

The Truth of Transcendence

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Years back, a friend of my brother found out that I was a Buddhist monk and so he decided to get a present for my niece. It was a little box, called *Buddha in a Box*. It had a little plasticine Buddha and a little booklet on the Buddha's teachings, which told of how the Buddha awakened to four wonderful truths: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. [Pause.] There's no laughter. [Laughter.] You think that's what the Buddha awakened to? Those four wonderful truths? [More laughter.] I had to sit my niece down and explain things to her.

More recently I read someone saying the Buddha awakened to four noble truths about life, and that was it. In other words, he didn't awaken to anything transcendent, he didn't really put an end to suffering, didn't find anything unconditioned. He just found that there were four, again, wonderful truths about life. And that's not true either. Part of his awakening was discovering the four noble truths, but he also discovered there were tasks appropriate to them. There were skills that you developed around the truths, each truth requiring a specific skill: Suffering is to be comprehended; the cause of suffering, craving, is something you want to learn how to abandon; the cessation of suffering is something you want to realize, and the path to that cessation—which involves dispassion for the craving—is something you want to develop.

But the Buddha didn't stop there. Remember, the Dhamma wheel has twelve spokes and so far we only have eight. The remaining four spokes were realizing that he'd completed the duties with regard to all four truths, and it was the completion of those duties that led to something beyond the four noble truths. After all, the truths are part of the path and the path does go someplace. If the Buddha didn't have a goal, he wouldn't have used the image of the path. There is a total end of suffering; there is a total release and it's totally unconditioned.

Another teacher I was reading said that release is something conditioned. She cited a text in the Canon where the Buddha starts out with dependent co-arising up through suffering and then from suffering talks about how suffering gives rise to conviction and conviction gives rise to effort and joy, concentration, discernment, all the way up to release. So her conclusion was that release, too, is caused; therefore, she said, nibbana is also a conditioned phenomenon—it comes and goes—and she claimed to be able to dip into nibbana whenever she wanted to, with the mature realization that it wasn't going to last. She presented this as if it were good news.

Again this is missing the whole image of the path. The path is something conditioned but it can lead to something unconditioned. It's like gaining release from prison. You have to go through certain processes—all the paperwork, all the requirements that you have to fulfill in order to get out of prison. But those processes don't create the freedom you find outside. That's something independent of the paperwork, the bureaucratic hassles. The paperwork gets you there, but the freedom isn't caused by the paperwork.

In the same way, there is something unconditioned. That point has to be repeated over and over again, because for some reason there are people who don't like the idea, whether it's because it makes them feel inferior or that there's a demand placed on them: "There's somebody out there who's attained freedom, whereas I haven't attained freedom and therefore there's something wrong with me and I don't want to feel like there's something wrong with me so let's not even think about it." And that's just setting the bar so low that there's no such thing as accomplishment, no such thing as attainment, which is not a gift in any way at all.

But the path was the Buddha's gift to other people: He found the path to totally unconditioned freedom and he was able to teach it. He showed the way. As in the Thai word *naenam*: *Nae* - he was able to advise; and

nam - he was able to lead you there, show you the path, show you by example that this was possible.

So even though the issue of an unconditioned freedom may not be your immediate problem right now as you're meditating, if there were no freedom, it would be a big problem. It would shut the door on any hope of a total release from suffering. We'd be stuck here—and how that could be good news, I have no idea. The real good news is that there is an unconditioned. And, through your efforts and through your desires and through your attempts to achieve mastery, it can be attained. There is an end to the work we're doing here.

So don't confuse the path with the goal. The path is one thing; the goal is something else. And part of the path is understanding the four noble truths and learning how to use them. That much is true, but it's not the end. We want to learn how to see things in terms of the four noble truths so that we can apply the duties and master the skills.

Now, this is a very special way of seeing things. It doesn't come automatically. In some of the texts, the Buddha starts right out with the four noble truths, but in others he has to work up to them. Basically, he starts out with what's called mundane right view, which essentially is belief in the principle of kamma, your actions: that your actions really do make a difference, that the quality of your intentions really does determine the quality of the results. There are good and bad actions leading to good and bad results. A lot of us resist this teaching because as soon as we think about our past actions having results, we think about all the bad things we did and say, "Oops, they're going to come and get me."

But that's not how the Buddha introduced the topic of kamma. When he was talking about mundane right view or the principle of kamma, he'd start out with generosity and gratitude. The phrasing is, "There is what is given, there is what is sacrificed, there is what is offered." It sounds strange, but he's basically pointing out that giving does constitute a meritorious act, and for two reasons. One, you do have choices—and this is probably the essential part of the Buddha's teachings on kamma, on action: that you have choices, that things are not determined totally by the past. The results of past actions are going to crop up, but given the range of things that can crop up, you have choices in any one moment as to whether you're going to shape those experiences in a skillful or unskillful way. So when you give something, it's because you've made a choice. You weren't forced to give.

The second reason for why giving is meritorious is because the action of giving does have results. It does lead to positive states of mind, positive conditions that have real value because people have value. People have value because they can make choices.

As for gratitude, the Buddha starts out by saying, "There is mother and father." This was in opposition to a belief that you didn't have any real debt to your parents because, in giving birth to you and raising you, they just were acting under totally predetermined forces, so they had no choice in the matter. You came out, and that's it. It was just a mechanical or a biological process.

But once you realize that your parents had choices—they had the choice to give birth to you, they had the choice to let you live, and in many cases they taught you how to speak, how to walk, raised you—you have a huge debt to them. Even if they didn't raise you, even if they abandoned you at birth to be adopted by somebody else, at least they gave you the body you have. They didn't abort the pregnancy. So there's a debt to them, a debt of gratitude—*gratitude* here meaning an appreciation of the goodness that other people have done for you, the fact that the happiness you have depends on the skillful choices that other people have made.

There's a debt that goes along with that. And there's a lesson as well: that we depend on the goodness of others and the hard choices that some people have to make. If we want goodness to continue in the world, we're going to have to learn to make hard choices as well. We can't just assume that whatever comes easy is okay. Sometimes you have to make the hard choice to go out of your way to do something you know is really good, really helpful, even though it requires sacrifices.

So that's how the Buddha introduced his teaching on kamma, on action: There is goodness in the world because people can choose.

Then from those principles he'd give what was called a graduated teaching or a gradual teaching. He'd go through various topics starting with generosity and virtue and then the rewards that come from generosity and virtue. He'd talk about heaven, which is another part of the teaching on kamma: There is a life after this one, and the actions we do in this lifetime bear results now and on into the future. If the actions are good, they can open the way to heaven. But heaven isn't permanent. You have some good times up there, sporting with your fellow devas, and then you have to fall again—and when you fall, you fall hard. There were a couple of people I knew in Thailand who were constantly dissatisfied. You could never do enough for them. And Ajaan Fuang made a comment about them once, saying that they were devas in a previous lifetime and they don't like being human beings again, because it's a lot harder and a lot less fun.

So there's a danger, there are drawbacks to even the good rewards that you would gain from generosity and virtue as you wander through various states of being and becoming. It was after coming to these drawbacks that the Buddha would talk about the rewards of renunciation, looking for a higher happiness, trading in the happiness that comes from generosity and virtue for the sake of a happiness that's more lasting, that comes with giving up your desire for sensual pleasures and looking for something deeper inside, more lasting inside.

Once you'd seen the rewards of renunciation, you'd be ready for the four noble truths, which require a willingness to turn around and look, even when things are going well, to remind yourself that these things that are going well are not going to go well forever and is that really satisfactory? There's always going to be a hitch; there's always going to be something impermanent. There's always stress even in the pleasure.

The second noble truth teaches that the cause for that stress comes from the craving that tends to go along with the pleasure. So you want to look for that and to develop the qualities of mind that can see that craving and develop dispassion for it. This is why we develop all the different factors of the path, why we're sitting here concentrating right now, trying to be mindful, trying to get the mind centered: so it can find a pleasure that lies above the sensual pleasure. As the Buddha said, it's only if you find this pleasure that comes from stillness that the mind can get a better perspective on its sensual desires and genuinely let them go.

So here you are, cultivating the desire for a higher pleasure—which is perfectly fine. It's part of right effort.

There was another thing I read recently, where a teacher said he was writing with the purpose of getting people to get rid of their craving for awakening. That's really destructive. The Buddha said that the desire for awakening, the desire to be skillful, to bring skillfulness to fruition, is part of the path. As Ven. Ananda said, the craving to gain awakening is something that's necessary for the practice. So we're working on this desire to create a better state of mind, a more solid state of mind, both because it gives a higher pleasure and because it puts the mind in a better position to see its movements—to see exactly where is that movement of craving. What does it look like? How do you recognize it? Where is the stress? There are stresses that are simply part of the fact that things arise and pass away, but then there's the stress that comes from craving. It's a different kind of stress. It's the one that really causes the suffering that digs deep into the mind. But it's the one you can really do something about.

So this is how you prepare the mind to start using the four noble truths and developing the skills around them so that at some point you will have the skills fully mastered. That's when you've got a complete Dhamma wheel in your heart. And that's when even the truths get put aside. Remember the Buddha's image of the raft. The four noble truths are part of the raft. You don't carry them around after you've gotten to the other shore, but while you're crossing the river you don't want to let them go. If you let go of the raft while you're still crossing over, you just get swept down the river—and going with the flow of the river doesn't lead you to good places. In the Buddha's image, you're swept to monsters, whirlpools, crocodiles, and other beasts down the river.

So we hold onto the raft to get across, which means holding onto the path, onto all the factors of the path. But it's always good to have in the back of your mind the conviction that this will lead to a dimension of

true freedom—total, ultimate—where you won't need to hold onto anything. This conviction is something that can be tested, that can actually be verified in this lifetime. And that's a wonderful truth.