

2007-01-07 Four Noble Truths

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SPEAKERS

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It's my custom at the first talk of the year to be on the Four Noble Truths as one of the foundation pieces for Buddhist practice. So that's what we'll be today. And I'll start with a story. Once upon a time, there was a monastery that had the custom that every at the beginning of the year, the abbot would call together the newest of the monks, the monks who'd only been in the monastery for less than a year. And say, please get ready and pack your bags because I'm going to take you on a pilgrimage to the to the holy sites of the Buddha places their holy in Buddhism and three That's places of the Buddha was born where he was enlightened where he lives where he died. So the abbott says I'm gonna take a pilgrimage to the holy site. So these new monks were quite excited that they can. And so they packed their bags and they came for their journey. And they took off. And first, the abbot took them to a hospital where people were sick, and they toured the wards,Laguna Honda. And then next day, went to an old age home and saw the old people with a Laguna Honda and optins manners next door. And then finally, he took them to hospice. And a crematorium. saw people dying dead committed. And then he took him back to the monastery. And he chose to come back to the monastery at a time and all the monks from meditating came into meditation home. First thing to saw was the stillness and the quiet of the hall full of meditators, very engaged, very still very poised, practicing. And that was the pilgrimage to the for holy site. And so the monks were a little bit they'll be surprised by this, they expecting a long trip to India. But I think, partly because of the surprise, it really made a big impact on them. There's something holy, sacred, very special about the encounter of sickness, old age and death. And then it's often once you've encountered that there's something very special about engaging accounts contacting someone who's on a path of practice. I think that all religions, most religions, attempt or, or address deep existential issues that we as human beings have. And there's a variety of solutions that different religions tried to have to the questions of sickness, old age and death to, especially to death. You know what happens when what happens when we die? What happens after we're dead? And many people would like to have great reassurance that once they die, that's not it, that somehow there's a glorious future after death. And some people will choose religions based on how you know the kind of teachings they have on what happens after death. It just seems right there seems most inspired, has the most promise. And one of the characteristics of Buddhism is not to look for a solution to life's difficulties. In the future, I look for, you know, after death, for example, you get to go to heaven and everything will be great or you get to go to the promised land or something. There is an attempt, there's now an attempt to delay the resolution of issues that come up around sickness, old age and death. But there is an attempt to really grapple very honestly, with issues of represented by sickness, old age and death with a core existential issues we have the idea that being all the other kind of issues, difficulties and complexities that people have in their lives are kind of tail incidents significance next to the issues of sickness, old age and death, but they all come under under the rubric of sickness, old age, old age and death. And so Buddhism is an attempt to address this very directly. And then make Buddhists like this image of a lotus, growing out in muddy water and in the mud is Whether going to lotus seed, I guess gets planted

in mud, the swamp or whatever, is like the mud of life, the difficulties complexity, the suffering, the sickness, old age, and the stuff of life that people often want to get out of. And that's where it starts, you have to plant the seed in the mud. And then the Lotus grows up out of the mud, but connected to the mud. And then at some point, blossoms, this beautiful lotus blossom that comes up out of the top of the water. And then it said that the lotus blossom is unstained by the muddy waters. So somehow, there's an awakening there's a there's a blossoming of the heart, the blossoming of the mind and awakening that arises up out of the mud is connected to the mud as the mind becomes eliminated or awakened or freed. And so that's kind of like the movement is that movement into the into the mud to really address it and see it, understand it and then coming up out of that There's this blossoming. So not avoiding it, but entering into it. And the analogy I like for this is, if you've ever tried, all you've tried jumping some point or other in your life. And if you try first before you jump to stand on your tippy toes, and we can use straight and then try to jump, you don't go very far. But if you want to really jump, well, you need to crouch down first and then you can spring up in the spring actually, right. So first, you have to kind of bend down. So it's kind of like that, if you want to kind of become, you know, liberated, get the first get into it kind of crouch down, really kind of get into the mud, I guess, and really get to know as well. So you can have that support to spring up or to leave three of the three. So the Four Noble Truths are the key Or the central description that Buddha had for the path of liberation or the practice of liberation, the context of liberation. And it begins with getting into the mud begins with crouching down into stuff for life. And that's counterintuitive for most of us, because it's mostly most intuitive is to keep the difficulties away. I'm trying to get away from my difficulties as fast as I can. My stresses of my life life, the worries, the anxieties, the pain, the despair that whatever it might be, you know, but here in the first noble truth, the instruction is to really go in there and get to know as well really kind of cross down in the mud, do it. And because the first noble truth is a truth of suffering, which is the truth that says that in human life, there will be there is suffering. And the practice around suffering of our life is to get To know really well, that's the practice that's the first step, get to know it well. And, and so there's a variety of different kinds of suffering. The Buddha when he enumerated the kinds of sufferings that he was addressing in the first noble truth, he said, birth is suffering. sickness is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering, being separated from what you love is suffering. Being connected to what you dislike is suffering, and the entire world of our, of grasping our psychophysical world of grasping, all of it is suffering. So this is kind of like the bad news of Buddhism like no one wants to hear. You know, some of you already wondering, you know, why like Today nide rouching in the mud, suffering, all this kind of stuff. And that's how I said at the beginning. The second noble truth is a discussion about the conditions or the cause that gives rise to the suffering. And it's a little bit of a tautology, tautology is philosophy where two things define each other. So, you know, so, the suffering this thing discussed in the first noble truth is that suffering is given birth from arises from the second noble truth. So, the second noble truth says that the cause of suffering or this kind of suffering is thirst, or grasping or clinging, or drivenness or compulsion to the kind of thirsty Kind of powerful compulsion. And if you think of it as compulsion, then you can kind of think that when there's compulsive compulsive activity going on in the mind, it's hard to put something down. And if something's not serving you, well, if something's bringing you suffering, until it's enough, I like to stop that. If your mind is compulsive, it's hard to put it down and the suffering persists. And probably some of you have been have wondered, why some of your dot your your, you can't seem to be freed from so easily from some of the things that bother you. You're suffering here, despair, sadness, or depression, fear, anger, hostility, or as all kinds of things that exist there that kind of follow us and can weigh us down and be nice, snap our fingers and just say it'd be nice to, you know, with a finish, but it doesn't go away so quickly kind of stays there. And the suggestion in Buddhism is that stays there because there's certain momentum in the mind in the mind, of givenness of compulsion, that has its own momentum. And so we can't just kind of choice just drop it so easily. But we have to address this and look at it. Now, when the Buddha described the second noble truth, he described it by saying there are three kinds of thirsty two kinds of compulsion. The first is, the thirst for sensual desire. And none of you of course, are troubled by sensual desire. But it is if you read the newspapers or just not to go very

far, to say that this is people this is a huge issue for most human beings. And sensual desire calls also includes a whole range of desires. Maybe first and foremost that some people think about a sexual desire, but there's also the desire for varieties and kinds of pleasure. Addiction are often originated From sensual desire, desire for pleasure, confusing, a pleasure for happiness in pursuing the alcohol or drugs, sometimes there's a compulsive activity around the pleasure of food people eat a lot, or there's a whole variety of things that people can be addicted to being the pleasure, the uncomfortable and, and the suggestion in Buddhism in Buddhism is this is a very deeply seated source of compulsion, and that compulsive activity can cause a lot of suffering a lot of damage to pain. Probably the percentage of you have caused suffering either to yourself or to others, by some attachment, some acting on an addiction to sensual pleasure. Then, the next two are quite interesting to do list of three forms of creative given here and the next two Give you the sense that it's been better to understand them as being deeply rooted forms of trading or the roots of craving the common denominators as many kinds of craving that people have. And some of them are kind of like the leaves in the tree to take off the lease between your spouse new leaves, but if you want to kind of somehow do away with the weedy tree, you have to upgrade it to take the roots out, take it up by the roots. So, some of these thirst driven is a deeply rooted and you have to kind of get down into the roots in order to do the uprooting. So that the second and third forms of thirsting are is a desire for existence. And the desire for non existence is a kind of technical words. And the desire for existence includes things like the desire the drive, To have an identity, to hold yourself, this is who I am, to the drive to accomplish something to make something happen, to drive to procreate and to have children create children, for example, to be a father and mother. There's a whole bunch of things that has to do with becoming and creating and making something, bring something into existence. Now, there's nothing wrong with that in and of itself. But I think we have to admit that the drive the compulsive drive, to have something exists, is something has caused people a lot of suffering. The drive to exist as a certain identity can cause a lot of suffering. I've suffered around that where thing I had to be a certain way. And so I tried to fit myself into that box. And kind of, you know, shaped myself a certain way in order to maintain a certain identity, or I have had an identity that I thought was just who I really He was Thank you. And but it seemed like reality didn't, didn't cooperate that well. And so, I was trying to kind of build it up, you know, hold on to it to something. You know, so for example, the identity of being a young person, you know, some people are young, some people here are young. And some people are, you know, some people here, you know, there used to some, you know, doesn't have many days left. Still here. And, and so people hold on sometimes to then either use and all that they use means I can cause a lot of suffering and be a huge expense for some people, or the identity of status or profession are all kinds of roles that people can apply with, and they can cause a lot of suffering There's a lot of suffering around having children. I've known people who have wanted children desperately. And somehow it wasn't happening, variety of reasons, as a tremendous source of suffering in that, and that suffering kind of carries with them sometimes the rest of their life, you know, they wish they would have had children. And so there's a suffering there. The Buddha talks about suffering, here's a form of suffering, that arises out of the desire for certain kind of existence, bring something into life. Perhaps the desire for accomplishments sometimes desire to do to make nothing wrong with that, but there can be a driven that behind it, that when that driven is is frustrated, that our psyche can suffer a lot, a lot of frustration. The third kind of thirsting is the thirsting for non existence. And this is Kind of an aversion kind of pushing things away, making sure something doesn't exist. Some people have an attachment to not existing as an identity. They don't want it. They don't want to be someone they want to be invisible or anytime they stand up or anything, there's going to define them they want to knock down any kind of definition. Don't see me that way. I don't wanna be seen that way. Some people don't want to have anything come their way. They're impressed by with lifetimes. These want everything to go away, go away, go away. I want the simpler when be left alone. I don't want things and the same form of desire thirsting for non existence, it can be the desire for, for suicide, and I don't wanna exist at all. So, both the desire to explore existence entirely non existence can be seen as being very, very deeply embedded in the human beings. And they play

out in both mild ways, simple, almost innocent ways and they play out Some very deep seated ways. They can seem so innate and so connected, connected to what it means to be human being, that it can seem impossible to uproot them, or it can seem like it's a kind of violence to who we are as human beings to uproot them. That can be a very disorienting idea, I need these things, how can I exist without these kinds of desires, or the desire can be so strong that the quest comes along with it is an unwillingness to entertain the alternative to entertain the idea that might be possible not to live in the grasp of these kinds of desires. It's unimaginable that human life is worthwhile without having some of these desires fulfilled. And if he suggests that it's seen as an alternative as possible, people might get angry or they might take the great is so was it August he said, Give me chastity, but later. So, you know, yes, you know, I will overcome these desires, but later after had my chance to, you know, to fulfill them all. And so, in talking about the second noble truth, saying that the origin of suffering is in thirst, the Buddha, I believe, is pointing at something very, very so deep in our human being, that it can seem unacceptable can seem impossible, that it's worthwhile or appropriate to uproot these things. Then the third noble truth is the truth of the cessation of this thirst and the cessation of suffering. So this is a good This is when you start doing a leap out of the mud, you know, where the flowers blossoming. And this is when you understood your suffering well and we respected it, engaged in it in a proper way. And then understood the craving that gives birth to that. And then in a variety of ways have learned to let go or to soften, to release that craving. And that release is called in Buddhism cessation, the cessation of that suffering, cessation of craving. It's fading in a negative way, just the end of something. And you don't get a sense from that statement, that it's a glorious thing. You know, but actually, the ending of cleaning is a fantastic thing to have the mind not in conflict, to have the mind at peace, and have the mind not in the mind, not in the grip of some kind of compulsion is a beautiful thing. And some of you probably get a little sense of that intonation and that intuition of that, when you meditate. It's not uncommon for people when you sit down to meditate, to be to discover that their mind has a mind of its own, that there's a certain degree of compulsion of grittiness in the thinking mind, and it just simply doesn't want to stop and let itself down. And it might at first seem Why should I, you know, the thinking is kind of who I am and I should just be have unfettered access to think whatever I want. And not only that, but to pursue the dreams that my thoughts are telling you that I need to pursue. But it's possible to kind of get a sense as possible to have that thinking mind quiet down and either feel or have an intuition, of a sense of peace, and the other side of that compulsion of thinking and some of you perhaps had a little taste in a calmer piece that that's possible. So when we don't just simply put to rest, the surface, clinging and grasping of our mind of our hearts, but able to get down into the roots, the roots of Central desire the roots of desire for clinging for existence and non existence and up with those, then there's kind of a revolution that goes on in the hearts and minds kind of a radical transformation to turn and you'll never understand yourself the same way again. It's kind of like a butterfly never incense itself the same way becomes a butterfly worm doesn't extend itself as the same the same, once it gets transformed becomes a butterfly is not the same thing anymore. So there's something very radical that happens when the cessation they're letting go the release can get down and happen and this varies the deep fundamental place in our psyche. Then the fourth noble truth grip is the truth of the past. And this is the recognition that to do this release to the cessation is not an easy task. We can't just snap our fingers and we shouldn't be so and in order to do is we have to kind of engage our whole being a whole life a whole sense of who we are. And in order to kind of do the inner work that allows us to get down to those roots that allows us to really release let go in a profound way. So this is where it's a spiritual path, that and it's all encompassing, includes all of who we are. If you want to use a weekend, Buddhists, then you don't go very far. Or if you're a nightstand Buddhist, you don't go very, very far. You know, so you know, or if you're, if you're a wannabe Buddhist, you know, one of the meditator meditation doesn't work. You know, you guys know that. Meditation doesn't work. Unless you do it. So you got to do it. So you have to use up all the videos, the path is in the all of you, all of who you are as included. Now the image that's used for the path is an image of walking. A path is something you walk. And here, you see that the Buddhism focuses on you doing the walking. It isn't

that you use someone else who can do the walking for you. It isn't that you have this great, wonderful guru, like the Buddha or someone else who's going to zap you your Dharma, your transmission of the mind to mind transmission and you get it I say the right you know, channel the right frequency. Are you the right teacher has the right frequency. And then I somehow I don't have to worry about anything anymore. And it should be done for me. And there are some people who have that approach to spiritual life. They're expecting someone else to do it for them. They just get in their presence. Or perhaps it's The gods or God, that's gonna do it for them, you just have to kind of pray the right way and some things will be done to you for you. Or you're going to hold on to certain kind of belief. And that belief is going to kind of make you safe, and kind of do it for you. The four noble truths are not meant to be beliefs, rather than meant to be a part of the path if you walk you engage in, because the idea of walking in a path is that you are the one who does it. You can't expect someone else to do it for you, you have to do so. So you have to enter into this path. If what you want is liberation, if you want to be freed from the deep seated roots of thirst of suffering. If you're not interested in that, of course, then the path is not needed. You know, there's not there's no religious imperative in Buddhism, thou shalt walk this path, or lightning will strike or something terrible happened to you. nothing terrible will happen to you. You'll suffer. You'll keep suffering. But if you're interested in if you're interested in, in those sweet of suffering, then the suggestion is that you want to include all of your life in it. And it's possible to talk about this path, the Eightfold Path, three of Buddhist language. So we don't have free yourself from the idea that this is a Buddhist thing you're encountering and doing the Four Noble Truths are not meant to make you a Buddhist. They're supposed to be more like, you know, if you go to your dentist, your dentist is a Republican. You know, it's okay. You know, you probably don't care that much. You know, just want to make sure the kids get taken care of. You know, you're not being asked to become a republican by having your eye opening your mouth or a democrat or whatever and Let's see. So there's four humble truths thing also, you know, you're not being asked to become a Buddhist, but they're offered as as practical tools and insights, understanding, they can help you. At times when you might feel you need help in terms of freedom from suffering. So the Eightfold Path is a path we walk. And the path that we walk then begins with the first of the Eightfold Path. And the first of the Eightfold Path is right, orientation or right view. And specifically, this means that you begin to understand your suffering through the filter of the Four Noble Truths, as your interest and that when you suffer, that you want to understand your suffering, according to this, this, these kind of equation, the suffering, there's a cause of suffering and there's a possibility of release of suffering. If you don't have that kind of perspective, then there's no hope for you, oh, I understand I suffer that I'm not going to do any more work than that. You have to kind of engage the suffering boys understand what the causes, you have to understand the possibility of freedom from it and begin to begin experiencing some degree of freedom from that claim. So the first the first of the full path is to begin understanding our suffering from that point of view. I see it as a way of taking responsibility for how we contribute to our suffering. One of the epidemic illnesses, and our culture, maybe in a lot of cultures, is blaming other people for our suffering. And certainly, society in the world creates the conditions for suffering. But one of the great challenges of Buddhism to us is that your suffering is something huge Have you contribute to and if you interested in the path of the Buddhist path To the Eightfold Path, you have to begin being interested in what your contribution is. It doesn't mean that you turn a blind eye to what other people do. But the path is found by taking responsibility of your contribution to your suffering. That's where it's found. If you're not interested in that's fine. But that's where the path is found. What is my contribution was your contribution and nothing quick then to blame and look outside. And then, the idea of noble is a great word, the Noble Truths the Four Noble Truths. It means that these truths have are very highly respected. The word noble can almost be translated as sacred, as considered sacred. Suffering is not sacred or suffering is not noble, or respected, unless it's understood. If it's not understood, there's nothing noble about it. But if you really understand it, understand the nature of and understand how it fits into this formula, the Four Noble Truths, then we make it into something that's sacred. Not so that we suffer more and more, but then it becomes part of the path. So then the first step, a full path is beginning to understand our

suffering from this perspective. The second step in the Eightfold Path is doing the best we can to reconfigure or reorient our attitude about how we're going to be in this world. How we're going to walk the path. So again, his ideas take responsibility, not only to take responsibility for our suffering and our causes of it, but we take some responsibility for attitude and to some degree, you can overdo this and do it in insincere way. But if you can do it, it's appropriate to change your attitude. If you're going a certain way. activities. So you're the attitude by which you go bowling, go bowling probably have an attitude that you bring along. It's very different attitude. You have, if you go spend a day in a kindergarten class, kindergarten class requires certain attitude, some kind of approach, different attitude and going to a ballgame. different activities we do call for different attitudes. You go to a funeral, most people not even thinking about adjust their attitude. When it goes to a funeral. We adjust our attitude and we go to a birthday party, middleweight title change that goes on, it's almost innate to make the kind of shift. Can we shift our attitude a little bit so we have an attitude that's more conducive to walking this path? And so the suggestion is, change your attitude a little bit. Maybe just a little bit. Don't try to be insincere about it. But can you do some change? In one of the changes in attitude is can you start being a little bit Kinder The second is can you be more compassionate, less harsh, less judgmental. And the third is, uh, can you avoid being driven or prioritizing sensual desire, don't put on essential desire be the primary thing, attitude is going to drive your orientation this life. And instead, can you haven't orientation of being kind of letting go, the simpler kind of some kind of movement towards simplicity of being. So first, it's an understanding, understanding the Four Noble Truths. The second is a little shift that attitude. And as practice goes along that as you can shift a bit more and more, and then the third, fourth and fifth steps with a full path have to do with our behavior. The suggested here is that it's easier to adjust or take care of or look at our behavior than it is to adjust our mind our mind in some way, our mind is much more subtle. So the first thing to do is look at your speech. Have, it's helpful if you're going to be on the path to liberation path to freedom. It's helpful if your speech is not compulsive. And chances are when people gossip, when people lie, when people use harsh slang, harsh language, chances are there's compulsion that's built into that. If you can let go of that kind of language, and rather talk in ways that are kind and honest and kind, then then you begin shifting the inner territory begin understanding better what's going on. And one of the ways I'm understanding is that when you can when you when you make a choice not to act In habitual ways, like I always lie, right? So I'm going to try not to lie. So that's my, my, my decision. And so then I find myself about to make a lie. Look, I can't lie, I said I wouldn't. And then I get to look at that a little bit uncomfortable, I get to look at that and see what's really going on here. In that line. If I have free rein to lie frequent, much as I want, then I don't get to look at it. So that the right speech is considered part of this training. It's a practice. It's not meant to be an ethical thing, a moral thing. It's meant to be if you're interested in this process of liberation, then speech is part of that process, and look at your speech and try to find ways to speak that express freedom and the same thing for your other behavior. So generally, the next one has to do with your actions in the world and usually described this You're here ask us the ethical life. So, don't kill, don't steal, don't involve sexual misconduct. Don't lie and don't intoxicate your mind and body. All things that usually when people engage in those things represent some kind of compulsion, some kind of loss of, I would say loss of self control. And then the fifth one, and the Eightfold Path is right livelihood. Many people spend much of their work or their daytime hours pursuing engaged in life limited issues. And it's nice that that big chunk of our life is in harmony with a spiritual path rather than odds, I'd argue with it. So getting some care to what our livelihood is an important part of the path. And then the last three elements of the path has to do with that the inner life and beginning to cultivate an inner life that is helpful for us. So, avoiding those inner impulses, which are harmful to us, cultivating and enhancing and awakening those impulses, desires wishes that are helpful for us. practicing mindfulness practice, the core practice here at IMC practicing mindfulness. So we can really see clearly what's going on. Without clearly seeing, we can't really get down into the roots. You can't really take responsibility for yourself unless you clearly see. And so mindfulness has a lot to do with cultivating ability to see really well see really clearly what's going on here. And to support the mindfulness of clearly seeing, the last of

eightfold path is right concentration, and right concentration supports the mindfulness by getting the mind still enough and focused enough that the mindfulness can then penetrate and see right down to the bottom of the module and we'll clarify and approve The roots of the lotus can be set free, I guess. So, if the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are intimately linked, and as truth these are not meant to be philosophical truths or doctrines, demented the pragmatic truth the truths that are true in your realizing them so we're not nothing that's something you must believe in at all costs, but rather they're supposed to be something that you test engaging and in utilize in your life and utilizing utilizing your life. You find that a true for yourself. So the truth is, I realized, that's why they're true, rather than the true because there's their logical or something are taught by the Buddha pragmatic truths that each of us start to realize for ourselves. And the way to realize them is to engage as much of our life as we can, on the path to walk the path to liberation. And so, I hope that as you go about this next year, that when you have an occasion to encounter sickness, old age and death, you remember what the abbot did to the new new monks. He took them on the holy pilgrimage, to visit the sacred sites. And to realize that when you encountering these things, that there is something very important and special that goes on in that encounter. And there's an opportunity there and the opportunity to discover Four Noble Truths. And I believe that to do that, well if you do that, well, you'll discover that in the midst of that open blossoms Lotus, lotus blossom opens, you'll find a jewel. It's called the Julian Lotus in Buddhism. And that jewel in the middle of the lotus is compassion. And that compassion is our then our offering back to the world to make a difference. So your encounter with sickness, old age and death is a sacred encounter. encounter that well. Something inside of you will open to find peace and freedom. And in that freedom, you'll have a jewel to share with others for this coming year, may your compassion be a benefit for everyone that you encounter. Thank you