

# 2009-01-05 Choice And The Four Noble Truths

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choice, suffering, life, buddhism, driven, exercise, compulsion, four noble truths, choose, eightfold path, mind, desire, people, world, freedom, attitude, understanding, important, internal, path

## SPEAKERS

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So Good evening, everyone and Happy New Year. So it's the custom here at IMC that the first talk of the years. The first Monday talk of the year is always on the Four Noble Truths. And the reason for that is that four noble truth lays at the beginning of Buddhist practice and Buddhist teaching to the very foundation of it. And it's sometimes said that all Buddhist teachings are an explanation or a development or application of this core teaching of the Four Noble Truths. So in looking at the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, we see that one way of understanding it is that it's an exploration of the issue of choice, where we have choice in our life and how we exercise choice, and to understand both the choices we can make, and the places and how to make choices. And so there are lots of things we don't have any much choice about. We don't have, we have very, very little choice about the weather. Some places they seed the clouds for rain, but the weather comes and goes. There's a variety of environmental things that happened to us that can affect us, which we have no choice about. But we have choice about how what we do about it's raining so forth about the weather. So how we respond to it. So if it rains, we might get a raincoat. So that's a choice that we have, or more closely inside. We have some choice about how We think about the weather or attitude about the weather or, you know, internally our reaction to the weather. So if we have strong dislike for the rain, and we kind of get angry at the weather, then we have some choice about that anger. So this inner world where the choices is what Buddhism focuses on, there's also the world of sickness, old age and death. We don't have much choice around certainly about getting old. Certainly those of us who are lucky enough to get old have no choice but getting old. And, and then we have no choice about dying, or we have no choice about in a sense, we'd have no choice about, you know, people we know die around us. Today I wrote a letter to someone who is dying. And it was Kind of my farewell letter to him. I've never done that before. So it was very touching for me to write, know write words to someone, or appreciation and gratitude is kind of like doing a eulogy while a person is still alive, or something like that. So, the So, sickness, old age and death are kind of this code words in Buddhism, for what visits all of us and what all of us are contending with and dealing with. And so to some degree, a big degree, we don't have much choice about this happening to us. But we do have choice about how we relate to it. So do we get angry, do we get afraid? Do we cling to it to try to push it away? Do we deny it? These are all these internal movements. And this is the this is the world that Buddhism focuses on Buddhist practice and focus in the place inside our minds or hearts where we have some ability to choose choose one way or the other. And if we look a little bit internally, to what happens with our mind and hearts, we can see that there's a big difference between having freedom around the place of choice and not having freedom. So sometimes we'll notice that we act and compulsion. We say something afterwards, we wonder, why do I say that that just came out of my mouth? Or we do something. And there's a variety all kinds of things that people do when sometimes it's not a surprise, sometimes people are, are doing them while no they're doing it while they're doing it. And while they're doing they know they shouldn't be doing it.

But there's something else is taken over strong addiction, strong desire, a strong compulsion is going on. So there's no freedom in that kind of compulsion. And when there's no freedom, there is no choice.

That's kind of the nature of compulsion, there's the, the other kind of limitation to our freedom is inhibition. So we get inhibited. There's movements, desires, wishes that we have, and we don't want to act on them. We don't want to kind of express it, we're held back or limited. And so this world of inhibition and compulsion is the world in Buddhism, that is the world of suffering, this internal suffering, the place so when we can't exercise our freedom, then it's more likely that's the place we're going to suffer. There's something about compulsive activity, which either is painful in and of itself, or leads to pain and suffering down the line. And there's something so certainly about being inhibited or checked or limited, which also is, is, is certainly unpleasant. It certainly involves a loss of freedom. So Buddhism puts a big emphasis on freedom, becoming free. And, and so to become free of the forces of compulsion, the forces of restriction that go around our hearts are going in our own mind. So the Four Noble Truths are exploration of this area of where we have where we have choice. So I'll start today with the fourth of the Four Noble Truths, which is the truth of the path of practice. So, Buddhism puts a tremendous importance on practicing these to kind of find Buddhist use the word practice all the time. And so the idea of walking a path of making choices around how we behave and what we do when we think so again, exercising the act of choice. So the first thing is, the first step in this eightfold path is right view, having the right understanding

And it's not so much a matter of just having some knowledge, but has to do with choosing what frame of reference we're going to use to explore life to help our life alone. It's kind of like what medicine is useful, or what you know what questions are useful to bring along as you go about your life. So, if you live in the desert, perhaps in the Sahara Desert, perhaps they're right. It's not a it's a wrong question to ask which kind of umbrella you should get. I guess they have sun umbrellas. But, you know, but there's kind of right and wrong questions are helpful questions in particular context. So in Buddhism, the helpful question to have if you want to be free of compulsion is to understand where it is. That compulsion, whereas compulsion act for you, where were you driven? And so there's no freedom and no choice. And so the first of a full path right view has to do with understanding the nature of compulsive activity driven activity. And looking at it carefully, understanding what drives it, what makes it work? And then looking and seeing, is it possible? How can we exercise choice in letting go of it? So the first choice then, in other words in Buddhism is the choice to choose a particular series of questions with which to explore life. We'll come back to that we get to the end and maybe understand how important this is. So it's not just a matter of again of knowledge or the belief system, but it is a matter of choosing particular tools that are going to be useful for you. So you're going to use this tool, this frame of reference for beginning to understand your experience. So the next one is right intention, the second of the Eightfold Path. And this has to do with choosing a general broad kind of attitude with which you're going to kind of explore this territory. So if what you want to do is to become free of compulsive activity, become free of restricted movements in your own mind inhibitions such things. It's helpful if you explore that and start asking these questions with an attitude of kindness or friendliness and attitude of compassion and, and an attitude of letting go of not holding on to things because holding on to things is a form of compulsion. I like to think of it as holding things likely being light about it. So the first of the towpath involves choosing and understanding exercising your choice what to understand that you're going to use for your life? It can seem very oppressive to some people to say, oh, now I'm supposed to have tickle understanding was to adopt this understanding, and then even worse, adopt an attitude. But, in fact, you're operating on an understanding all the time. And you're operating under an attitude all the time. And is the understanding and edit to you currently operating on? Is it helpful for you? Is that the really the best one? You could, you know, is it really something you've chosen, or as it's been chosen for you, by society and family and who knows what, by your personality or something. So we

start looking at understanding and attitudes very broadly very, very kind of just in a very different, not in a heavy way, not in some difficult way, but just kind of just very generally. The next three steps of a full path is we begin actually sizing choice around how we speak, how we act in the world, and what kind of livelihood we engage in. We can raise these issues only because we have some choice in this in these matters. So when we speak, do we speak the truth? Or do we lie? Do we have some choice about that? If you're always telling the truth, then not an issue. But if you find yourself saying things which are not true, then do you are you doing that compulsively? We talk about compulsive liars, or you're doing it not so compulsively but for other reasons. And it doesn't really serve you. Can you exercise your choice there and find a way of speaking, where you choose to speak the truth? Do you speak harshly? Do you speak in mean ways? Do you gossip or do is your speed Speech divisive does it cause division among other people between people. If it does, then there's you could exercise choice about how you how you speak, you could choose not to say those things and maybe choose to speak other ways.

In your behavior actions, you can choose to avoid action which harm, hopefully sort of exercising that the best you can. So exercising the option not to steal, if you're taking was not given, you can exercise the option of not engaging in sexual misconduct, you can engage in the option and the choice of not lying. And then you can engage the option, the choice around alcohol and drugs, not not intoxicated yourself. So all along here we're exercising this muscle of choosing One thing over the other. This is really important, one thing over the other. As we do that we're exercising freedom. We're getting exercise, exercising our ability not to be caught by one particular way. That's habit, that's reactivity. That's addiction and choosing in by choosing, putting ourselves in the camp of free in the sense of free will, of choice, loosening ourselves from the drive mode, which the mind can be. Then we get to the sixth step of the Eightfold Path, which is right effort. And here, right effort is all about exercising choice. In a simplest way, it's about choosing those activities and actions which are healthy for you and avoiding those which are unhealthy for you. Very simple. So you can't really argue With that, you know, if something is unhealthy for you then and you do it even against your best judgment even though you know you shouldn't be doing this you're not free so we're begin to find and also suitable begin looking understanding what is healthy what brings me suffering, what brings me happiness? And can I kind of choose between these two? It can be something as simple as I said, I talked about yesterday, Sunday morning here. So simple as how do you drive your car? Are they healthy ways of driving your car or unhealthy ways. I've noticed in my own driving there are times where I know that in principle, I have a choice about how I drive. But sometimes I get I get contracted a little bit tight, a little bit pushing pressure about getting somewhere a little bit faster than healthy, relaxed mode of being would be. And then I could see these internal arguments inside of me about, oh, if I can just do all these things quickly, then I can get to the important things in life. And so I'm caught by my desires, but my wishes, but what I think is important, and that translates to a particular mode of being, which is not so pleasant to be in. If I'm really honest, and look inside and feel was like to be a person internally in these modes of being driven and caught and in a hurry. It doesn't feel good inside. So, do I have choice? And what choices do I make about how I drive? It might seem like a very petty issue, but it's an example of kind of issues that come up in our life over and over again in many different situations. The important thing Here I'm emphasizing is beginning to exercise the possibility of choice and seeing where we have choice and when we don't. Then the next second to last, folded the Eightfold Path is right mindfulness. So the practice of mindfulness of attention. And this is the practice of looking much more deeply. What's really going on here, not just what's meets kind of our surface of our life as we just kind of go about our life busy, whatever, but stopping and looking at some deeper way, what's really happening here with us. And that's when we start becoming aware of a variety of things. One is, we can become aware of the cost, internal cost of how we're living our life. We can become aware of the degree to which we might be much more unhappy than we we originally thought there might be much more suffering and tension and stress than we were aware of than if we were always kind of driven and blinded by when we want

to, we don't want and we're not paying attention to the inner world. Much more important. As the mindfulness gets stronger, we start seeing more and more subtle places of choice, where we can choose one thing over the other.

So, for example, in meditation, you sit down to meditate and try to be with the breathing. And most people, most human beings will find that their mind is out of control. That there is a very intense movements of some people will say addiction to thinking. And so is it too much to meditate or trying very hard to exercise the option of choice around what they think about. We try to be with a breath and the mind can wander off very quickly. So what do we do? Do we let the mind wander off freely, compulsively? Give it give the mind its freedom to think whatever it wants to think. Or can we find where we have choice about where the mind goes or where the mind doesn't go? And so do we do we have choice there? And hopefully we discover, as we meditate more and more choice about, Oh, no, I'm not going to go there. I don't have to think about that. I can put that down. I cannot get involved in that. I can let go of it. And so we're strengthening this capacity to choose at this more and more subtle levels. When we meditate. It's very hard and we go about our life busy life, to track our mind that carefully and to see moment by moment, where the mind is going left and right. This this idea and that idea. And the meditations are seeing that and finding more freedom in that regard. Then the last folder of a full path is concentration. And this is the beginning to develop a real stability in the mind. So that the mind it's very stable, can begin seeing below the surface chatter, the surface concerns a surface activity of the mind and see what Buddhism is said to be the very roots of our behavior. Sometimes it's called latent. The roots of our behavior, the kind of the core motivating factors that drive us. So are we. So it's very hard to see those common denominator for behavior and the function of concentration is to be able to see these things very clearly. So the Eightfold Path all along the way. They were exercising choice. redeveloping, strengthening our capacity to choose Then we come back again to the first of the Eightfold Path is sometimes the same as it seems a spiral. These eight steps, come back to the first one. And the first one, in the most classic description of it formulation of it is called the using the framework of the Four Noble Truths, to understand our experience. So again, this is not a belief system, you have to believe it or not, but rather it's a pragmatic truth. So, for example, if you have a wound, it's a pragmatic truth, that if you keep the wound clean, that you will be it'll heal better, better. It's not a philosophical and religious truth. It's just a pragmatic one. So the Four Noble Truths are meant to be pragmatic truths in that in that kind of way. So the Four Noble Truths To begin with the truth of suffering. And the truth of suffering is that if you look at your life carefully, or maybe sometimes not so carefully, it's you'll see that your life and the lives of others has a fair degree of suffering in it, about happiness. And the corollary of that is that if there is suffering, then maybe there's a possibility of being free of suffering, of happiness. So, the Buddhist approach to happiness is to begin by studying and becoming sensitive to where we suffer. Then the second noble truth has to do with the condition or cause which from which this suffering arises. And the Buddhist analysis of suffering is a suffering arises from clinging from craving from compulsion, When we're driven by desires, not desire, desires are not the cause of suffering. So that's a very important to underscore. I read, I looked at a book today, Introduction to Buddhism book. And I looked, you know, like a big, hefty book, serious book. And so I want to see what this book said about the Four Noble Truths. This is going to talk about it today.

And they're in solid bullet points. It said, the first noble truth is that life is suffering. The second bullet point for the second noble truth was this desire is the cause of suffering. This is a common misunderstanding, and it's very depressing to read that life is suffering. And if if desire is the cause of suffering, well, then it's hopeless. Because that's what human beings, human beings are human desire feelings. That's what human minds do. They have desires. Like you know, sometimes we want to go to the pee. You know, I have a desire to have pee, enlightened people have that desire or they have diapers. So, desires are not the problem and life is not suffering. That's not what the Buddha taught.

What the Buddha said is there is suffering. There's a huge difference between those two. And the suffering that Buddhism wants to address is a suffering that doesn't come from desire, but comes from being driven by desire, being addicted to desire, caught by desire, pushed around by desire. So, usually, so I prefer the language of craving and clinging as the cause or the condition for the rising of suffering, and you see that because when there is craving or clinging, there's compulsion and generally run compulsion is also contraction, tightness restriction, narrowing down, darkening of the mind and heart and a variety of things that feel very unpleasant, which, you know, in shorthand Buddhism calls suffering.

So then the task in Buddhism is not only to understand suffering, but to understand begin understanding where that compulsion is and discover how can we become free of this compulsion. And because the third noble truth is the truth of the cessation of clinging and the cessation of suffering, this the good news, so there's suffering, the cause of suffering, the possibility of ending suffering and a path Ending suffering. Those are the those are the four noble truths. To say it in a different way. There is happiness, so different, there's suffering and the cause of suffering. And then there's happiness and the conditions for happiness. So this is what this is kind of the domain exploration in Buddhism. So, if there are simple things, like how we drive our car, maybe that maybe it's kind of very easy to exercise the choice to see or be driven. I'm drivin. I'm kind of impatient here. And I'm kind of kind of tightening up a little bit my body, my mind, my eyes. So trying to get someplace fast and judging all the drivers around me and you know, telling them to get out of the way and kind of caught up in the whole world of driving. Maybe I can see that and I can just let go and sit back in the in the seat and relax. But then there are much deeper things that we get caught by. There are deep. For example, there's all kinds of things but for example, the world of human relationships. You know, people are very driven by all kinds of desires and wishes, expectations, fears, around being in relationship with people. Tremendous amount of suffering arises in this world of relationship. Do we see the place of choice where it operates in our relationships? After I've been meditating for I don't know how long, four or five years I was in my mid 20s. And I got very interested to see if I could notice the moment of choice where I chose to fall in love with the woman and Lo and behold I could see it if I paid it was I was really still and quiet pay deliberate careful attention it wasn't just like lightning or just did just like happen you know just chemistry and you know I'm not gonna control you know just but it was very subtle. Now Oh reaching for something that was very pleasant or desirable or enjoyable or satisfying or something you could see that choice being operating. How about if you get angry with someone? It can you see the place of choice in buying onto the anger or when you get afraid, can you see the place of choice. As you exercise the place or as you see the place of choice, then you have choice. Then you have freedom. People who don't see the place of choice, have no choice and then Being kind of operating an automatic pilot or being upgraded, kind of being driven by all kinds of internal forces or external forces. So in order to become free in Buddhism, we have to have the capacity to begin seeing where we have choice and to find more and more and more, where's the place of choice. There are some Buddhist practitioners who think that enlightenment and awakening is not a choice. It's not something they're going to choose. If they just sit quietly and Wait, do their duty as a good Buddhist meditator. They'll have the Big Bang of enlightenment, something will be happened to them. And they're waiting for that wonderful moment of grace or explosion. There may be some element of grace involved. I'm not gonna say it's not but it's sitting await. Not take responsibility is to advocate this whole exploration, exploration of choice exercising choice, which is so important in Buddhism. One of the reasons why this is very important, is it's a very powerful way of protecting, of being protected.

So, in, for example, on our social world, or relational world, you know, of course, if someone's someone's hitting you, then you need to do something about that. But if someone's speaking to you, and say unkind things to you, where are you protected? Where are you best protected in that situation?

What protects you from that? You could plug it get earplugs, so you don't hear it. But that's usually not very effective. You could pick it up Mouth stopper for them. But that's, you know, they don't sell mouth suffers like that. So it's usually not frowned upon but the Buddhist approach and looking at where you can be protected, that's protected, the place where you can be both securely protected is to stop and look at how is it that you react to those unkind things that are being said? If so, if I say that you know if I say that people with hair are kind of you know, silly then most of you How would you How would you react to that I hope most of you were just like, you know, wouldn't wouldn't do anything to you. But people can say something, I could say something like, you know, people here are silly. And someone might might say, Oh, no, the teacher thinks that I am silly now because I am here. I better go get a haircut. I better get a hat and hide my hair. I better get angry at this teacher who does know what he's talking about. has no business judging people's hair, drawings and Buddhist teacher. You shouldn't be doing such things. I'm going to give them a piece of my mind. There's all these internal movements that can happen in there. When we can exercise the place of choice and see it and say, Oh, this person said this odd thing. Maybe it's even you know, I don't agree with it. Maybe the person shouldn't have said it. I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna not do anything. I'm just gonna let it be in just letting it be. There is protection from your internal world of reactivity. That's, that's a very powerful place of protection, to exercise, exercise, the ability to leave things alone, not going to go, they're not going to pick that up. I'm not going to react, I just let it be. There's a lot of protection there. Because the primary way that we get hurt, the primary way we suffer is not from what people say to us or do to us, but rather there's what we do as a result of that. We pick it up how we close down how we push back what we do inside so As we explore this area of choice, one of the great things we learn is it chooses a choice of doing nothing. It's not the only thing we should do. But doing nothing is very powerful. This works very well when we look internally to our own mind. Because our own mind is not necessarily under our control, what we think the feelings that come up the ideas that happen, but we have an amazing capacity if we develop it, of not, not getting involved with thoughts and feelings and desires that bubble up in her mind. Oh, look at that. Now I'm judging someone because of their hair. That judging thought arose. I'm not going to go there. I'll leave it alone. I don't know why it went there. Why why the mines doing that, but I'm just gonna leave it and not do anything with it. or have a desire, desire bubbles up, or an aversion bubbles up in the mind, or a memory bubbles up or something, you know, all kinds of things bubble up. Oh, I just leave it there.

Unless you're a baker, this monk who teaches there sometimes he likes to compare or liken the human mind to, he calls it what he says a corporate board, room, corporate board, where you're the chairman of the chip chair of the board. And, and you have this unruly board of directors. And you have no control over what the board of directors say. But as a chair of the board, you have veto power. So you can say no, we're not going to go there. So the same thing with a mind the mind can do all kinds of different things, but we have the ability to say no, not going to go there. So that's exercising our capacity for choice in a very effective way. As his capacity to say, no becomes stronger than also we can exercise the capacity to choose what we do want to do. Do to do those things which are supportive and helpful, for happiness, for greater freedom, for greater love and joy in our life. And this is the Eightfold Path. And, and so it goes around in a spiral so the full path, we begin appreciating or exploring our life from the point of view of these four noble truths. We cultivate an attitude that is optimal for exploring this part of our life, attitude of kindness, compassion, and letting go. We begin Living a life that is supportive of this effort, looking at how we speak looking how we act, and looking how we make our living. And then we begin looking much more carefully within to see what are the movements inside, in the mind and the heart and our feelings, in our motivations are choices, internal choices, to see where we have choice between choosing that which is helpful, and that which is not. And being an exercising that internal movement to the internal life is the only place where you can have the optimal choice or control or, or a development of responding and living wisely in this life around us.

And then, the seventh and eighth factor the full path, generally understood to be meditation. practicing meditation, because in this wonderful laboratory of sitting quietly, sitting still, it seems to be a really great place where we're not distracted by all the things of life, really great place to look deeply inside. To find more and more, kind of follow back the stream right down to the source of what motivates us in our life. And then somehow find that place with all begins and find how to somehow radically change or radically, make a radical choice to choose freedom at the foundation of our life, rather than compulsion and do it so radically at the foundation of it all. Because it's like the root of it all that once. That's the choices made at the root all kinds of other things will follow in its awake, all kinds of beautiful things will follow, like ripple effect. And then it's possible to live a much happier life, and hopefully a life that not only is better for ourselves, but also better for others. I'm very fond of the fact that the Four Noble Truths, as taught by the Buddha, do not have a pronoun connected to them. There's no it doesn't say, these are the four noble truths for you. You know, or I, you suffer, or I suffer. It just says there is suffering. There's a cause of suffering. There is the freedom from suffering into the path for it. And because there's no pronoun, I like to see it as being an approach to life that's very inclusive, where we actually include others very deeply in our life. And so the very path to freedom that the Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths point to leads us to a life that then hopefully, is very supportive and helpful for other people to also find this path of freedom. So

I hope that you find it enjoyably challenging to begin studying, where you have choice and begin expanding the range and the subtlety in your life where you begin exercising, you're acting with choice because if you don't do that, then you're not free. And is that what you choose? I hope you don't. So thank you