

Four Noble Truths: Dukkha (1 of 5)

Introduction

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Welcome to the beginning of a four-week series of talks on the Four Noble Truths. I will be offering talks each week on one of the Noble Truths. This week will be on the First Noble Truth. Today, I'll say some introductory words about the Four Noble Truths in general.

For many people, the Four Noble Truths are thought to be the core teachings of Buddhism. When I was studying Zen in Japan, I was given a primer for high school students. I was living in the monastery and given a book in Japanese about Buddhism. It talked about how the Four Noble Truths are the core teachings of Buddhism. It claimed that even a child could understand what they are – but, at the same time, an older person with lots of life experience might not understand their depths. I think that something like this is true. The Four Noble Truths provide an ever-developing series of insights, ways, and perspectives for understanding our lives.

There isn't just one teaching on the Four Noble Truths. There are many. In the history of Buddhism, there are different interpretations, applications, and elaborations of how these truths apply to many areas of our lives. This idea goes all the way back to ancient times. The Four Noble Truths provide a wonderful framework within which to begin studying how to live a deeper, more meaningful life. In that regard, one of the teachings around these Four Noble Truths is that there is a particular task for each one.

The Four Noble Truths have to do with suffering and the end of suffering. It's not a coincidence that this discussion about suffering follows the week where we talked about care as a form of love, compassion, and goodwill. Suffering is central to the human experience. To value and care for our lives and the lives of others is to value and care for our personal suffering, the suffering of others, and our collective suffering. We strive to do this from a place of groundedness, centeredness, and non-reactivity. We need to work with this in a wise way that leads to a better future and freedom from suffering.

It's said that while addressing his suffering and that which he encountered, the Buddha was immersed in a noble search. There's nobility, dignity, or worthiness in addressing and meeting suffering, and then finding a way through it and coming out the other side. We don't address suffering to become greater victims, or to diminish ourselves in any way. Instead, we look at suffering as a dignified, ever-changing process. The Buddha said that when he was looking for the alternative to suffering, he was looking for long-term happiness — one that's not dependent on the vagaries and changing circumstances of our lives, when we're tossed around in the seas of change.

We're going to address this topic of suffering on the foundations of care and faith. One of the early meanings of the word 'belief' defines it as something that you love, or what is 'beloved.' So, what is your beloved? What is it you love? I like the idea that care and love are a deep, heartfelt involvement with the topic, touching something deep inside — as opposed to looking at it as a series of propositions or tenets that we have to believe in or adhere to, such as a creed. Hopefully, this is something that will touch us all in a deep, even tender way — a tender spot within. Our value, our nobility, our dignity, our worthiness can allow us to really touch, feel, and experience the full depth of the challenges and the potentials we have as human beings.

We use the word 'suffering' a lot when talking about Buddhism and the Four Noble Truths. It might not be the best translation for the word *dukkha*, but it's a translation I'll use today since it's the most common one. Some people hear the word 'suffering' and immediately think about the big suffering in their lives. And maybe this kind of suffering is a little bit irrelevant for how they're going about their daily lives. In fact, it may seem a little overwhelming to hear the word. The word *dukkha*, translated as 'suffering,' is meant to define the full range of ways in which we feel stress and distress, and how we are challenged by this life in big and small ways. If we study and look deeply into our suffering, we can find an alternative, a different way of living in the world. We can find something about how we suffer that doesn't have to be there.

I want to clarify that the word *dukkha* defined as 'suffering' also points to the large, big suffering that we have. It points to the things that are most challenging for us and may not be a part of our ordinary, everyday lives. It points to the things that we will encounter sooner or later, to things we can anticipate we will encounter, or the kind of things that sometimes when we're young we don't think about so much.

The Buddha is said to have lived a life of privilege, protection, and luxury. He didn't really know about the large existential challenges of sickness, old age, and death. As the myth goes, he escaped from the palace, and supposedly saw sickness, old age, and death for the first time, as a twenty-seven-year-old man. (Imagine living protected from life for that long!) As protected as he was, it probably came as a shock to him. And maybe some of you have been shocked by your encounter with these things. Sometimes there are sudden losses, deaths, and changes that turn our lives upside-down.

I like to think that the Buddha designed the Dharma, not so much as a place to deal with the everyday stresses of life — certainly it addresses that — but in fact to really prepare us, with care, love, groundedness, rootedness, steadiness, and courage, for the biggest challenges that come existentially in this life. In this regard, when the Buddha laid out some examples while addressing suffering, he used powerful words that translate into English as, “grief, mourning, pain, distress, and anguish.”

In looking at the Four Noble Truths, we're looking at the truths of grief, mourning, pain, distress, and anguish. We're seeing that these powerful feelings are doorways or conduits into something that's on the other side of them — something that the Buddha called 'freedom' or 'peace.' Dharma practice can open us up to a deep respect for and acknowledgement of these things. It can allow us to really see and understand them well. As we step into these tender and challenging areas, we have to do so with a lot of care, faith, groundedness, and stability. Being simply present, connected, and grounded — without getting caught up in ideas and abstractions — is central to making Dharma practice effective.

For some reason, the Buddha doesn't mention the word 'fear' in his definition of *dukkha*. I don't know why that is, except that maybe fear by itself is not always a problem. It doesn't always arise out of attachment and clinging. In fact, fear can be healthy and appropriate. The biological fear around survival is not necessarily rooted in greed, hate, delusion, or attachment. It comes in the package of being alive. The Buddha did say, however, that the world of clinging and attachments is something that gives rise to tremendous fear. So to really delve into these deep topics of the Four Noble Truths is to also address the kind of fear that is rooted in attachment.

Scholars sometimes say that in early Buddhism, there are different layers of how these truths were laid out. In the earliest layer, the Four Noble Truths were very simple. The text says:

This is suffering.

This is the arising of suffering.

This is the cessation [the end] of suffering.

And this is the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

It was very simple and direct.

Then later, the word 'truth' was added:

This is the truth of suffering.

This is the truth of the arising of suffering.

This is the truth of the cessation of suffering.

And this is the truth of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

Then later again, the word 'noble' was added:

This is the noble truth of suffering.

This is the noble truth of the arising of suffering.

This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering.

And this is the noble truth of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

What we find is that these wonderful statements have no pronouns. I am very inspired by this. The idea of addressing suffering is not directional. It's wherever we encounter it. Certainly the suffering we have in ourselves is a place where we can take the most responsibility, and where we can delve most deeply into the very roots of

what it's all about. But these powerful formulas also address the suffering we encounter in the world. This is something that we want to attend to, study, and understand.

So as we go through the Four Noble Truths, we want to be inclusive of the world and have our practice be part and parcel of the wellbeing, freedom, and happiness of all beings. I want to end with a statement, which certainly has great value for me and, I believe, for all of us as we begin this study of the Four Noble Truths:

Your suffering is my suffering. My suffering is your suffering.
Their suffering is our suffering. Our suffering is their suffering.
Your welfare is my welfare. My welfare is your welfare.
Their welfare is our welfare. Our welfare is your welfare.

Let's care for the welfare of all. Thank you.