

The Graduated Discourse

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If you were to take a class on Buddhism in a college or university, one of the first teachings you'd learn about would be the four noble truths. And from an academic point of view, that makes sense. As Ven. Sariputta said, "All the Dhamma is contained in the four noble truths in the same way that the footprints of all animals are contained in the footprint of the elephant."

But from a personal point of view, beginning with the four noble truths doesn't necessarily make all that much sense. Not everybody's ready for them, or open to receiving them in the way they should be received.

This is why, when the Buddha introduced the four noble truths, would often preface them with what was called the graduated discourse. He'd start with some very basic principles and then work his way up to the four noble truths once he felt that his listener was ready.

There's no recorded version of the graduated discourse in the Canon. It's just mentioned as a list of topics.

The first topic was generosity, giving. There are several reasons why the Buddha started with giving. For one, he said that none of the higher attainments can be reached by a person who's stingy. So he wanted to make sure that his listener appreciated the principle of giving. He also wanted to stress the fact that giving is real and giving is valuable because we have the freedom of choice. We have the freedom to give or not to give. If we didn't have any freedom of choice, giving wouldn't mean anything. Also, if people were just conglomerates, aggregates, coming together and then disappearing at death, there would be no value in being generous with one another because there'd be no lasting impact. So when the Buddha starts with giving, he's affirming the principle of freedom of choice at the same time affirming that there's something to us that goes beyond death.

From generosity or giving, he would move onto virtue, which is also a kind of gift. You give safety to yourself, safety to others, through restraint. Virtue for the Buddha is mainly an issue of restraint. You refrain from killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. That way, you protect yourself and you protect others. You give the gift of safety to them, and if that gift is universal—in other words, you give it to everybody—you're going to have a share in that universal safety as well. Virtue also teaches some other important principles, such as the fact

that true happiness can't depend on the abuse of others. If it does, they're not going to stand for it and it's not going to last.

Then the Buddha would talk about the rewards of giving and virtue. You have the respect of other people, you're well liked, you have a sense of confidence when you meet with groups of people. And there are also many material benefits: wealth, beauty, long life, all those things that we mention when we chant blessings at the meals. Then there are rewards in heaven. It's through generosity, through virtue that people go to heaven. So he's painting a picture of the rewards of good karma here.

But then he turns around and talks about the drawbacks even of good karma. Heaven is impermanent. When people fall from heaven, they fall hard. You can think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening, having that second knowledge in the middle of the night. He saw beings dying and being reborn in line with their karma, going up and down and up and down. It's almost as if samsara is playing a trick on people. You work really hard to develop good karma and you get the rewards. But then if you're attached to the rewards, you start behaving in unskillful ways to protect them. And then you start falling again. Even when you don't think you're attached, the fact that you simply get used to having things easy in a certain way makes it hard when you fall.

You don't have to look at heaven to see this. You see this even the human life. I've been reading a lot of biographies in French to recover my French. And of course, every biography ends with death. But before there's death, it's interesting to note that everybody who seems to have an enviable position in life becomes the target of a lot of jealousy. As you get older and weaker, it's not that people let up and treat you more gently and with more respect. They actually just get worse, because they see that you're weak and it's time to get rid of you quickly.

So the rewards of good karma can turn on you. This is why the Buddha talked about the drawbacks of heaven and the drawbacks of sensuality, so that you could become ready to see that renunciation might be a good thing. There might be some peace there. There might be some rest, some safety through learning how to give up the rewards of sensuality. And that's when the Buddha would teach you the four noble truths, because you want a happiness that's noble.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha calls them noble truths: They're the guidelines for conducting a noble search, in other words, a search for something that you can achieve through your actions that leads to a result that doesn't die, doesn't have any aging, illness, or death. That's what he means by "noble," as opposed to the ignoble search where you're looking for happiness in things that are going to change, things that are going to age, grow ill, and die. Or *you're* going

to age, grow ill, and die. Whereas the four noble truths provide the guidance for a path that constitutes another kind of karma, better than good. In other words, there's good karma, bad karma, mixed karma—both good and bad—and then there's a fourth kind of karma that's neither good nor bad: the karma of the noble eightfold path. That leads to an end that goes beyond karma, to the end of karma. And that's the only happiness that human action can provide that won't turn on you.

Of course, it's not that samsara's playing a trick on you. Your mind is playing tricks on you, holding out rewards and saying, "Okay, you work for this and things will get really nice." But then you get attached to the nice things and you start misbehaving and you create a lot of bad karma and you fall back down again. The mind's been doing this to itself over and over and over again. This is why we need to have some awareness of the Buddha's second knowledge, so that we can get his perspective on the rewards and drawbacks even of good karma.

The Buddha's solution was to move on to the third knowledge: Is there a way out of this? It's through seeing the four noble truths. But not just seeing them, actually applying them to life: In other words, you use them as the framework for how you look at your life and how you conduct yourself in life, because they carry duties. Suffering is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. Its cessation is to be realized. The path is to be developed. And so, instead of dividing life up to what you like and what you don't like, or what's you and what's not you, or what exists and what doesn't exist, there's simply the issue: Where is the suffering? What should be done about it and how do you approach it so as to put an end to it?

You can do that only after realizing that every other happiness you can find through action has its drawbacks. Those kinds of happiness can turn on you. When you see that, that's when you're really ready for the four noble truths, really willing to give them a serious try and follow the duties appropriate to them. Because all too often, when suffering comes, we just turn our backs on it and run away from it, trying to avoid it. But if you do that, you're never going to comprehend it.

When you contemplate the duties of the four noble truths, you begin to realize that they're all interrelated. If you want to comprehend suffering, you have to be able to look at it long enough. That really requires, one, the conviction that this is something that's really worthwhile to do; and two, the strength of mind to be with pain, to be with suffering, long enough so that you can comprehend it. To do that, you need to develop the path, both the right view that points out why this is important, and the practice of right effort, right mindfulness, and right

concentration to give the mind the strength it needs to be able to sit with pain and not get blown away by it.

So what we're doing right now, as we sit and meditate: It can either be the kind of karma that leads to a nice rebirth or pleasant conditions, that trains the mind how to be equanimous, how to be balanced in the face of difficulties, and to live life in a way that minimizes suffering. Or it can be aimed at going beyond suffering altogether. It's the same practice, but done with a different motive, different values. This is why the Buddha taught the graduated discourse, because it teaches values. It shows the importance of the four noble truths and why they're so basic, why they're so noble, and why we should want to have a noble goal for our practice.

So when you find the mind wandering off, remember those principles: generosity, virtue, the rewards of generosity and virtue, here on Earth and in heaven. But then the drawbacks—and these are the drawbacks of good actions. Can you imagine what the drawbacks of bad actions are? The drawbacks of acting on greed, aversion, and delusion? When you find the mind wandering off, try to think of these principles to re-establish your values or get them back in line with the four noble truths, so that you can actually apply the duties. These are not duties that are being imposed on you by anybody, aside from the fact that the fact of suffering pushes you in this direction if you take it seriously enough.

All too many people, even though they suffer greatly in their lives, don't get let themselves get pushed in this direction at all. They don't see the value of this because they don't try to comprehend their suffering. They hold onto beliefs telling them that they're suffering because of this person or that person or this social condition or that social condition. They don't turn around to see that the suffering in life actually comes in two sorts. There's the suffering of the fact that things are inconstant, stressful, and not self, that they're products of fabrication. And then there's the suffering of the four noble truths, the suffering that's based on craving.

The main message of the four noble truths is if you focus on this second kind of suffering—the suffering that your mind is creating for itself—then when you solve this problem, then the other kind of suffering is not going to weigh on the mind at all. So it really is within your power not to suffer. That's the good news of the four noble truths. But it's up to us to keep in mind the values that can place the four noble truths first, where they belong: the beginning of the path, the guide to the path, the values that open our way to the end of suffering, to the noble goal of the deathless.