high without drugs. So they found their way up to see Shunryū Suzuki Rōshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, when he was at a little Japanese temple in Japantown. And so they went up there to see him, and he answered the door, and they told him why they were there: yeah, to get high without drugs.

And he was delighted to see them, and he took them to the meditation hall, sat them down, and then gave them a talk on the *Four Noble Truths*. Suffering. The cause of suffering. The end of suffering. The way to the end of suffering. This is not what they came for.

But Suzuki Rōshi was so happy telling them about suffering. They had never encountered someone like this. And so the woman who told me said she then, because of that, she became a lifetime Zen student. She became, that's what she did. And so this contrast between happiness and suffering.

So as we start this new year, kind of my New Year resolution is to remember how little I know, and to see if I can ask better questions as I go through the year. Maybe that can be the theme of the year, better questions rather than better answers. And so the custom here at IMC is for the first talk of the year that I give to be on the *Four Noble Truths*. So I probably won't be

as happy as Suzuki Rōshi, but happiness is the context for the whole discussion of the *Four Noble Truths* and discussion of suffering. And I'm struck that I've done this now for the first talk of the year for maybe 25 years now. It's a long time.

And I find myself very curious and interested in what am I going to say this year, because my understanding has changed, my life has changed, the world has changed, the world's understanding of things has changed. And so this basic simple formula of the *Four Noble Truths* gets applied and understood and questioned in new ways as we go along. So it's a wonderful reference point for a Buddhist life, to have this kind of deeper reflections about the *Four Noble Truths*, about suffering, the arising and cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way to the cessation of suffering. And see it as questions to ask yourself, and to keep coming back to these fundamental questions. And so as I talk about the *Four Noble Truths*, I also want to present it the best I can as a journey.

I think that the more I study the ancient teachings of the Buddha, it seems to be very journey-focused. The *dharma*, kind of the equivalent word for religion in Buddhism, would be the word *magga*, or *mārga* in Sanskrit, meaning path. So this idea of a path that you're following, a journey we're on. And over and over again, the way the Buddha taught so many times in individual teachings, individual talks he gave, you can kind of follow the trajectory of the journey he's taking people on. And so this *Four Noble Truths* is the same way. It's a journey.

And the journey begins by an honest assessment of suffering. And so the question to be asked is, how am I suffering today? What is my suffering here? And this word suffering in English is a big, big word. Some people are troubled by even using the word because for some people it's only catastrophic things that qualify as suffering.

One English translator prefers to translate the Pāli word, which is *dukkha*, as stress, because stress is applicable everywhere, even when we're having wonderful things. I've been told that one of the most stressful things that people can have happen in their life is marriage, or getting married, the marriage ceremony. And so you wouldn't necessarily call it suffering, but maybe you're willing to say, oh yeah, that was stressful sometimes. Yeah. So, but anyway, this level of psychological distress, psychological, emotional, one teacher I practiced with wanted to translate *dukkha* as anguish.

I protested, but still it's interesting that that's what he wanted to do. Because, you know, so what is suffering? What is your suffering? How are you suffering? Are you stressed? Are you uncomfortable? Are you uneasy?

How are you uneasy? And so kind of the bumper sticker for Buddhists would be, I stop for

suffering. I said that once and next time I came to IMC, someone had done a pile of bumper stickers for me. They put them on the counter there: I stop for suffering. But to stop for it, not to suffer better, but to know suffering better, to recognize it, to question it, to put a question mark next to it.

And some of that means we have to stop long enough to consider, am I stressed out here? Am I uneasy here about something? And it's easy to override it. It's easy to have priorities, have purposes, have challenges that seem so big that we don't pay attention to how the impact is on us personally. And to live a Buddhist life is to live a contemplative life, a reflective life, a mindful life, where you actually really take time to recognize how you are at any given time.

You're the instrument, you're the musical instrument that you want to get finely tuned. And if you don't tune your instrument, then you go through the music making very bad music. Go through the world and making very bad music. And so there's a kind of a self-awareness that's very important in this process. So we ask the question, am I suffering? What is my suffering?

How am I suffering? What is my relationship to how uneasy I feel, how uncomfortable I feel? I don't want to feel it. I want to do anything but feel my suffering. I want to, you know, distract myself. I want to find someone to blame.

I want to just say anything that takes me away from feeling what I'm feeling. That's one way to relate to it. The question is, is that useful? Is that helpful? What's the helpful way to be with suffering? It's a wonderful question.

And so to discover how you can stop, take a deep look, understand your suffering, learn how to be with suffering in a useful way. What is the useful way of being with suffering? Is there a useful way? Is that oxymoron? Is that like unacceptable to ask that question?

A common story I heard from friends of mine years ago who used to teach mindfulness-based stress reduction, a kind of medical clinical procedure for using mindfulness for people with a lot of pain, and they would be teaching in hospitals and places, usually for people who had intense, a lot of pain. There was a story they told repeatedly, how people will come to these clinics and one of the things that are being told is that when you have a lot of pain, you want to stop and really feel it, be with it. And people will get furious. I'm here to not suffer, not to feel the pain, not to feel more pain. And some people actually would leave and never come back, because the whole idea of stopping and looking and being with the suffering, with the distress, with the pain, goes completely against the grain of what people think they're supposed to do and what a good life is, or it's to somehow not know it, not be

aware of it.

There was a lovely Charlie Brown cartoon many years ago where Charlie and Linus are talking, and Charlie says, oh, so you don't think my father knows how to fix cars, repair his car? Oh, he knows what to do. And we were traveling recently and there was a loud banging sound coming out of the engine. And Linus says, oh, don't tell me. He stopped and fixed it.

No, he turned up the radio. So the Buddhist way is to turn the radio off, to stop. And one of the ways to do that is to have contemplative time. And I use that to be a richer, wider word than meditation. Maybe you go for a walk. Maybe you sit and have tea.

Maybe you have a Sabbath. Maybe you meditate. But to stop, to really learn how to be present for what is uncomfortable. Don't run away. And one of the reasons for this is that the more you're able to stop and really recognize, be with, find a healthy way to be with how you're stressed, how you're uncomfortable, that's the very kind of attention you need to also be present for your happiness, your well-being, your peace.

That also needs careful attention. That also needs to be felt and known in a deep way. And so you can't deny one and expect to have the other in a good way. You can't avoid how you're stressed and expect you can only focus on how to be happy. The only way to do that, as I know, is to get a distracted happiness.

Just do things that kind of keep you so engaged, so busy, so stimulated that you don't really notice how you are, who you are. And it becomes happiness from being disassociated, happiness from being not really connected to yourself, which is only good as long as you stay disassociated, disconnected, as long as you stay distracted. And that's what some people are experts at doing. So contemplative time with suffering. Stop and take a deep look.

Stop and be with it. And then ask yourself, how can I be with this in a useful way? What if I'm going to be like this way forever? It's kind of a depressing question. But that's the question I asked myself when I was in the early years of being a Zen student, because my meditation practice there was very, very difficult.

I had a lot of pain, a lot of suffering. And so I only had to get through 40 minutes. That's how long the meditation was. So that was a little bit the context of this question, and it was probably very helpful for me. But I would ask myself the question, what if this difficulty I'm experiencing now, what if it's forever?

And asking in that way shifted my whole orientation to it. Well, if it's forever, I won't fight it. If it's forever, I won't get lost looking for the cause, trying to analyze it and engineer my way out of it. If it's forever, maybe I just make more space for it. Maybe I open to feel it more.

Maybe I allow it. Maybe it's okay not to fight it and resist it. And so slowly, very, very slowly, I learned to be with my suffering much better than I had growing up. It was really a remarkable lesson for me to ask that question and slowly learn how to be present for my suffering without trying to fix it. The unexpected, unintended consequence of doing that for me is that that kind of accepting or open, allowing willingness to just not resist my suffering, just be with it, started to change me.

And how it changed me was it slowly, imperceptibly, it touched something in my heart, my metaphorical heart, where my capacity for compassion grew. And I didn't get enlightened through Zen practice, but I became compassionate. That was one of the great transformations for me in doing Zen practice. I don't know if my suffering was solved, but I got this great gift from being present for it. And that gift of compassion then was a guiding orientation for my whole adult life afterwards, after that, how to live my life.

So don't think that you have to solve your suffering, but learning to stop and be with it and find a healthy way to be with it might be all you need to do. But then the *Four Noble Truths* goes further than that. It does say, it does, the Second Noble Truth is there's conditions, there's causes there for the arising of suffering. And if you don't go quickly looking for the cause, that's why I spend time with the First Noble Truth. But at some point it begins opening up.

At some point you ask the question, what are the conditions that are present here for me that this suffering is here? Some people will answer that question pretty quickly, blaming someone else, blaming my parents, you know, the way they grew up, I was raised. They're all responsible for it. That's why. You know, or my partner or my this and that, or, you know, they're responsible.

And sometimes in a certain kind of way they are, we don't want to get everyone off the hook. That would do them a disservice, perhaps. But that's not the Buddhist question. That's an important question. It's important to understand the external causes and conditions for our distress, our difficulties.

There's a time and place for that. But the Buddhist question in the *Four Noble Truths* is something I would like to suggest is both very contemplative, meaning it's part of a deep spiritual life to ask this question. It's also something where you have a chance to do something about it. And that asks the question, what am I contributing to my suffering? What's my contribution here?

Even if 99% is those people, that 1% that's your contribution, that's where you have some

agency. That's where you have some capacity to look at, to question, to wonder, to shift, to let go, to understand maybe there's a misunderstanding you have, and maybe you can change your orientation, your interpretation. What is your contribution to it? And chances are it's more than 1%. Chances are, you know, it's enough that it's a really good investment for you to stop and take a good look.

What am I contributing to this? How am I making this worse than it needs to be? And the answer that the Buddha wants to give for this personal anguish, this personal stress, uneasiness, suffering that we're experiencing, a key way, key contribution we make is something that in Buddhist English is called craving. Craving. In the ancient language, it's literally the word thirst.

It's a powerful word. There's a psychological thirst. There's a drive, a compulsion, an attachment that's going on. So what is my attachment here? What am I thirsting for?

What compulsivity is operating here? Is there any? I'm innocent. You know, I'm not doing anything. But it could be that there's a very intense attachment and craving.

One of the ones that I had to work with, I had a very strong compulsion, craving, to not have suffering, to not experience it, to get away from it. So I would pull away, I would go into fantasy in my mind, I would, you know, distract myself. And that was how I was contributing to it, was avoiding it at all costs. And so to see, oh, look at that, Gil. You're driven to avoid.

You need to stop and look. Look at my, I had to look at my anger. I had to look at my fear. I had to look at all these things. And then what are the conditions?

And then once that outer layer of how I was relating to it by this compulsive avoidance, then I got to stop and look at what's going on more deeply. What are my desires? What are my attachments? What do I want? What do I want that's so strong, right, that I'm like a little kid in the backseat saying, are we there yet?

Are we there yet? You know, just kind of so impatient. What is it that's in us that kind of keeps nagging at us? Meditators get a front row seat to see this because we sit and we're quiet enough to start seeing the repetitive nature of the mind, what we keep looping back to over and over again, desires, aversions, hatreds, resentments, fantasies, that we keep wanting to fix on and want more. I want this.

This has to happen. This has to happen. This shouldn't be happening. This has to happen. This shouldn't happen.

And so there's something about repetitively seeing this that for some people finally gets their

attention. If we're so distracted, we don't see how repetitive our mind is. We don't take things seriously in the same way. We say, wait a minute. I've had the same desire, it's only like, you know, seven o'clock in the morning, and I've had this desire 64 times.

You know, that's interesting. Or people who go on retreats, it's like, wow, you know. And... So start looking more deeply. What are we contributing in terms of our desires, our aversions, our compulsions?

Where are we stuck? What do we keep, what are we replaying over and over again? And how is that a desire? How is that a thirst? What's going on here to see that?

And so there's what I'd like to propose, this journey of going into ourselves, that once we start looking at the conditions, the causes, the sources inside of us for our suffering that's contributing to it, that there's actually multiple layers. And we settle one, like I settled the one about trying to, I had this compulsive wanting to avoid. When that settled, then I got to see something more personal, more deeper, and then deeper and deeper. And as we go deeper, we learn to let go. We learn to let up.

We learn not to believe some of these strong impulses, some of these strong desires. We don't invest in them. We don't give them authority. And I've learned that I'm quite capable of having a lot of desires. I sometimes describe myself as that desires are like a dime a dozen for me.

And it's probably even more so now with inflation in terms of how much they're worth. And it's so easy, but I've learned through this practice to let them just pass through. I don't pick them up. I kind of nod, okay, well, let's go on. I don't have to believe every one.

They don't have a lot of authority. I don't feel like I need to invest in every desire. It's just like, oh, okay, well, easy come, easy go. Whereas before, they grabbed me by my throat and wouldn't let me go. So the Second Noble Truth is to spend time with the question, what are the conditions that I'm contributing to my own suffering?

The Third Noble Truth is very interesting. The simple way of describing it is it's the cessation of suffering and the end of it. And that's kind of like the Buddhist good news, that it is possible to bring suffering to an end. And some people have never heard that lesson. One of the reasons to constantly avoid it is because people feel there's no other choice but to have suffering, so you might as well do something to avoid it or compensate for it.

But Buddhism says it is possible to end it. And why should we end it? Because then we can be happy. We can be peaceful. We don't have to suffer.

The absence of suffering is not neutrality. The opposite of suffering is a certain profound form of happiness. Happiness and peace is the common description that Buddha gives for the goal of practice. And you could also then turn the *Four Noble Truths* around. The First Noble Truth is the truth of happiness.

What questions can you ask that are helpful and useful around happiness? The Second Noble Truth of happiness is there's conditions and causes for happiness. What is it for you? How would you change your life if you're going to create the conditions and supports to be happier in your life? And the Third Noble Truth about happiness is not the cessation of happiness, but the truth of the growth of happiness, the spread of happiness.

This is possible. But the cessation of suffering, the standard Third Noble Truth, the metaphor or the image I'd like to offer you is: the mind sometimes is like a raging storm on a surface of water. Many years ago, I was out in a small sailboat sailing across the big sea many days, and there was a raging storm, raging wind, waves that were probably at least 20 feet tall, you know, higher than the mast of the boat. And it was intense. And that was a time when being attached was necessary.

It had a really good grip on some part of a stable, strong part of the boat to be able to stay on the boat. But slowly the storm stopped. Slowly the waves lowered. The wind died down. And at some point, the ocean was completely placid.

There was no wind, it was peaceful, there were no waves, it was flat. It was completely calm. The surface was calm. Maybe it's easier to imagine this with the surface of a lake. Completely calm, completely peaceful.

One of the great images I've had that supports me in my life is the image of a mountain lake early in the morning at dawn, where there's no wind, it's completely still, it reflects the mountains in the distance, and the animals are not out, the birds are not out, and there's something phenomenally peaceful and quiet about looking across this very placid surface, peaceful surface. And then, looking out across that surface, a little fish jumps out or sticks its head out for a moment, or a turtle comes out with its head and goes down. And you see it so clearly, and you see the little ripples of water across that you cannot see when there's a raging storm. You don't see the little details in the storm.

So when the mind becomes peaceful, when the storms of the mind quiet down, when the waves of the mind become still, we see ourselves in a very different way. We see the things that are subtle. We see the small thoughts. We see the small desires, drives. We see the small impulses.



We see the small joys. We see the small forms of happiness. We see so many things that get lost in the storms of our mind. And those small things are not inconsequential. The smaller things like that, the things that appear in the quiet and peace, are some of the most profound and important aspects of our life.

That's where we begin finding an alternative. That's where we find the alternative way to get high. That's how we find how to discover what supports happiness and well-being. That's where we see with great clarity what we're contributing to our suffering. It's very hard to see that in the middle of the raging storms of our life and conflicts in our lives.

But if we have some way of becoming peaceful, settled, then we might be able to see what we're doing in a way that's effective. And effective partly means that we don't have to believe it. We can let go of it. We can ease up on it. We can let it go.

We can let it be and not be pushed around by these desires and aversions we might have. What this means is that for when you're a person who's a meditator, it's ideal if you can see meditation time as an alternative time, that you're not just bringing your life as it is with you and continuing with your thought trains, your confusions, your trying to figure things out, you're just kind of continuing repeating the same stories. You see meditation as a time that you're going to recognize whatever degree of safety and peace that's really present here and now, here, this time. Many of us live in situations that's dangerous in our lives, but hopefully when you sit down to meditate, that danger is not imminent. The challenges you have are not there right then and there.

If you bring them with you and keep thinking about them, then you'll feel unsafe when you meditate. But that's optional. To make meditation the contemplative time, the place where you're going to tap into an innate capacity to feel safe, to feel peaceful, to be settled, to recognize that right now my little toe is not challenged by anything. Right now my little toe is completely safe. There's no challenges to it.

Nothing's going to happen to it. It's just there and minding its own business. Maybe my ankle. Maybe my calves. Maybe, you know, you go through.

Maybe there is some degree, some way of recognizing there's some peace. There is some peace right here. There is some safety right now. It's not in my thinking mind. So let's just put that aside for now.

Maybe if I relax my belly, I can feel a little bit safer in my belly. Maybe if I relax my shoulders. Maybe my back rib cage feels safe, feels at ease. Where do you find some modicum of ease here and now? Not to ignore what's out there suffering, not to deny, not to say it, you know,

not to kind of cover it over, but so you can find a way to quiet that surface of the mind, to quiet the lake, so you can see more clearly what's going on.

You can see the ripples. You can see where what's stirring up the water. You can see what you're adding. You can see more clearly. But it really helps to do that in a context of some degree of inner peace, some degree of inner safety.

It's a lot easier for me to say this than for us to do it. But to know that this is part of the principle. And the *Four Noble Truths*, the Third Noble Truth, is to remember and to begin recognizing where that cessation of suffering, where that peace is, where that safety is. And it can be found. Oh, there it is.

We need to recognize it so we can build on that and go through this whole process of questioning in a deeper and deeper way. If the lake is very calm in your mind, peaceful, peaceful, peaceful, then begin the journey of the *Four Noble Truths*. Where's my suffering right now? There's no suffering now. Yes, but that's the question.

Where's your unease? Oh yeah, I'm a little bit uneasy here in the back corner of my mind. I didn't know. Oh, look at that. Actually, that's always been with me.

I didn't know that. Maybe I need to address that. Then you can ask the question, what contributes to that? What's the desires that are operating? Okay.

And when that becomes settled, the cessation of that suffering, then what's next? Well, then comes the Fourth Noble Truth. And there's two ways of understanding it. I want to emphasize the second. The first is that this is the way to come to the end of suffering, to the cessation of suffering.

These are the practices to do to come to the end of it. The second way of understanding it is that these are the practices that once you have understood something about the quiet, calm lake, once you've kind of settled some of your suffering, this is how to continue this, to go further with this. So the *Eightfold Path*, there are eight practices that are a manifestation or an expression of the degree of peace, of well-being, of settledness that we're finding through this journey. So we come to the journey, we start with our storms of life, we start recognizing what we're contributing, like on a sailboat, what we contribute to our challenge on the ocean with a sailboat was keeping the sail up. So we took the sail down.

We couldn't stop the storm, but we had something we could do. We put the sail down. And it was remarkable, just that made things peaceful, going up and down. And then we just hung out until it all passed. But at some point, the question is, now that I've become some modicum of peace, what is useful now?

How do I want to live now with this? How do I come out of this in a way that I can live differently? Because without making choices to live in a different way, this whole enterprise of Buddhism doesn't make any sense. We have to ask ourselves sooner or later the questions, how am I going to be different? Some people want everything.

But we have to live differently. We have to let go of something. We have to shift something. And what do we have to shift? What kind of changes do we need to do?

So the first change is called Right View, the first of the *Eightfold Path*. And this is to remember this journey of the *Four Noble Truths*. To keep coming back to this, what's my suffering? What am I contributing to it? Where do I find the cessation of it?

To keep, rather than, you know, where, how do I win the lottery, which stock should I invest in, you know, how do I get a better job so I can get, you know, whatever, you know, what are the kind of common orientations you want to have your life in? And if you want to have an orientation towards this freedom and peace that you're beginning to discover through practice, stay close to the *Four Noble Truths*. Keep asking these questions. The second is that what we start discovering through this kind of peaceful, quiet absence of the storms is that the orientation of the inner life is more towards kindness than it is to meanness. It's more towards compassion than it is towards cruelty.

It is towards letting go of craving than doing more craving. And so that, appreciating that there's a different orientation, a different attitude that seems to come out of this new way of being, stay close to that. Where's the kindness? Where's the compassion? Where's the absence of craving?

Can you find it? Can you live with it? Can you be with it? The third is speaking. How do you speak if you want to speak in harmony with your inner peace?

How do you want to speak if you're not going to speak from fear, but feeling safe? And so we're beginning, Buddhists will begin adjusting and changing how they speak. Not so they speak in an artificial way, but rather because they're speaking from this deeper place they're discovering. This deeper place calls for a different way to speak. A common question I get here, people come to ask me, say, at my work, we have, you know, we have this coffee area.

People go to get coffee or hang out. And there's a lot of gossiping that goes on there. And I don't want to gossip anymore. It doesn't feel right as I practice more and more. But that's the medium of conversation.

How do I do this? How do I manage? Because I can't gossip anymore. So I love that question. And then behavioral change, a big one is it's really good, I think you'll realize how important

it is, if you have a modicum of inner peace, well-being and safety, you'll kind of begin understanding and feel how it doesn't really feel so good to kill people.

You know, no, I don't, it's not my idea of a good time. What are we going to do Saturday? Well, not that. Okay. We're not going to steal, and we're not going to cause harm to anyone through our sexual life.

These are huge areas of suffering in this world, one way or the other. Physical harm that people do to each other, the way people steal and take and take advantage of people, and the way people take advantage and harm through sexuality is huge in our societies. So there's a reference point now, internal reference point that says, no, thank you to those things. And if we want to stay close to that peace, close to that quiet peace, these are things that, it's a behavioral change that some people have to change. And you're probably not thinking about killing anyone, I hope.

But maybe you are thinking about killing animals, killing mosquitoes, killing animals, you know, cockroaches or, you know. And so at some point Buddhists will begin questioning even that. Is this really what I want to do? This doesn't feel good anymore. I remember there was a time when I was a teenager, we used to go fishing.

And at some point I just couldn't do that anymore. That just was too painful. And then the fifth of the *Eightfold Path* is livelihood, or the very lifestyle we're living. Is this lifestyle, way of living, the way I'm supported, right, is it ethical, becomes a big question. And then the last three of the *Eightfold Path* has to do with really getting more and more care to what we're doing with our mind.

To watch the thoughts, the impulses, the desires of the mind, and to start understanding what is healthy and not healthy for the mind to be doing. And meditation is a time to really have a high-quality attention to the health of your mental state, mental activities, what you're pursuing, what you're thinking, what you're wanting. And to begin being attuned to how good it feels to be awake, how good it feels to be present and aware, to be settled, to be unified, to be connected, to be here in a fully embodied, full way. And that supports this whole process even more. And then it's a spiral or iterative kind of process then.

And we start again at the beginning of this journey. Where is my suffering? What's my suffering? And each time we go around, it takes us deeper and deeper or fuller and fuller, more and more kind of finding our way to greater and greater freedom. So may it be that you remember these *Four Noble Truths*, think of them as a recipe for happiness, not more suffering.

And maybe one way to engage in them is to find ways for them, to find ways to relate to them

or to build on them through asking good questions. What questions can you have from the First Noble Truth of suffering, the Second Noble Truth of the cause of suffering, the Third Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering, and the Fourth Noble Truth of the way to the cessation of suffering? And maybe this year you'll find yourself with lots of questions. May your questions, just having the questions, just having good questions, create more peace, more space, more well-being for you as you go through this year. Thank you.