Approaching the Four Noble Truths

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For many of us, the first thing we learn about Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. What’s ironic is that the Buddha usually would not start with the Four Noble Truths, especially when he was teaching laypeople. He’d first give an introduction called the Graduated Discourse. In many cases, people, after hearing the Discourse, were ready for the Four Noble Truths. Really ready, in the sense that once they understood them and actually experienced them, they gained the first taste of awakening. What was important was the content of the Graduated Discourse and the qualities of mind that they brought as they listened to it. The qualities were these. There were five. Respect for the teacher, respect for the Dhamma, and respect for themselves. In other words, being open to hearing what the teacher had to say, trying to see the value of what he was saying, and also having a strong sense that they were capable of following the teaching. It’s interesting that you read in the Canon the different people who listened to the Buddhist Discourse and gained their first taste of awakening. It’s a wide range of people, everything from kings down to hired killers. In the case of the hired killer, there were people who were hired to kill the Buddha himself. But the Buddha managed to get them to put down their weapons and listen to the Dhamma. Unfortunately, we don’t have a record of what he said for these different Graduated Discourses. He probably tailored them to his audience. It would have been really interesting to hear what he had to say to the killers. But they must have been impressed by his presence, impressed by his lack of fear in the face of them. In fact, they were afraid of him. So he listened with respect. He was able to get them convinced that they too could benefit from following the teachings, they too were capable of putting these things into practice. The other two qualities that you’re supposed to bring are appropriate attention and singleness of mind. Appropriate attention is when you ask the right questions. How does this teaching relate to how I’m suffering? How I’ve come to put an end to suffering? And you’re really focused. The term for singleness of mind, ekagatha jitta, or jitta sankhya gatha, is sometimes translated as one-pointedness. So one-pointed, in some cases, people interpret it as meaning you can’t even sense your body or anything else around you. Of course, that wouldn’t work for a Dhamma talk. What it really means is the mind is gathered together. Ega, one, aga, gathering place. The mind is gathered around the talk. You give it your full attention. But with appropriate attention, you’re not only listening to the talk, but you’re also taking it in. In other words, seeing how it applies to what’s going on in your mind right now. Those are the attitudes you bring. As to the talk itself, it’s interesting, it starts with qualities of the heart. It’s not something we’re trying to figure out, a theory. The Buddha wants to teach that generosity is a good thing. This was a controversial issue at that time. There were some teachers who said that generosity didn’t mean anything. Whatever you did was influenced by the stars or influenced by other forces beyond your control. Generosity was meaningless. The Buddha is basically here saying that generosity is meaningful. And it gives good results. Same with the principle of virtue, which is the second topic. By abstaining from harm, there are good results. Whether he actually explained the principle of karma as he discussed these topics, we don’t know. But by the way he discussed them, definitely shows that your actions are the things you choose, and they do make a difference. So pay careful attention to what you’re doing. Then the Buddha teaches the rewards of generosity and virtue in the very central levels of heaven. None of this is really beyond anyone’s ability to understand. But then he turned the tables. He said even those rewards in heaven, even though they may be very great, have their drawbacks. In fact, he talked about sensuality, which means that your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures not only has drawbacks, but it’s also degrading. You’re lowering the quality of your mind by pursuing sensual pleasures. And you’re setting yourself up for a fall. Because even the devas end their lifespan. They come falling back down. And if they’re really heedless, they go way down. The purpose of all this is to get the listener to be inclined to find another source of pleasure, another source of happiness. And the Buddha said you learn how to see renunciation as rest. Renunciation here doesn’t mean simply giving up things. It means looking for an alternative pleasure. The pleasure of jhana, the pleasure of concentration. So once he had his listeners inclined to want that kind of pleasure, that kind of happiness, see it as a good thing. Then he taught them the Four Noble Truths. Suffering or stress, which should be comprehended. Its cause, three kinds of craving, which should be abandoned. The cessation of suffering, which comes from the abandoning of craving. And then the path that allows you to abandon craving, the Eightfold Noble Path. That’s to be developed. So there are cases where people listening actually practiced what the Buddha taught as he was teaching. And they actually saw it. Okay, this is the suffering. This is the cause. This is the cessation. This is the path. This, this, this. He’s talking about a direct experience. It’s not that you agree that the Buddha thinks nicely, thinks reasonably. His words are meant to have an impact on you. They’re meant to have an effect. They’re meant to make you do things as you listen. And as you do the path. If you got it right, and these fortunate people got it right the first time, then you do have a taste of the cessation. When the five aggregates, having been comprehended, are abandoned together with the craving. The aggregates as they function in suffering, the aggregates as they function in getting the mind into concentration, those get abandoned. And you find that there is an intense happiness that’s not dependent on any conditions at all. This is why the Buddha uses the image of the path. He calls craving the cause of suffering, something that arises together with it. But the path is not the cause of the cessation. It leads you to the end of suffering, but what you experience after that is not caused by the path. Having seen that, you come back. And it’s changed your experience entirely. Your sense of what’s possible. But because there are no aggregates in that state of consciousness, you’re not going to identify with the aggregates anymore, saying that they’re me or mine. There still will be a lingering sense of self around them, but if someone were to ask you, are they really you? And the answer is no. You saw that what you’ve learned came through your own actions. So you’re going to have to be very careful. You realize that it was through your own stupidity that you didn’t see this. dimension before. And the stupidity lay in acting in unskillful ways. So your adherence to the five precepts is going to be really solid. And finally, of course, there’s no doubt about the Buddha in his awakening. You see inside yourself that what he said is true. There is a dimension where there is no suffering. And you gained it through your own efforts. This has a huge impact on the mind. You’re seeing something you never saw before. So it’s not there just to agree that, yeah, the Buddha’s right. That’s not what he wanted. I mean, that was the beginning. But then you take what he had to say that was right and you put it to use. These teachings are meant to be used as tools. They’re meant not only to describe things, but also to perform. Teaching what to do. This is why when a John Lee talks about the different qualities of mind that you bring to mindfulness practice. Mindfulness, alertness, ardency. The wisdom lies in the ardency, in the actual doing of the duties. Because it’s only then that the teachings can have an effect. This is what we’re aiming at, as we practice. Taking the teachings, seeing how they apply to this question of why am I suffering? How am I suffering? What exactly is my suffering? And how can I put an end to it? And being really focused on what you’re doing. If you bring that attitude, that’s when you’re wise and you listen to the teachings in the wisest way. If you listen to them simply to argue and to spin out theories, there’s nothing really wise about that. You’re skirting around the real issue. It’s what you do with the teachings that matters. And as you notice, there’s an element of reflection here. When the Buddha has you listen to his teachings, you’re meant to look inside and see how his teachings refer to what you’re doing right now. That element of reflection carries on throughout the practice. That’s why when the Buddha introduced his son to the teachings, the image he used was of a mirror. You’re not just thinking about this is how the mind works. But as you look into it, how is your mind working right now? What is it doing? And is it skillful? If you really want to see it, you have to get it as quiet as possible. Otherwise we stir around. That’s a pun in Thai. The word for a person is kon. The word for stirring is kon. And a lot of people are just stirring a stirred, like a jar of water that has some mud at the bottom. As long as we keep stirring it, no matter how nicely we stir it or how cleverly we are in stirring it, it still keeps the mud throughout the water. If you want to see things, you have to get the mind as really still as possible. That’s seeing renunciation as rest. Then when the mind has found this rest inside, then it’s going to see itself. Or at least it has the chance to see itself. This is why I have to bring in appropriate attention, ask the right questions about what’s going on inside. What am I doing that’s causing suffering? What can I do to stop? All the questions that are worth answering come from those two, to try to get your mind still right now. That’s what this hour is for. Once things are stilled down, ask yourself, “What am I doing that’s adding any unnecessary stress here?” As you get the mind getting into concentration, sometimes you find that you are doing a lot of things to get it into concentration, because you’ve got to make sure it doesn’t go here, doesn’t go there. It’s like a mother hen looking after a lot of her little chicks, trying to gather her in. But as things settle down, then there’s less that you have to do. Let’s say the activity of talking to yourself about the breath reaches a point where it’s unnecessary, so you drop it. You reflect on the fact that, “I’m doing this and it’s not necessary.” Drop it. And you find that the mind stays really solidly still, begins to shed, shed, shed different activities. And you see that because you notice that certain activities add a little extra stress to the quietness of the mind. And the important thing is you see that they’re unnecessary. As long as they’re necessary, in other words, if you drop them and the mind loses its concentration, you’ve got to do them. But there will come a point when the mind gets more solid, then you can drop them in a secure way. So as you listen to the Dhamma, take the Dhamma in. The Thay and Chan talk about this again “Open, I go.” Bring it in. Because after all, that’s where it came from to begin with. The Buddha didn’t have a lot of texts to study. Everything he taught came from within his mind, came from his ability to observe his own mind. And if you’re going to follow him and gain awakening, we have to learn to observe ours as well.

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