

The Four Noble Truths

August 4, 2006

The discourse we chanted just now was the Buddha's first. It's called Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion. The wheel there was the passage where the Buddha talked about each of the four noble truths and about the knowledge he gained about the four noble truths in the course of his awakening.

If you notice, there were three steps of knowledge for each truth. First there was the knowledge of the truth; then the knowledge of what you have to do, your task with regard to that truth; and then third was the knowledge that the task was done.

In terms of the first truth, which is stress or suffering, the task is to comprehend it. For the second one, the origination of stress, the task is to abandon it, to let it go. For the third, the cessation of stress, the task is to realize it. And for the fourth, the path to the cessation of stress, the task is to develop it.

So there are four things you can do in the present moment. The Buddha never taught there was just one thing to do in the present—just to be equanimous or just to be non-reactive or just to go with the flow or whatever. There's no "just do this" in any of his teachings with regard to what you do to the present. There are different things that you might want to focus on and different things you have to do with regard to them. So it's good to know that you have that range of choices.

The Buddha gives you a full set of tools for dealing with whatever comes up. For example, stress and suffering: This includes pain, despair—i.e. physical pain and mental pain. There's also the pain of birth, aging, illness and death; the pain of not getting what you want; the pain of having to stay with things you don't like or being separated from things you do like. All of this falls under the stress that comes from clinging to form, feeling, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and consciousness—consciousness here being the consciousness of the senses. All of this, the Buddha says to comprehend.

Now, for most of us, when we run into pain, comprehending is not the first thing we have in mind. We want to push it away; we want to get rid of it. Sometimes the more we push, the worse it gets. That's because we don't really understand the pain. We don't take time to look and see what's actually going on to see where it comes from.

Because, as the Buddha pointed out, the sources for pain and suffering are pretty complex. *The* most complex teaching in the early suttas, dependent co-arising, is basically explaining where pain and suffering come from, where stress comes from.

How are you going to comprehend it? That's what that task in the fourth truth is all about: You try to develop the path. To comprehend pain, you need a good solid place to keep the mind so that it can watch the pain and really be interested in comprehending it, rather than just

wanting it to go away. That means you've got to put the mind in a position of strength, a place where it feels safe—not threatened or overwhelmed by the pain.

So we develop good qualities in the mind that help us develop that sense of being solidly grounded. And they come down essentially to two: getting rid of things that get in the way of seeing clearly; and then developing the qualities of the mind—like mindfulness, concentration, right understanding—that help us comprehend the pain, to help us see.

As for the things we have to abandon, the Buddha says that abandoning basically happens in two ways. In some cases, you simply watch an unskillful state of mind, and it's as if it gets embarrassed. Just the fact that you look at it straight-on—rather than letting it hover around the edges of your awareness—makes it wither away.

It's like those old stories of the hungry ghosts that hang around in dark places. If you cast a light on them, they wither. For some reason, I have in mind a movie I saw when I was younger and I can't remember its name. But it was just that: Somebody had a light that they would turn on these ghosts and you would see them dissolving away and screaming because they couldn't withstand the light.

Some of our unskillful mental qualities are just like that. You turn the light of your awareness on them, just watch them without letting them sneak in and become part of you, and they wither away.

Other's don't, and you've got to do something about them. You've got to argue with them. You've got to explore: Exactly where is this mental state wrong? Where is its appeal? In other words, how does it arise? How does it pass away? And what is the hook? For example, when greed comes: Why do you like greed? Why do you want to go along with it? What do you think you're getting out of it? When anger comes: Why do you want to go along with it? You can't just watch it and hope that it'll go away. It will go away—I mean everything that arises passes away—but that doesn't mean you're done with it. It's going to come back unless you really understand, until you see where the hook is.

Then understand also where the drawbacks of that particular state are. In other words, if you were to follow with it, if you were to identify with it, where would it take you? Say a thought of anger arises in the mind. If you were to think that thought for twenty-four hours, where would it lead you? What shape would your mind be in? If it's going to be bad for you over twenty-four hours, why give it even a couple of minutes in your mind? After all, these are defilements—that's the term for them. We don't usually like the term "defilement" but that's what they are. They defile the clarity of the mind.

It's like those little kids who go up to their friends and get them to throw a stone into somebody's window and then run away, leaving the kid who threw the stone to get punished. In other words, anger comes, it makes you do and say something, and then it goes and you're left with the results of your actions. You've thrown the stone; you're going to get punished.

So you can't trust these things. You've got to understand: Where's the hook? Why do they appeal to you? Many times we don't like to admit to ourselves that these things have a real satisfaction, when it feels really good to give into lust or greed or anger or whatever. But if we don't admit that to ourselves, we never understand them. So we've got to look for that.

Then we look for the drawbacks. And finally we look: Where is the state of mind that's escaped from these things, that's free from these things? How do you get to that point?

This requires analysis. You've got to think about these things and explore—not in an abstract analysis, but actually analyzing what's going on in the mind, parsing things out as they happen. This is the more active side of getting rid of bad qualities and developing good ones.

So these are some of the different tasks we have in the present moment. It's not that you just sit here and try to be equanimous or non-reactive or just be the knowing or whatever. You have to look and see: What needs to be done right now? Which of the four tasks is the most appropriate right now? And then, in implementing the tasks, what have you got to do? Because there are many different ways, say, of developing skillful qualities or abandoning unskillful ones; many different ways of understanding suffering so you can get past it—because suffering is complex.

So you want to look at the whole issue in terms of the four noble truths. Instead of saying, "I'm suffering, I'm suffering," just look, "Okay, where is the suffering and what's actually causing it?" Look in terms of cause and effect. And do what you can to get the "I" out of there, so that you can look purely in terms of what you're doing, what the results are. This is why, when you meditate, there are times when you just simply watch the breath, and other times when you want to play with it, experiment with it. You need both skills in order to deal with things as they come up.

Otherwise, it's like going to very a dangerous place and you've only learned one step, say, in the martial arts, and the people you might meet know 108 steps. You're going to get clobbered. They see that you have got only one step, only one technique, and they've got all kinds of techniques. What you need is lots of techniques as well.

So it's good to master all the skills the Buddha recommends: knowing how to develop the path; knowing how to comprehend suffering; what questions to ask; when to simply look on and watch things; and when to test, experiment, explore. The only way you learn this is through trial and error. This is why meditation is called practice. You do it again and again and again, like practicing a piano. You play it again and again and again until you get it right. But that's not just through the force of willpower. Practice requires playing it and noticing what's happening, playing it again and noticing what's happening. Change things a little bit: change the way you hold your hands; change the way you finger things. There are lots of different ways you can approach whatever the problem is in getting the piece to sound the way you want it to.

So remember, meditation is a skill, a whole bundle of skills. We have all these different tasks. They come down to four big ones: comprehending suffering, letting go of its cause,

developing the path, and realizing the cessation of suffering as a result. At different times in your practice, different tasks will come to the fore. So not only do you have to learn to master a series of approaches, but you also have to get a sense of which one is appropriate for which situation. Again: trial and error.

So keep this point in mind, because it's a very important point to remember. After all, when the Buddha gave this teaching on the tasks with regard to the four noble truths, that was the wheel of Dhamma. Setting that rolling—in other words, getting it going in such a way, as they say, that nobody can stop it: That's what his teaching was all about. So everything revolves around this: the four truths, the tasks appropriate to them. From that point, it's simply up to you to complete the tasks.

So remember: It requires a range of skills, not just one. But when you've got your full range of skills, you've got yourself protected on all sides. Like those movies of the martial arts artist who's got people coming in from four directions and he can fight them all off. When you've got a range of skills on all sides, then you can hold your own on the path.