

Satipaṭṭhāna (62) Four Noble Truths

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dukkha, painful, suffering, pain, insight, cessation, impermanent, arise, cease, First Noble Truth, birth, sickness, death, inconstancy

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These are often seen as the pinnacle of the insights, the core insight of the dharma. The way they are worded is: “One understands, one knows, *dukkha* as it really is. One knows the arising of *dukkha* as it really is. One knows the cessation of *dukkha* as it really is. One knows the practice leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.”

The insight that these represent are not 1, 2, 3, 4 insights that are separate – like first you know one, then the other, then the other. The way the ancient tradition offers them is that these all happen together in an instant. They are a singular understanding, singular insight, which can be explained or parsed out in these four different ways. Sometimes it is said that this insight occurs like lightning – boom! “Wow. Now I understand something.”

Some people find it very inspiring that one of the central teachings of the Buddha is an emphasis on suffering. Some people find, “Finally, someone’s talking about suffering. Stopping and taking a good look – willing to address it directly, rather than cover it over or ignore it.”

It is not just a teaching. It is an insight. It is meant to be something to experience deeply for oneself. That might not seem so interesting – to experience *dukkha*, intimately and fully, so we can know its arising and ceasing, and the way to its ending.

These Four Noble Truths, down through the centuries, have been explained in many ways. It seems like they are a wonderful template for all kinds of teachings – all kinds of ways of perceiving or understanding our human life. Part of the richness of them is their adaptability.

You can find modern books in English on the Four Noble Truths and compare how people say it and how they explain it. You see very quickly that people have different nuances and ways of teaching it. Theravādan Buddhists will teach it differently from Zen Buddhists and Zen Buddhists differently from Tibetan Buddhists. More traditional Theravādan Buddhists from Thailand might teach it differently from teachers in the West. You see it is changeable, malleable. I trust that everyone is

speaking from some idea or experience of what is most helpful for them, and then they present it that way.

In this ancient Buddhist tradition, there are two primary interpretations or understandings of the Four Noble Truths that I think are the most useful. One talks about the cause of suffering – there is suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way. The other has to do with the changing, impermanent, inconstant nature of *dukkha*, suffering. We see it arise. We see it cease. We see it cease in such a definitive, important way that something shifts and changes. There is a deep change in the psyche in seeing the whole world of *dukkha* somehow crumble down, dissolve, and drop away temporarily. Then we know something that is very powerful.

Some people in the ancient world felt that the Buddhist path only begins when there has been this deep insight into the Four Noble Truths. Now one really knows what the path is about. One has a personal experience – albeit a temporary experience – of where it is going. One knows: “Now I’m on the course. Now I know the practice leads someplace – it leads to this cessation of *dukkha*, of suffering.”

Both of these – seeing the cause and seeing the inconstant nature of it – are quite powerful for people. I will talk about both of them this week. Today I want to

say some things about the First Noble Truth. The first one is understanding, as it really is, *dukkha*. What is *dukkha*? Often we say “suffering” in English. Some people find that troublesome because they only use the word “suffering” for huge traumas, huge catastrophic difficulties.

In Buddhist terminology, the literal meaning of *dukkha* is “pain.” Sometimes it is easier to understand what Buddhists are saying about *dukkha* if we understand it to be pain or painful. For example, the classic description of what *dukkha* is, in the First Noble Truth, is that birth is painful. The word *dukkha* is an adjective, so birth is painful. Sickness is painful. Aging is painful. Death is painful. Associating with what is not liked is painful. Not being able to associate with what we love is painful. Not getting what we want is painful. In short, clinging – clinging to the aggregates, which we talked about some weeks ago – is painful.

Here is a statement that all these things are painful. It does not say that they are always painful. They are commonly painful. I think if you say birth is painful, most mothers will say: “Yeah, it was painful. But that’s not all it was.” People die, and it is not necessarily painful to die, but to say it is painful seems like, “Oh, yeah, that’s often the case.” Or there is something painful about it. Aging does not have to be painful, but I think most people, who start getting older, will discover that there is

pain involved with getting older. This very human thing of being with what we do not like, being with something that is unpleasant, is painful. Not being able to be close to what we love, not being with our loved ones, can be painful.

By naming a series of things in this human condition, I think what they are trying to do is to lay out the full range of where people experience pain, emotional pain. One more I did not list: anguish, lamentation, pain, depression, and despair are painful. All these things are painful.

If all we do is name it, then it is depressing. Then we can have anguish, lamentation, pain, depression, distress, and despair. But this is an honest look – an appreciation and a recognition that this is part of the human condition. And there is something about this that is optional. It is not necessary to be caught in some aspect of this pain. There is some way of freedom, stepping outside of the game of what is pain and painful. There is an alternative. That alternative involves seeing the changing nature, the inconstancy of this pain.

Inconstancy means it comes and goes. Maybe that is not good news – it means it is going to come back. But what it does – it allows some point for the mind to find a place of letting go, a place not part of the game, not part

of the cycles of pain that keep appearing and appearing. The mind finds a place of rest, freedom, openness, expansiveness, or some other game in town. That changes the whole perspective.

What the Four Noble Truths is leading to is a life that is free of a certain kind of pain – a certain kind of *dukkha* (suffering) – that comes from how we relate to or live in this world of suffering. In a certain kind of way, we stopped living in it. The mind, the awareness, has found a place of refuge, a place of safety, which is not separate from it all, but is not identified with it. If it is identified with anything, it is identified with freedom. It is identified with peace, with happiness.

We start with a willingness to look clearly at *dukkha*. The text says, “One sees, as it really is, *dukkha*.” Whenever the text says “as it really is,” what it means is we are seeing the inconstancy, the changing nature of it. That is the key thing. That is what makes it a noble truth. Not that we see suffering and suffer more, but we see suffering and somehow we are able to have the stillness, focus, and clarity of mind to see it as part of the inconstant flow of the changing river of our experience.

If this makes sense to you, you might try today, as you go through your day, to observe the ways in which your *dukkha* comes and goes, appears and disappears, rises

and falls, surges and recedes. Chances are your *dukkha* is not constant. If it is constant, then chances are you are holding on to something. What are you holding on to?

I am not saying that dealing with suffering is easy. But can you begin looking at it through a different lens, a different perspective from your usual one? Can you almost step outside of yourself, to look at *dukkha* as something that is flowing, changing, inconstant – a part of the stream of perceptions that are constantly shifting and changing? That sometimes comes back to *dukkha*, but then flits away. Begin breaking up the solidity of everything into the flow, the stream of experience.

If looking at *dukkha* today is too much for you, of course, you can stop. Do not do it too much. To understand what we are going to do for the rest of the week, you might see if you can gaze upon your *dukkha* in a new way. See what happens. Thank you very much, and I look forward to meeting here again tomorrow.