

Dharmette: Buddhism Simplified

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 9, 2011

In Buddhism there are many practices that are offered and taught, and many approaches for how to practice. There are endless teachings in Buddhism. Boy, there's no shortage of teachings to be offered. To find one's way through all this can sometimes be a challenge. But when I look back and see what the Buddha taught, there was a teaching that was unique to the Buddha, where the Buddha says, "This is what's unique to me. It wasn't unique, but it was the 'special' teachings of the Buddhas – and it comes down to the teachings on the Four Noble Truths. That's what's special."

When I was practicing in Japan many years ago, I remember they gave the monks a high school primer on Buddhism in Japanese. On the front page of this primer was a story of some old Chinese monk. I think he was living in a tree, so it was kind of unusual. The governor of the province came to see him, and asked, "What is Buddhism about?" The guy in the tree said, "The Four Noble Truths." The governor said, "What do you mean? This is a great world religion. Any child can understand The Four Noble Truths. Is that's all you have to say for yourself?" The guy in the tree said, "Any child can understand it, but an old governor might not understand how to live it." So the governor bowed.

The idea of The Four Noble Truths can be said quite succinctly. I think the reference point to always keep in mind is to understand: "Are you suffering?" And does the approach or technique that you're doing help you become free of suffering? Does it help you release the clinging or compulsion that you're living under – or does it not? That's a very pragmatic, experiential thing to explore. Where is the drivenness? Where is the compulsion? Where is the clinging or grasping? And is there some freedom or ease to be found in the release from the grasping or drivenness, the ending of it?

You can see that in the choice of practice you do. I've done this. I've done walking meditation thinking that what I wanted to do is get concentrated. So I'm trying to get concentrated, but I'm driven or clinging to this idea of getting concentrated. I'm supposed to be the great walking meditator. If I don't pay attention to the right technique of walking meditation – there are many techniques of walking – but rather if I notice how I'm suffering as I try to do this, then I'll see the stress involved with trying to get concentrated and trying to be the great walking meditator. I can feel that suffering and grasping. Sometimes it's a much easier thing to get happy, relax, and find peace than it is to keep on that route of pushing, trying to get concentrated, huffing and puffing, and hoping that somehow something will happen down the line.

The emphasis on grasping and letting go of grasping is a fundamental essence of The Four Noble Truths. There's an obvious benefit right here and now. There's an obvious way in which you can see the Dharma right here. The Buddha said that the Dharma is meant to be seen here and now. I think that in that simple movement, you see the Dharma.

People have huge philosophical questions about Buddhism, but the issue might not be about the right philosophy. The issue that might be more interesting is how are you holding the philosophy? How are you holding the drive to understand the philosophy? There might be grasping and clinging there. The Dharma can be found in that simple movement of letting go of the drivenness and the compulsion to understand. Understanding is still important. You still might pursue understanding, but the suffering was there in the compulsion.

In a lot of situations in our life, there are worthwhile things to pursue and do. But the Dharma may be not found in what you do, but rather in how you hold it and the relationship you have to it. So in this very simple movement – is there some way in which you're grasping, clinging or driven? Is there compulsion or obsession? Or can you drop it? Can you open up to it? Can you soften? Can you release what's going on? In Buddhism, we sometimes say that this is the guideline to find our path – rather than finding the path of practice through some complicated philosophy or complicated techniques of practice. The path unfolds in that simple investigation right here and now. Where is the stress? Where is the suffering that we have? Where is the dis-ease? Where is the discomfort? And where is the freedom from it? Where is the relaxing from it?

Sometimes we focus a little bit more on the suffering side, because we want to understand it. And sometimes we focus more on the freedom side, and what gets released or opened. But it's that movement between the two where the Dharma and the path are found. It might not seem very profound. It might seem like it doesn't take you very far – it's just kind of simplistic. Any child can understand this, right? But to do this thoroughly and well, to really do the investigation to understand deeply where the holding is in our life is a task of a lifetime. It's a beautiful thing to do. As this path evolves, if you do it thoroughly or well, the tendency is that it just keeps opening and opening to deeper aspects of who we are and what's going on.

A phenomenal depth of freedom and understanding can open up in due time through this simple investigation of: Where is the suffering? Where is the clinging? Where is the release? And where is the freedom from this? In some ways it makes Buddhism pretty easy. In some ways it takes the Buddhism out of Buddhism, which is a good thing.

So those are my thoughts for today. Hopefully they're useful. And if those thoughts cause suffering, now you have at least one idea what to do with that.