

Four Noble Truths: *Dukkha* (3 of 5) Happiness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Good morning. This is the third talk in a series of five talks in which we discuss the first of the Four Noble Truths – the noble truth of suffering. The task of this truth is to understand suffering. It is a call to stop, take a good look, and be with suffering. A bumper sticker for Buddhists might be, “I stop for suffering,” in the sense that this is really something to look at and be with. But it can seem that this emphasis on suffering could lend itself to despair or discouragement. Are we supposed to just suffer, and simply look at the suffering that is so difficult to have?

Many years ago I learned of a woman who lived in the Menlo Park area as a teenager. This was in the 1960s and Menlo Park was one of the centers for the Grateful Dead, Ken Kesey, and The Merry Pranksters. It was part of the bubbling up, or the origins of the whole psychedelic movement.

I am not sure if this story was connected to that, but she and two of her high school friends had heard that there was a Zen teacher in San Francisco who could teach them how to get high without taking psychedelics – without taking drugs. They decided to travel up to San Francisco – about 35 miles away – to see Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. Suzuki Roshi was living in Japan town at a little temple in the Japanese community. This was probably about 1965, before he started the Zen Center.

They came, and he received them. They told him they were there because they had heard that he could teach them how to get high without taking any drugs. He sat down and welcomed them in. He then proceeded to give a teaching about the Four Noble Truths – the truth of suffering, the truth of the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

Well, this was not what these young women had gone to San Francisco to learn. They were not there to get a

lecture about suffering. However, this Zen teacher appeared so happy as he was talking about suffering. The incongruity of hearing him talk about suffering, and watching him be so happy was the reason one of those three young women became a Zen student. She was a Zen student for many, many years.

Yes, Buddhism does emphasize suffering. It is important to look at it and make an honest assessment of it. It teaches us to not turn away, shut down, or pretend life's suffering is different than it is. We don't want to make a romantic view of reality that doesn't recognize the severity, seriousness, or scale of suffering that human beings experience. In that sense, Buddhism is meant to be quite realistic.

At the same time, the Buddha also emphasized happiness and was known to be a very happy person. He referred to the people who had engaged in the practice of freedom from suffering as “the happy ones.” If you read the teachings of the Buddha – the instructions the Buddha gave for a path to the end of suffering – that path is called “a happy path.” He emphasized doing the things that cultivated various kinds of well-being – happiness, gladness, and joy (some people call joy “rapture”).

The cultivation of well-being or happiness creates the conditions to be able to be with suffering and look at it in

the deepest of ways. It prepares the ground for a person to be able to see suffering in its depth and fullness. The suffering of human beings has layers and layers. Often what we see on the surface and can identify as our immediate suffering has deep tentacles, deep roots inside. We try to go deep inside and feel the core, central suffering of our lives that has been our companion for a lifetime. This doesn't come and go. If we are quiet and still, we can feel our deepest attachments – the things we care about most, are most scared about, or resist the most. That is the task of our practice. The idea is to do this in a deep way from a place of well-being, tremendous stability, and being grounded. Happiness and joy are a part of it.

That was certainly true for me. Some of my biggest insights or encounters with suffering happened while in deep meditation practice. This is kind of a paradox. I had so much happiness and joy at that point, that the happiness and joy became the container, the ground, and the foundation to be present for suffering.

I am not implying that this is easy, or accessible. I am saying this as an encouragement. Buddhist practice is not just about sitting with suffering. In some popular cultures, there is the idea that the first noble truth says that life is suffering. The Buddha never said that. That is not really a Buddhist teaching unless the teachings are understood as saying: within life, there is suffering –

and there is also happiness. Translating *dukkha* as “pain” and saying that life is painful also lends itself to the idea that yes, of course, it is painful in certain times and places, but there is much more to life. Life can also be happy.

The Buddha not only emphasized that the path to freedom from suffering is a happy one, he also emphasized that those who had gone through to the other side, to the end of suffering, were the happy ones. He used the word “*sukha*.” They were the happy ones.

Some people feel contentment or happiness through knowing that there is a path, there is a way and a practice where we can be honestly present for how difficult life is for us. It feels right to know that this path is possible and is well known. People have been doing this since the time of the Buddha.

The suffering that we have today might be on a different scale because we have so many more people in the world than at the time of the Buddha. In that sense, the aggregate might feel bigger, but it is the same suffering as during the time of the Buddha. It is not much different than before.

The Buddha lived at a time of much suffering. The historical analysis of what happened near the end of the Buddha's life is that his social world was collapsing.

Kingdoms were being usurped, and countries were going to war. His senior disciples were dying, and he was an old man with a very bad back. He was quite sick. His world was falling apart. And he died peacefully. He died in peace. He died happily. He died in a very deep, wonderful state of meditation.

He was able to find a happy, peaceful way where he could coexist with the suffering of the world. He wasn't burdened by that suffering, but he was realistic about it. He didn't take it on his shoulders as though he was responsible for it. He was responsive to it, and addressed it.

The idea is that, yes, there is suffering – *and* there is happiness. It can be distressing and discouraging to hear that life is suffering. As I said, that is not a Buddhist teaching. On the other hand, it can also be distressing to hear that the path to the end of suffering involves happiness and joy, because happiness and joy are not always accessible. Life can be difficult and overwhelming. Life experiences can be amazingly challenging. The pain and fear that we live in can overwhelm us.

We must recognize all this. We must prepare ourselves to do the deeper work of Buddhist meditation practice. We should ready ourselves and know that this is the direction we are going in. This is the North Star – to

cultivate a sense of relaxation, peace, and happiness. What does it take to get there?

Often, it begins with a very simple grounding, a care, and a tenderness for ourselves. We take into account what challenges us. We figure out a gentle, kind, supportive way to be present. We learn to be with what is. There is no hurry in Buddhism. We are not supposed to dive in and address suffering immediately. We might begin on the edges of it. From the edges of the suffering, we can get a realistic assessment of what we are up against. We begin to do supportive things and create a foundation for addressing the suffering at the right time.

One key Buddhist tradition that provides a foundation is to live an ethical life. We work carefully, not only in the obvious ways of being ethical, but also in the more subtle, nuanced ways. We attend to how we speak. We practice speaking honestly and kindly. We try to not speak harshly or angrily.

We practice generosity and start being generous. A friend of mine was very challenged with difficult psychological states of fear and distress. Her Buddhist teacher gave her the practice of generosity. In small ways, she started going around and wherever she could, she would help a little bit. She would do things for

people, just small things. It made a big difference for her.

Ethics, or *sila*, are things that you can choose to do or not do. It doesn't require your inner state to be any different. It just means behaving differently. Behaving differently makes a huge difference. Some people volunteer at an animal shelter or a homeless shelter. The idea is that our behaviors – generosity, kindness, ethics – are the way to begin gently laying the foundation. The Buddha taught that when we feel confident about our ethical behaviors, there is the bliss of blamelessness. There is a kind of happiness that at least our behaviors are okay, even though things are hard inside.

Then we cultivate contentment. We learn the art of being content with what we have. Of course, sometimes we have less than we need, less than may be ideal. We might be challenged with poverty and be out of work. Even so, can we find moments of the day when we can cultivate contentment? Can we be content with this moment, with this particular activity that we are doing, and not be wrapped up in wanting it to be different, or in anger, resistance, and fear? Cultivating some realistic kind of contentment with what we have is part of the path that helps to lay the foundation.

Then we practice with the hindrances. We start to understand how the hindrances operate in us, and how we get caught in them. As we stop getting caught in the hindrances, our core suffering might still be there, but we are not adding more suffering on top of it. Then there can be joy, contentment, and gladness, that we are not always getting caught in our reactivity.

There is mindfulness of the body. We keep getting grounded. We get our sea legs and stand here, balanced, and present. We begin allowing and trusting the flow of our experience to be here. We are not resisting, wanting, or caught up in the reification or the solidification of self around thinking. We do this in small doses. We just begin to open.

When suffering is big, then this is the medicine. When suffering is not so big or when we have the foundation ready, we keep practicing, cultivating, and looking for places where there is a sense of well-being. We look for how to realistically grow well-being. A part of that is to recognize how often there is some sense of well-being.

If we walk out of our home today and it happens to be a sunny, nice day, it is possible to be so preoccupied and caught up that we don't notice. It is also possible to walk out and take some moments to appreciate the nice day. We can appreciate the clear air and the warmth of the sun. We can look for opportunities to appreciate the life

we have – not as a denial of suffering, but so that happiness and suffering can coexist.

Finally, I would like to share a little saying: “If you want to address suffering, call on the support of happiness. If you want to support your happiness, address your suffering.” Those two work together. We address suffering with the support of happiness, and we support happiness by addressing our suffering. They go back and forth. With that, I hope that you will go deep toward the end of suffering.

Thank you for this morning, and I look forward to our chance to be together tomorrow.