

Noble Standards

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The truths the Buddha taught about suffering, and its cause, its cessation, and the way to its cessation are called noble truths. And the question is, what's noble about them? They're motivated by the desire to put an end to suffering—which on the one hand may seem pretty common. Everybody tries to suffer less. Whatever people do, skillful or unskillful, if you asked them why they were doing it, it would come down to the idea that they'd be happier, or there would be more pleasure and less suffering, less pain. So it's a common motivation all over the world.

What's noble about the noble truths is the motivation that they're working on takes that motivation and moves it in a noble direction. To begin with, the Buddha's standards for happiness are higher. You should look carefully at what you're doing and the actual results you're getting from what you're doing, so that you can figure out how to do it more skillfully, really skillfully, so that the happiness that results is solid and sure. At the same time, you're looking for a happiness that's blameless, that doesn't harm anybody else, doesn't harm you—something that gets you out of the feeding chain. That's what makes it noble: the fact that we're looking for a happiness that's blameless.

There's that story of King Pasenadi one-on-one with Queen Mallika. He asked her, "Is there any one you love more than yourself?" And of course he's hoping that she's going to say, "Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself." But she's no fool, Queen Mallika. She says, "No, there's nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anybody you love more than you love yourself?" And the King has to admit obviously that no, there isn't. That's the end of that scene. It didn't go where the king thought it would.

So he leaves the palace and goes to see the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "You know, she's right. You could search the whole world and there's be nobody that you would love more than yourself. But you also have to reflect that everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely as you do." And so the conclusion he draws is not that it's a dog-eat-dog world out there. The conclusion is that you should never harm anybody.

This is the basis for compassion: the realization that if we're really looking for genuine happiness, it can't impose suffering on others. The Buddha doesn't say why, but two reasons come to mind. One is that if your happiness depends on other people's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. They're going to do what they can to destroy it. And, two, there is that simple fact of sympathy. If you see someone else is suffering because of your happiness, it places a tinge of sorrow in your happiness. Now, some people are very good at denying that. That's what a psychopathic personality is. They don't care. And there's a little bit of psychopath in many of us, in the sense that we just say it doesn't matter that so-and-so is suffering because we're looking for happiness.

What makes the path so noble is that we're learning how to outgrow any psychopathic tendencies we may have. You want to get really sensitive to areas in which

you're causing yourself suffering and areas in which you're causing other people suffering.

Suffering here doesn't mean that you're hurting their feelings. Some people will use their hurt feelings to run your life. And that's not what the Buddha's talking about. He's talking about ways in which people would actually harm you, killing you, stealing you, taking your things that you need in order to find their happiness.

But what they're doing is their business. The question for you is, are you going to follow their example, or are you going to avoid doing that kind of harm to yourself and others? You've got to decide you're in this for the real thing. And part of that means you've got to raise your standards.

The Buddha's approach is pragmatic. Sometimes you hear people complaining about pragmatism is that it tends to be lazy. Many pragmatists will say, if it's good enough for me, that's all they care about. That's it. So pragmatism gets a bad rap as a lazy, self-serving approach to life. The Buddha's pragmatism is different. He says you adopt these teachings because they work—that's the pragmatism—but his standards for "what works" are really demanding and high.

We've got to work on raising our standards to his level. This is often the hardest part of the practice. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha said that the practice starts with having admirable friends, people who have high standards. They want to help you raise your standards so that your idea of what's good enough gets stretched, in the right direction. That way you begin to see areas in which you thought you were skillful and your actions were good enough, and you see that they're not really. The Buddha once said that one of the secrets to his awakening was that he didn't let himself rest content with his skillful attainments. He always pursued the question: Is there a better way to do this? Are there higher standards of skill?

This is where criticism is helpful, when someone you trust points out that the very areas in your life where you are still unskillful. There are even times when there's someone you don't really trust—you don't trust their motives while they're pointing this out—but they actually do point out something that's unskillful in your behavior. You've got to learn how to admit that as a good sport. You don't want to be demolished by the criticism. That doesn't help. But you've got to learn to look at yourself: "In what way is what that person says true? Do I still have this flaw in my behavior, in my thoughts, my words, my deeds? What can I do to overcome that flaw?" That determination is what keeps you on the path, and actually turns the path into a noble one.

I visited a Dhamma center recently when some of the students were complaining that their teachers were constantly pulling the Buddha down to their level. The teachers were talking about how the reports of the knowledges the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening don't sound really possible. Maybe it was just a case of lucid dreaming. These teachers were trying to tear the Buddha down, to their level. And that really puts an end to the path right there. It closes the mind to the idea that maybe there are things in the human mind that are more than we can have anticipated.

I remember, in encountering Ajaan Fuang, what was so radical about the experience is just the sense that he did have some psychic knowledge that I had never thought possible before. It opened my mind. Maybe there's more out there than I had conceived.

Maybe I can't take myself as the measure of all things. Maybe it would be good if I tried his standards. And I thought I'm going to have to stretch myself. Work harder and meditate longer.

When emergencies of various kinds came I had to learn how to drop whatever I thought was important and focus on the emergency. Sometimes it was his health, sometimes it was other problems in the monastery: fires in the monastery, sudden building or repair projects that needed to be done. And there was a willingness to say, "Ok, I can stretch myself here." That's what enabled me to grow.

I've told you many times about the time when Ajaan Fuang said we were going to sit and meditate all night. It was very early on with my time with him. We had worked hard all that day—at least I had been working hard all that day—and I didn't think I'd be able to handle it. And so I told him as much. He looked at me and he said, "Well, is it going to kill you?" I said, "No." He said, "Then you can do it." And I did. Much against my will, but at least I gave it a try and found that it really worked. I didn't die. And I benefitted from the experience. I learned that I was capable of more than I thought.

So an important part of the practice is being willing to stretch yourself. That line from Hamlet, that there is more in the universe than is dreamt of in your philosophy, really does apply to the Buddha's teachings. Human beings are capable of more than we ordinarily think. There are more dimensions to the mind than we would normally imagine.

And so it's this willingness to allow yourself to be stretched: That's how you come, as the Buddha said, to realize what you've never realized before, to attain what you've never attained before. Because otherwise, if you keep on doing the same old things, you keep on attaining the same old level. Nothing new ever happens; nothing new ever gets discovered.

So on one hand this means being willing to listen to criticism; on the other, it means being willing to open your mind to the fact that there may be standards higher than the standards you already have. If you really want your path to be noble, you've got to stretch yourself. The result, of course, is that you benefit and the people around you benefit as well. This is a path whose fruits are not limited only to the person who tastes the noble fruits. It requires that you be generous, that you be virtuous, that you develop thoughts of goodwill and compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, where they're appropriate. And that spreads the goodness around.