Four Noble Truths: An Overview

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:10

In this evening's talk, I want to give an overview of the Four Noble Truths and base it in the discourse, the sutta. Sutta means discourse in Pali. This was the Buddha's first teaching after his awakening.

I'm truly happy that we can explore this topic with a group of experienced students. Sometimes when we introduce this in a regular retreat, people respond with, "Four Noble Truths? Oh no, I don't want to hear any more about dukkha." But the Buddha said—and I think you all know—that the realization of the Four Noble Truths is accompanied only by happiness and joy. So we hope this will be the message of tonight's talk: the happiness and joy of the possibility of freedom.

This discourse was given by the Buddha over 2,500 years ago in northern India and was truly the beginning of the movement that has come to be known as Buddhism, the major world religion. It was a comprehensive teaching, and you could say that all the rest of his forty-five years of discourses were footnotes or amplifications to this discourse, making it absolutely central. It's called the Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma.

The idea is that this wheel of the Dhamma was set in motion 2,500 years ago and has rolled across many countries and continents, and has now come to the West, where it is beginning to roll and pick up considerable momentum. We want to look at the discourse tonight, passage by passage, and talk about the themes within it. Then in the rest of the retreat, we will develop each of the Four Noble Truths in more detail. We'll have one talk on dukkha, one talk on craving, two talks on nibbana, and a talk on aspects of the Eightfold Path.

But I want to provide the setting for this discourse before we begin, because I think it's remarkable. The Buddha left home when he was twenty-nine years old. He was living near where he had been born. His birthplace is one of the first pilgrimage sites—Sally mentioned going on pilgrimage to India. His birthplace is actually in Nepal, but it's very close to the village where he grew up, which is another of the pilgrimage sites. That's usually one of the first areas people visit on pilgrimage: the Buddha's birthplace and his childhood home.

When he was twenty-nine, he became dissatisfied with his worldly life and wanted to seek what he called "an unailing, unaging, deathless and sorrowless security from bondage," which he called nibbana. This was a concept that was in vogue at that time in India. There were many philosophical schools, and many of them were trying to find this release, this security, this peace of nibbana, but no one had charted a clear course to it. The Buddha said he wanted to set out to find this for himself.

He left a very luxurious life at his home and went off into the forests of northern India, where he met with many teachers, listened to their advice, and practiced with great diligence and austerity for six years. Take the schedule you're doing here, multiply it by two, then extend it for six years, and you'll get a sense of what the Buddha did during that time of his own pilgrimage.

He described his effort in these terms: "Let only my skin, sinews, and bones remain, and let the flesh and blood dry up in my body, but I will not relax my energy as long as I have not attained what can be attained by human strength, energy, and exertion." He had tremendous determination.

In the course of this, one of the prevailing philosophies was that if you torment the body, the soul will become freed and will be able to find the path. So he engaged in great austerities where he ate very little. He said that at one point his skin was almost falling off, and when he touched his stomach, he could feel his backbone. He came very near to dying and decided that this wasn't going to be the way.

Near the town of Bodh Gaya, a young woman named Sujata offered him a meal of rice gruel. He took it, ate, felt stronger, and said, "This is what's needed in order to find the release that I'm looking for."

He traveled a little further from the site of the meal and sat down under a Bodhi tree in an area now known as Bodh Gaya. Bodhi means awakening or enlightenment—it was near the town of Gaya. He sat under the tree, a Bodhi tree, which is just a form of ficus called a peepal tree. He made the resolve at that time: "I'm not going to get up until I attain this release of awakening."

He entered the evening with very strong determination: "I'm either going to die on this spot or I'm going to find what I'm looking for." It's a good thing to keep in mind the next time forty-five minutes of sitting seems a little too long. This kind of determination is possible.

He began his meditation. There are a couple of discourses in the middle length discourses of the Buddha that describe his practice that night—number four and number twenty-six in the middle length discourses are very inspiring descriptions of that practice. As he practiced all night long, toward morning, just as the sun was rising, he had the insight that freed his heart and mind from all forms of suffering. He came to complete awakening and liberation called enlightenment. Only at that time did he become the Buddha, which simply means "the awakened one."

It was such a revelation to him that it brought on a great quality of bliss. The bliss of release was immense. Rather than go out and do anything, he stayed around the Bodhi tree for the next seven weeks, doing various reflections and mainly just abiding in the bliss that he had discovered of liberation.

At that point, he thought about teaching, but he was inclined not to. He said, "The world is so caught up in confusion and wanting, there won't be people who will understand." Then it's said that a heavenly being came down to him and said, "Venerable one, enlightened one, there are those who will understand. There are those with little dust in their eyes."

Please teach what you have discovered for the benefit of beings.

So the Buddha looked around with his awakened vision and saw there were indeed those with little dust in their eyes. The first people he thought of teaching were his two former teachers, who had instructed him in states of meditative concentration. But when he looked with his psychic vision, he saw they had passed away. Too bad for them.

Then he thought of a group of five renunciates, ascetics with whom he had practiced. "They have little dust in their eyes. Let me teach to them." But where were they? Again using his psychic vision, he saw they were living near the town of Benares—actually quite a major city in northern India—staying in a park called the Deer Park outside what is now Sarnath.

That was about two hundred miles away, and there were no Tesla motor vehicles back then. The only way he could reach his friends was to walk that distance. So he set out, traveling by stages from Bodh Gaya to Sarnath.

There he found his five old friends, who had continued practicing. When they saw him approaching, they said, "Oh, here comes Gautama. But he looks fat. He's been living a luxurious life. He's been eating food. We know that's the wrong way to go. You can't eat food—that's going to trap the spirit in the body. So we're not going to listen to him."

But as he approached, something in his bearing and his face was dignified and radiant. They couldn't help themselves; they were drawn to listen to him. So they finally did. He sat down with them, and here we pick up the discourse you have a copy of.

Let me read it section by section so that the words enter into our talk as well. Beginning where it says on the upper left, "11, Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma," please follow along if you can:

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Baranasi in the deer park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus of the group of five thus: "Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana. And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata? It is this noble eightfold path: that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana."

The Buddha's teaching is often called the Middle Way. He was pointing out to them that freedom is not reached by looking for one's happiness in sense pleasures, nor is it reached by torturing the body in the

belief that this will free the soul. But there is a middle way between indulgence in sense pleasures and mortification of the body, which is the Noble Eightfold Path he outlined to them.

So the Middle Way is this Eightfold Path, and it leads to vision—another word for insight—knowledge, peace, direct knowledge, enlightenment, and nibbana. This is his enunciation of the path and the core of his teachings, stating from his direct experience that it leads to enlightenment and nibbana.

Then he begins to explain the Four Noble Truths, which are at the heart of his insight:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering."

In brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.

The word being translated as suffering is dukkha, the Pali word. The meaning of dukkha is wider than simply suffering. It refers to the whole range of inconvenient experiences in this life, from intense pain—emotional or mental—to mild inconvenience. The fact of the shuttle breaking down on the way to the retreat yesterday was one form of dukkha, not necessarily the greatest anguish. When things don't go according to plan, that also is dukkha.

We may often use this word untranslated because there's no one English word that really renders it. We may well just say dukkha when we talk about the First Noble Truth, but you understand it includes a wide range of experiences.

Notice that the Buddha is not saying that life is suffering. Sometimes that's a gloss of the first noble truth—oh, it means life is suffering, it's so pessimistic. It's not saying that. But it describes these really universal experiences. Birth is suffering, isn't it? Aging has suffering in it. Illness has suffering and death has suffering. This is something that we all share. In it, we're all alike. We're united in this kind of suffering.

Association with what is displeasing—finding body pain as you sit during the day is dukkha. Separation from what is pleasing—not being in a comfortable home, not being with companions that one might like to visit with—is unsatisfactory sometimes. Not getting what one wants is dukkha. One wants a concentrated sit. It doesn't happen. There's some frustration.

So there are these many forms of unsatisfactoriness, but I think the beautiful thing is how universal this statement of it is. These are things that everyone on the planet can relate to. Often when we are in suffering or unhappiness, we feel isolated because of it. We think no one else is having this kind of experience. But if we look at this definition, everybody has these kinds of experiences. So suffering shouldn't isolate. It can join us to one another. And it comes in so many forms from big to small.

Joseph Goldstein was teaching here one year, and it provided the inspiration for one of his little mottos.

He has a lot of little meditation mantras, so I'll share this one. He was going for a walk, probably just down the walk that goes south of here, down the river. On the way, I think he sprained his knee and had a hard time hobbling back up to the meditation hall. When he got here, he couldn't sit cross-legged anymore. It was difficult to sit, but he could not fold his legs up to sit cross-legged.

He went into a lot of personal grief about it. Talking about association with what is displeasing—he had it in spades. And it was painful. So he had to sit in a chair. He hobbled around to complete the retreat. And he was thinking, why me? Poor me. How can this happen to me? I'm a healthy person. I shouldn't be having these kinds of physical problems.

Then this phrase came to him spontaneously: "Oh, if it's not one thing, it's another." And that's the message of dukkha. If it's not one thing, it's another. That's a really useful phrase to drop in when you find yourself frustrated with any given situation. These little inconveniences in life pop up.

So on the first day of retreat, we often encounter many of these little inconvenient experiences of dukkha. The body isn't comfortable. The mind is wandering. We can't sleep well at night. Someone is in the shower when we want to use it. The food is not exactly to our liking. These are all part of settling in. But rather than simply turning to them as sources of complaint, we can see them as expressions of the universal nature of dukkha.

One of the ways that dukkha manifests is when we're separated from what is pleasing, or when what is pleasing changes. Things we've grown accustomed to don't stay the same. And when they change, that's often disappointing or frustrating or difficult for us.

Organizations manifest this dynamic quite often. Spirit Rock is a very complex organization, always going through countless decisions and turning this way or that. Some recent decisions haven't made me very happy—I've been frustrated by them. I would sit in meditation, stirring around in my mind the things different people had said that I didn't agree with, some of the decisions that had been taken that I didn't support. If you know organizations, you know this happens all the time.

Sally and I recently taught a retreat in Durango. It's lovely to see some of you from that retreat joining us here as well. After the retreat—some of you might remember—a few members of the local sangha took Sally and me on a river trip, a canoe excursion down the Green River in Utah, which was a total delight. I'd never done a canoe trip down a river before.

We were in three canoes, six people total, and Sally and I, being the least experienced, sat up front and let the person behind us do the steering. We paddled, but they did the steering. The current was quite good, so we could cover—one day I think we traveled eighteen miles without working all that hard.

What was beautiful about the river is that it was broad and flowing. It was set at the base of Labyrinth Canyon, which has walls of sheer rock that rise five hundred to a thousand feet. It really is a wonderful experience if you ever have the chance to make that trip. Not only were we unplugged from cell phones

and email and internet, which was a great blessing, and there were just the six of us sangha members, but we were in a different timeframe altogether.

We were floating down one sunny morning, and I turned around and asked my friend who knew the area well, "How old are these rocks that we're looking at?" And he said, "Well, the oldest ones we can see are two hundred to three hundred million years old."

I just let my mind expand into that geologic time. It put everything I'd been dealing with into great perspective. Two hundred to three hundred million years. And I'm worrying about changes that have unfolded over six months. Come on, Armstrong. This whole meditation center isn't going to be here in another million years, most likely. And that's just a fraction of these rocks' age.

Going back into geologic time was fantastic for putting perspective on our human experience. You get a taste of that here at Vallecitos as well. Sally and I took a walk this afternoon, went up the ridge to a spot where you get a 360-degree view, and it's very expansive. The river trip expanded time, and some of the views and walks around here really expand the sense of space. This gives great perspective on our moment-to-moment struggles and reactions—dropping into that wider view of things.

Because these difficulties of being human exist within a big field. Being human is not an easy thing to carry out. Everyone struggles in different ways with human life. This is from the New Yorker:

"According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be, given everything it must put up with. Nine out of ten respondents stated that they would give up completely if they only knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail."

This is kind of our human life, and you may feel like this at times here. Unfortunately, you've given up the chance of getting something in the mail.

We simply notice that being human involves us with dukkha in many different ways. We can feel it in subtle form, in moment-to-moment experience. Sometimes life presents us with big examples of it.

We can use that dukkha in our practice. We can use it to make us more compassionate. We recognize it in ourselves and open to it with some tenderness. Knowing that other people are experiencing the same, we open to them with tenderness as well.

This is from Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet: "Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must

see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive."

Meeting our own dukkha can make us more compassionate. It can also make us stronger. We learn so much from meeting, understanding, and working with our difficulties. This is the first noble truth.

The second noble truth is phrased this way in the sutta: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there. That is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination."

This last is more often translated as craving for non-existence. This is where one simply doesn't want the experience to go on any longer. This is the movement that results in suicide, and in lesser ways, it's a movement to reject.

Craving is the source of dukkha. This was really revelatory for me. When I first started hearing this, it was very liberating. I came into the practice at a time in my life—in my twenties—when I had a lot of confusion, unhappiness, uncertainty about direction. I wasn't sure what was up. I went through a lot of highs and a lot of lows. Many of us do that in our twenties.

What was alarming, looking back, is that I didn't know what led to happiness and what led to unhappiness. I didn't know the cause of my unhappiness. Here the Buddha spells it out so clearly—both the truth of unhappiness and the truth of its cause. If there's a cause, there's a way out. That's what was so amazing to me.

Craving is the translation of the Pali word *taṇhā*. Its original meaning was simply thirst. I like that because you can feel that—you can quench a thirst, but it keeps coming back. You can't ultimately quench a thirst. You can't ultimately satisfy craving by continuing to feed it. You can get temporary release, but it cannot be satisfied permanently in that way.

Craving is this deep-rooted tendency of mind, a very deep movement of mind that wants things to be a certain way. Generally, the way the moment is isn't that way. So craving is looking at the moment, looking for it to be one way and complaining because it's not, or wanting something different. It expresses itself both as pulling toward us with wanting, as Sally mentioned this morning, or pushing away with aversion, which she also mentioned.

Normally in life, we think that the problem is outside of ourselves. The reason we're unhappy is due to causes and conditions outside of us and beyond our control. The second noble truth says something different.

I don't know if you saw the movie *Kundun*. Martin Scorsese made a film about the life of the Dalai Lama. It must have come out fifteen years ago or so—a really beautiful movie. If you haven't seen it, it's worth a

look. It traced the Dalai Lama's life growing up as a young monk with his tutors in the Potala Palace. He was recognized at an early age and trained from about age four.

In this particular scene, he's probably around ten years old, and his tutors are teaching him the Four Noble Truths. They say to him, "Now, explain in your own words the meaning of the Second Noble Truth."

He said, "The second noble truth is that the cause of suffering is craving."

They said, "No, no, no, that's too formulaic. Express it in your own words."

And so he thought for a moment and said, "I suffer because I want things."

They said, "Oh, that's still a little too traditional. Put it really in your own words."

And so the young Dalai Lama sat there, reflecting for a few more moments. Then he said, "Most of my suffering comes from my own habits of mind."

And the tutors said, "Very good."

Most of our suffering comes from our own habits of mind. And that's what meditation is for—to release us from these habits of mind. We have to trust in that. Otherwise, we keep complaining about the external conditions. But the source and the release is within us.

So then we come to the Third Noble Truth as described in the sutta: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it."

So the Buddha is talking here of the ending of suffering, the ending of dukkha. And this is generally understood in a permanent way—the remainderless fading away of that craving, meaning it doesn't arise again. This is what he discovered under the Bodhi tree. It's a possibility that the source of dukkha can be uprooted and not arise again. That is the essence of full awakening or full enlightenment. That is a human possibility. And this is the direction that our Dharma practice leads in.

So this was a radical discovery. According to the recorded literature, no one else had proclaimed it in this way before—that it was possible to find an end of suffering through the ending of this psychological habit of craving.

We can explore this in two different senses. There's the permanent end that the Buddha pointed to that is reached with full awakening. This is the state of what is called in our tradition an Arahant. One who is fully awakened is called an Arahant—reached the very end of craving, and it's said never to arise again for that person. That person's life will still continue, but there won't be psychological suffering in it.

But the other way that we can understand this is that there can be a temporary end of suffering when there's a temporary end of craving. This brings it much more home to us in our moment-to-moment

practice, and it makes freedom available here and now. A degree of freedom is available here and now by the relinquishment, the letting go, the abandoning of this movement of craving.

So in practical terms, this is what's very helpful to explore, to recognize, and to learn how to move into. We'll be spending a lot of time talking about this—both the permanent state and as a practical, immediate experience for all of us to discover.

And then the discourse continues: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. It is this Noble Eightfold Path, that is right view to right concentration."

So this is the statement again of the same path that he described as the Middle Way. These eight components—right view and right intention constitute the wisdom portion in Pali called paññā. Right speech, right action, right livelihood constitute the portion of conduct called sīla. Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration constitute the meditation portion called samādhi.

To have a path that gives us step-by-step instructions to come out of dukkha and move into any degree of freedom that we might aspire to is such a gift to the world. This is the Buddhist gift to the world. There is not only the possibility of happiness or freedom—there is a clear, concrete path to reach it.

And that's what we're doing here. We are walking the path that leads in that direction. Whether we finish it in this week or not, I don't know. But this is one more movement of momentum that heads just in that direction.

Just to talk a little bit about the meditation portions of this: right effort basically means keep the mind in a wholesome place. That's all that right effort is about. So you can watch right effort going into annoyance or going into hindrances or going into craving. And when you see that, as far as possible, you want to interrupt it and bring back wholesome factors of mind.

So the most immediate wholesome factor that we're going to keep bringing back again and again is mindfulness. Mindfulness is one of the most wholesome factors of the whole path, and it's something that we can bring about in a moment of intending it. That's why mindfulness is the next step.

Effort is meant to remind us: okay, move back into wholesome. How do I do that? I become mindful. I start paying attention.

I want to give a really simple definition of mindfulness. You can read long, complicated definitions on the web. MBSR has its own definition and different teachers have their own definition. I want to offer a really simple, practical definition: mindfulness is knowing what your experience is in this moment.

All you have to do to become mindful is to answer the question: what's happening to me right now? Oh, there's an in-breath. Oh, there's a sound. Oh, there's a mood of irritation. Oh, there's an unpleasant sensation in the lower back. Knowing that is your experience—that's mindfulness.

Now it can grow up and become more mature and refined and stronger and unshakable. But this is enough to activate the path. So this will be the essence of our meditation instruction: what's happening right now? And all you have to do is notice it. It's really simple. Connect to the direct experience of the way things are. This is what's happening.

Out of right mindfulness, when we string enough moments together with enough frequency—or you could say continuity—the mind starts to collect in the present moment. Because what we're doing in mindfulness is taking it out of the spin of conceptual proliferations. All the things we think about—work and home and past and future—we're taking it out of that spin and we're just coming in and saying: what's happening now is there's a pain in the knee. What's happening now is there's an in-breath.

As we accumulate these moments of present moment orientation, it builds to collect the mind in the moment, and that's a source of strength. When the mind becomes collected, that's concentration. And concentration brings a steadiness, a strength and a stability to the mind. So all of a sudden we can observe the way things are going—even thoughts, even hindrances, even movements of wanting or hating. We can observe those without being so shaken by them.

And having found that stability, we can start to see clearly. The purpose and benefit of concentration is to see things as they are. That's the ground for insight. So you can think of it like this: what's this awake awareness that we've been talking about? What's the purpose of it? It's to see things the way they are. That's what frees us.

And when we can abide in that awake awareness, we discover that it itself has a quality of freedom. So it leads in the direction of freedom and it embodies, it carries with it the quality of freedom. And then this seeing things the way they are comes back around to the start of the path, which is right view.

So the sutta continues. And this is where it gets kind of interesting in a way that isn't talked about so often. The Buddha is going to break down each of the noble truths into three phases that he wants us to understand and focus on. So he's going to express it differently now.

He takes the first one: "This is the noble truth of suffering. Thus, Bhikkhus, in regards to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge, and light." In other words, he's saying this was an original insight. I didn't get this from somebody else. I saw this for myself. This is the noble truth of suffering.

And then it continues: "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood, thus because in regard to things unheard before there arose in me vision, knowledge," etc.

This is a really important line in the whole sutta: "This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood." The noble truths aren't just philosophical concepts that we're supposed to believe in. If that's all it was, everyone could pick up a book on Buddhism in Religion 101 and reach the Four Noble Truths.

Each of the Noble Truths is a call for us to take action. The action in regards to suffering is we are to fully understand it, fully understand it. When we fully understand suffering, that is what brings release.

The Buddha said on another occasion, "There's one thing the not seeing of which keeps you bound. What is that one thing? Dukkha." It's because we haven't fully understood dukkha that we continue to be bound.

And then he continues, "This noble truth of suffering has been fully understood." So now he's speaking as the fully awakened Buddha, saying that he has fully understood the first noble truth of suffering. And this is what has released him.

There are these three aspects with each of the noble truths. There's the statement of the truth, there's the call to action, and then there's the expression of its completion—the action having been completed. And when all three of those are brought to fullness of development, that is the ground for awakening.

And then he continues, "This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned." So the meditation instruction is craving is to be abandoned. Now we may have abandoned craving on many, many occasions, and that's fully in line with the Buddha's instruction.

But then he continues, "This noble truth of the origin of suffering has been abandoned. Thus there arose in me vision, knowledge, etc." So his statement is craving has been completely abandoned, relinquished, let go of, not to arise again. And that's again a statement of his full awakening.

So we understand dukkha. We release or abandon or let go of the craving. And in truth, sometimes we can let go of the craving. And sometimes we can't. Ajahn Chah has this great line. He said, "Seventy to eighty percent of spiritual life is knowing that you're holding on and not being able to let go."

So we will see that a lot. We know we should let go. And we just can't. But eventually we do. And this is so helpful to notice the moment when the craving has been held and is then released. Really helpful to see directly.

Then the third noble truth. "This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. This noble truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized." This is our task. And then for the Buddha, "This noble truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized."

So we are to know in our direct experience, the cessation of dukkha. We can know it on a momentary basis, the temporary release, the temporary freedom, the temporary liberation. And at some point, hopefully we will recognize it in the complete release.

And then in the fourth noble truth, "This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. This noble truth is to be developed." And then his statement, "This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering has been developed."

So dukkha is to be understood. Do we always understand our dukkha? No. Often we won't even

acknowledge it. There's so many ways we are so defended against letting ourselves even feel the dukkha directly. We deny it's happening. We blame it on someone else. We blame ourselves for it as a way of distancing. We want it to go away. We try to push it away. All these are complications of mind that mindfulness helps us to undo.

Freud said that neurosis is the refusal to suffer. And he's just pointing to all the defense mechanisms that we create against feeling it and understanding it. So we open to our suffering through this practice of mindfulness. And through that, we can understand it.

So we have the Four Noble Truths, each with its call to action: to understand dukkha, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation of dukkha, and to develop the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. Each of these Four Noble Truths has three aspects—this is the truth, this is the action, and this is the statement that we have done the action, at least partially. We have three aspects times the four noble truths, which generates the number twelve.

This is where the Buddha continues: "So long as my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths as they really are in their three phases and twelve aspects was not thoroughly purified in this way, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world. But when my knowledge and vision of these four noble truths, as they really are, in their three phases and twelve aspects, was thoroughly purified, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world. The knowledge and vision arose in me. Unshakable is the liberation of my mind. This is my last birth. Now there is no more renewed existence."

This is his proclamation of his own liberation and deliverance from the realm of birth, death and rebirth known as samsara. He ties it to these twelve aspects. This setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma is described in detail as these twelve aspects.

This has been represented in the art of our tradition for a very long time—the symbol of the Dhamma wheel that the Buddha started rolling. When you see it with twelve spokes, those represent these twelve aspects: the noble truths times their three phases. Often the Dhamma wheel is represented with eight spokes, symbolizing the Eightfold Path. This is perhaps more commonly the way we think of it. But in Asia, more often we see the Dhamma wheel with these twelve spokes symbolizing the Four Noble Truths in all their three aspects. You might see the Dhamma wheel in either of these forms, but in either case, it symbolizes the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the path. The implication is that this wheel was set in motion and cannot be stopped—has not been stopped and cannot be stopped.

"This is what the Blessed One said." Kondañña was one of the five ascetics, and in this moment, he had a direct realization of the Four Noble Truths. This is a stock phrase that occurs throughout the suttas to indicate this moment of glimpse into the truth of what the Buddha was pointing to: "All that is subject to origination is subject to cessation." He had apparently seen at least the cessation of craving and suffering fully in that moment.

This is what's referred to as stream entry. This first glimpse of the depth of the Four Noble Truths is a moment where the mind has been temporarily completely liberated, and one knows without a doubt that liberation is possible through this teaching and through this path. Kondañña received this from one short discourse that the Buddha taught. Things like this still happen today. People still get awakened on hearing the Dhamma being spoken. It is a powerful means of communication, listening to the Dhamma.

The next section describes how "the earth-dwelling devas raised a cry. At Baranasi in the deer park at Isipitana, this unsurpassed wheel of the Dhamma has been set in motion by the Blessed One, which cannot be stopped." This goes through many layers of Buddhist cosmology where all the high heavens proclaim their joy at this setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma. I'll leave you to read that at your own pace and make of it what you will. It's not essential to believe in this cosmology, but it is a way of saying, as Asian religious texts often do, this was a big deal. And it's still a big deal today.

These Four Noble Truths are something that all the meditative schools of Buddhism agree on as their foundation. If you go into Zen, Chan, or Tibetan Buddhism of any school, you'll find the Four Noble Truths underlie the teachings as they underlie ours. It's what joins all these schools together.

The sutta concludes with this lovely paragraph: "Then the Blessed One uttered this inspired utterance: 'Kondañña has indeed understood! Kondañña has indeed understood!' In this way, the Venerable Kondañña acquired the name Añña-Kondañña, Kondañña who has understood."

Not only did the Venerable Kondañña get it—the Buddha saw that he got it. He saw that Kondañña had momentarily awakened and received in the deepest possible way this teaching. But Kondañña wasn't fully awakened. The Buddha had this insight seven or eight weeks earlier and had fully awakened from it. Kondañña's mind wasn't that strong or that clear.

He didn't fully awaken, but he knew the path. He had complete faith in the possibility of full awakening. Then the Buddha continued to instruct the group of five over the next two weeks. During that time, Kandanya and the other four all reached full awakening. So at that time, there were six Arahants in the world, six fully awakened beings, two weeks after the Buddha began teaching.

We might ask ourselves this question about full awakening: Is that just a 2,500-year-old Asian fairy tale? Or is that still possible today?

I want to close by reading a short passage from a biography of a teacher named Ajahn Liem. Ajahn Chah was a great Thai master of the last century. He was Jack Kornfield's first teacher and Ajahn Sumedho's main teacher. He passed away in the mid to late 1990s. But before he did, he gave transmission and anointed as his successor Ajahn Liem, another Thai monk who lived in the northeast of Thailand. This is from Ajahn Liem's biography, which you can find on the web.

Around the middle of the rainy season of the year 2512—that's 1969 to us—Ajahn Chah encouraged the monks to practice with special intensity. So Ajahn Liem increased his efforts, and as he did so, results

became evident.

"Keeping this teaching in my mind, I kept on meditating. Normally I would sit meditation until about 10 or 11 p.m. and then stop to have a rest, but on this day I continued sitting without moving or making the slightest change in posture. A feeling of peacefulness shot up and pervaded throughout the whole body, as if something were taking hold over it. It felt cool, a coolness that suffused the whole body, an experience of the body becoming completely light and at ease. Cool, peaceful, quiet, and still. The only experience left was that of utter peace and stillness.

"This experience continued on throughout the whole year, not just for a day or two. In fact, it has continued on unchanging for many years, all from that one sitting. It feels like there are no more proliferations of the mind. All the suffering that arises with defilements that had bothered me before—the thoughts concerning the other sex or all kinds of ambitions that I had before—I don't know where they all disappeared to. There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any. And this experience of this feeling has lasted on continuously all the time since then. There has been no change all the way up to the present day. The same state still lasts on, and it has been stable, continuous, and without change."

This is very rare in Theravadan circles—that a senior monk, a senior practitioner, basically declares his ending of all suffering. But he is considered in Thailand to have genuinely reached this state of full awakening. He sometimes comes to teach in the West. He still teaches in Thailand and sometimes also comes to the West.

So this is a possibility of the Four Noble Truths manifested in the current day and age, where the cessation of suffering has been fully realized by someone.

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

This is the kind of peace and tranquility that arose. There isn't anything to be concerned about as far as how various things exist. As concerns dukkha, I don't know what dukkha is like. Questioning myself about dukkha, there wasn't any.

Thank you for listening.

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