

Four Noble Truths: *Paṭipadā* (5 of 5)

The Flowering of Ease

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Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to the twentieth and last talk on The Four Noble Truths. This will be a summary and conclusion.

I want to start by bringing up a statement that the Buddha made: “The Buddha teaches suffering and the end of suffering.” This very pithy way of talking about the essence of the Buddha’s teaching kind of clears the air. It points to just the essential elements of what the teachings are about. This is something that we can keep in the back of our minds – that all of the teachings,

the practices, and the way of life that Buddhism supports are for this purpose: to come to the end of suffering, the end of our unease, and the end of our distress and stress.

With that principle as a guideline, we can practice and live and reflect on our lives. With that in mind, we can ask: does what I am doing now lead me to greater suffering? Or does it bring me freedom from suffering, the end of suffering? Is this perspective I'm using now supportive to move to the end of suffering? Does this perspective, this understanding, this practice, or this activity I'm doing really help, not just for the short-term ending of suffering, but in the long term?

That is an important point because some people are just looking for relief, and relief is not the same thing as release. Relief is temporary – just getting comfortable. It can even be an escape from really looking deeply into our lives. The task of ending suffering requires us to look deeply and to really be present for something, even some great difficulty we have. If we are too quick to avoid the suffering, the pain, and the difficulties of our lives, that does not really work for the long-term ending of suffering. We have to really be present.

The Four Noble Truths place that purpose – ending suffering – at the center of Buddhism. I really love this,

because it puts a very pragmatic purpose in the middle of Buddhism, without the need for a lot of other beliefs. There are no supernatural beliefs, creeds, or ideas that we have to believe, which might seem too foreign to us.

The Four Noble Truths place at the center something that most people can identify with, and can feel is a way forward, or a way of responding. It is not much different from having a thorn in your foot and pulling it out. When you feel the pain of the thorn, it is practical to pull the thorn out. There might be a little bit of pain at first when pulling it out, but for your long-term well-being, it's good to pull it out so it doesn't dig in deeper.

The Buddha talked about a thorn in the heart. What he discovered with his awakening was that there is a thorn in the heart, and that thorn can be pulled out. There is something extra going on within us, an activity that brings on the suffering that we contribute to – this thorn – and it can be pulled out. We can come to the end of suffering.

I like to think of Buddhism as a very naturalistic form of religious life. It orients itself around a very natural aspect of our felt experience. We can recognize suffering in ourselves. We don't need a big book on Buddhism or a Ph.D. in Buddhism to appreciate when there is suffering and when it is absent, and when there's unease and when there is ease. We can use the

presence and absence of suffering as a guide to really look deeply within. The Four Noble Truths are four-fold perspectives that help us with the task of looking at suffering and coming to the end of it.

It turns out that there are many different interpretations or perspectives used by different teachers for this four-fold framework to help them look at suffering and come to the end of it. These different perspectives probably worked for them to some degree. Maybe they'll work for us in some settings in our lives. At certain times, certain perspectives will be more useful than others.

In this four-week series, I have tried to point out that the context for understanding the Four Noble Truths depends a little on the state of our mind, and where we are in our ordinary life. In the complex ordinary life of work, family, and activities, the ordinary way of thinking is to look at cause and effect. So sometimes we spend a lot of time asking, "Why did that happen?" Rather than saying, "Don't do that," asking about causes is completely appropriate sometimes. Sometimes very deep insight, relief, release, and healing can happen by understanding causes. Some people journal, talk to friends and therapists, and try to unpack what is going on until they find some really core thing that they see as the cause or the primary condition that needs to be unraveled and worked out.

The idea in this perspective is that there is a cause of suffering, and then, it points us to something that we have some ability to do something about, so we look within ourselves. There are causes of suffering outside of us; sometimes we can deal with them and address them, but sometimes we can't. Instead, we look at what we are contributing to this suffering. We ask, "What's my role in it?" Even if 90% of the cause is external and 10% internal, it's a very maturing, very liberating, very deepening process to go look at that 10%. Not to ignore the 90% out there, but here is where the seed of awakening, deep peace, and maturation of wisdom can grow: when we really look inside.

The tradition in this perspective says, "Look at the craving. Look at thirst. Look at drivenness or compulsion. Where is that in the system? And then let go of it. Bring it to an end." Because this is difficult to do, live a life that sets in place the conditions that allow you to be calm, settled, and clean enough to look deeply into what's going on here. This is the more traditional understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

Another whole perspective, which is really a powerful current in the teachings of the Buddha, is to look first at the conditions – to look at the ecology, the landscape of suffering. As the mind becomes quieter and mindfulness becomes stronger, this is where we can take a wider

look at what's going on, so we're not just caught up in causes,
or caught up with “me, myself, and mine,” or you over there, and what you're doing.

We look beyond the realm of over-identification around self and start seeing that there's a wider field of conditions that are in play here. We learn to work in and engage in that world of conditions that are shifting, moving, and developing. We let go of conditions to help overcome suffering. This is part of developing the Eightfold Path – putting in place the conditions that support a deeper letting go of the causes of suffering.

At a deeper level, especially in meditation, the Buddha teaches a lot about the tremendous value of being very still, quiet, and vibrant, with a very clear mind – resting in this peaceful mind, and just allowing the stream, the river of life, to flow, so we can see the inconstancy of experience: how it's constantly flowing, and moving, and arising and passing.

Some of the deepest, maybe subconscious areas of holding on and clinging are best addressed not in the world of concepts, ideas, causes, or even conditions, but rather, at this very primal level of experience. This is the foundation of experience, having to do with how moment-to-moment experience is flowing and moving. Any kind of suffering we have involves, in one way or

another, some attempt to try to stop, block, hold on to, or resist this flow of experience. The idea is to experience that flow, and then to let go more deeply. The deepest letting go is in the field of inconstancy. But to come to that still, quiet state of mind where inconstancy can have that powerful an impact means one has already let go of a lot.

I offered three different perspectives. There are many other perspectives on The Four Noble Truths. I'll end with what I said at the beginning: that we all have the capacity for freedom from the suffering that we contribute to, through the forces inside our own hearts – of conflict, holding on, resistance, fear, greed, hatred, resentment, envy, and conceit. We have a capacity for peace and ease. It exists in us originally, perhaps, as a little seed. That seed needs to be nourished and watered. If the seed is nourished, watered, and given the right fertile conditions, it will grow into a beautiful plant.

The idea that what is in us is ready to grow and unfold points to a very positive view of human nature and human potential. There is something really good, wholesome, and wonderful here waiting for us – a liberating process, a process that moves us to peace. We learn how to create a fertile ground for that plant, how to water it, how to make room for it to grow, and how to get out of the way.

We learn how to let something move through us that is a natural process, and that is distinct from our personal efforts to make, do, accomplish, attain, and acquire – all the actions of the self.

They are certainly okay in some settings, but there is something that is deeper than the self. Some people describe it as larger than the self. There is something within us that is not associated with what we identify as the self, by which we define ourselves. Mostly we don't *do* this, but we allow it. Allowing peace, allowing freedom from suffering, and allowing the possibility of becoming free is the whole point of the Four Noble Truths – this ennobling freedom that we can all do.

Those are the teachings on the Four Noble Truths. Next, I might do five talks on what are called “The Seven Factors of Awakening,” and then five talks on *metta* or loving-kindness.

I'll answer some questions for the next fifteen minutes or so.

Q1: How about the Eightfold Path?

Answer: One way of understanding the fourth noble truth is that it is defined by the Eightfold Path. But there are other interpretations of the fourth noble truth. The Eightfold Path as the fourth noble truth means the

conditions that enable the cessation of suffering. It is a beautiful path.

Q2: Could you please say something about the killings of so many of our African American brothers and sisters by the police? How does the Dharma guide us in facing these situations?

Answer: I think that the Four Noble Truths also apply in our society. Sometimes I like the idea that the Four Noble Truths don't have any pronouns associated with them. Sometimes what we want to do is actually turn our gaze toward the suffering in the world, and really study it, look at it clearly, and be a witness to it. Sometimes the world needs us to be a witness to the suffering of the world – to not turn away from it, to use our capacity to have some ease with what is tremendously painful, to stay present and really see suffering, take it in, and try to understand. That might mean that we have our hearts broken. I think my heart breaks regularly. What is happening with the killing of African Americans in this country is more than heartbreaking. It's just heart-wrenching that this should happen.

But the world needs you to be willing to stay open to feel that and look at it, and to become wiser because of it, and allow yourself to become different by doing this. You allow yourself to become a better person. The more

distressed you feel about what goes on in our society, the more important is that *you* do something about it. That doesn't mean that you go to Minneapolis and talk to the police chief, or whatever.

It means that in the way that you live your life, *you* learn something more about what's going on in our society so *you* can be changed. *You* do something that benefits people in this regard. What you do could be very small. But if we are not changed by the things that upset us, then I think we are probably not free. We need to be willing to look at what's happening, be a witness to it, take our time with it, and then be changed. We then try to be an agent of change in one way or another. There are many things we can do.

Q3: I've been meditating for many years, and, while my concentration has improved, my mind still wanders so much, and anxiety arrives. Is this normal?

Answer: I think it's best to consider everything normal, to normalize everything, because then it's easier to be at ease with it. Seeing whatever is happening with you in meditation as normal, then the question is, given what is happening, what is wise? What is a helpful way to go forward from here? I'm happy that your concentration has improved over time.

At some point when you're able to sit quietly and concentrated enough, what may need your concentration is the anxiety itself. So when the mind wanders off, don't come back to the breath to get concentrated. Turn your attention toward the suffering and the anxiety. That anxiety might need you.

One of the things I like to teach is that you want to help your anxiety feel safe. You want to be able to hold it in the palm of your awareness and just let it be safe – not criticizing, not trying to fix it, and not trying to get rid of it, because then anxiety is going to feel even worse. But rather, hold it and be a witness to it. See what happens and what you can learn. See what it wants. Really understand just by being with it. Sometimes when held that way, anxiety and fear will reveal what's going on by themselves. And sometimes they will finally begin to relax – “ Finally I'm being held, I'm being seen here.”

Q4: Can you post that IRC oatmeal recipe on this site? I felt so taken care of at IRC.

Answer: Well, that's very sweet. Those of you who haven't been to IRC might not know that it's the teachers who make the oatmeal in the morning at the retreats. The teachers make breakfast and put it out. It's our job to make the oatmeal. I think it's a standard oatmeal recipe. The only difference from what the box

says is be sure to put a lot of love and mindfulness into it.

Q5: How do we know if we are practicing with right effort? Previously I think I was straining too much. But now I'm wondering if I'm not going too easy.

Answer: Great question. This is the perfect question for finding right effort. Everyone needs to find it for themselves and that is the question to ask – am I straining? Am I trying too hard, or am I trying too little? Am I complacent or too easygoing? Inevitably people swing back and forth between those two. Sometimes the effort swings to extremes, but as practice goes deeper, the swings are narrower and narrower. But there are always little swings going on. Not that you're always looking at the question of what is right effort. Sometimes you're close enough, but you kind of feel your way.

The idea of tuning into suffering, tuning into unease, is actually a very important aid for meditation practice. Because if you become increasingly sensitive to where the unease, the stress, and the discomfort is, sooner or later you will feel the discomfort of trying too hard. You will also feel a kind of discomfort or dissatisfaction that comes from not trying enough. In this way, we become our own teachers, and we make little adjustments to find our way.

Q6: I am interested in how to apply the Eightfold Path in everyday life.

Answer: Wonderful. I think maybe we'll spend some time on the Eightfold Path one of these weeks.

Q7: This is not relevant to today's talk, but is there a permanent self within, according to the Buddha, like the *Purusha* or *Ātman*? What is your view on reincarnation?

Answer: Yes, the idea that there's a permanent everlasting *Ātman* within us, like a soul, is a very important part of some of the religions of India. Sometimes we translate it as “self.” The Buddha was very interesting. He was very pragmatic, in that he was really only looking at what we can see for ourselves and what we need to see for ourselves to become free of suffering. I would say he was not that interested in whether there is or is not a permanent self. But he did have a teaching called *anatta* (*anātman* in Sanskrit). This teaching is not so much that there is no self, but rather, that in the world of experience – what we can actually directly know, for the purpose of liberation – nothing in our experience is that self, is a permanent self. If there is a permanent self beyond the realm of experience, I think the Buddha would have said that it is not really that relevant. It wasn't really of interest to him.

In regard to other religions that do emphasize that, then we could look more carefully at those religions and see that there are a lot of similarities and a lot of ways in which these different traditions are not that different, even though one posits one thing and one posits another. They are all looking toward liberation, and they all have to work through many of the same issues to get to what they think is a liberated state.

Comment: We become the ripples in the stream.

I appreciate all these comments and this connection to all of you. It makes it very rich to sit here and try to teach and feel connected to you.

Q8: How can we best support *you* and your practice?

Answer: Well, that's very nice of you to ask. Just asking that makes a difference for me. I think that I'm supported by the people who practice. If you practice sincerely, that inspires me and supports me, and will support many, many people. That's really the best way I can be supported.

Q9: Is there a book from Bhikkhu Bodhi that you recommend?

Answer: I think just about everything by Bhikkhu Bodhi is very worth reading. He is a great thinker, and I use his

translations a lot. I recommend his commentary on the *suttas*, his commentary on Buddhism, and his reflections. He is a wonderful thinker, a wonderful practitioner, and a sweet, kind man. So I think that it's always useful to read Bhikkhu Bodhi.

Q10: How can the Buddha help me lose weight?

Answer: There was apparently a king in the time of the Buddha, Pasenadi, who was overweight. They were friends. The Buddha seems to have given him some advice, but I don't know what it was. It's in the *suttas* somewhere.

Hopefully, mindfulness, concentration, and the inner practice that we do help us to have the right attitude, right approach, and right discipline for whatever's needed in terms of weight, whether that means losing weight or learning to be at ease with the weight that we have.

I feel very fortunate to have this chance to unfold these teachings on the Four Noble Truths in the way I did. I hope it has been clear enough and helpful enough. For some of you who don't know much about this, maybe this is a nice beginning for reflecting a little bit about this very important Buddhist teaching.

Thank you.