

# The Dharma (1)

## Week 7 - The basic analysis – the disease and the prescription.

### Introduction

*'Dharma' is a Sanskrit word with several of meanings. It means both the Truth, and more particularly the Truth as set out in the teachings of Buddhism - both those taught by the Buddha himself, and by his advanced followers since his death. But 'Truth' is an abstract concept, and the written teachings of Buddhism are vast, diverse, and sometimes can seem contradictory*

*Can we boil all these teachings down to their essence? Many people want a single, logical formula, that they can see is true, and that seems to sum it all up. Unfortunately that is not really possible – any four Buddhists would probably express the essence of the Dharma in four different ways, according to their temperament and personal needs at the moment. And if we thought that the Dharma was just any one of these summaries we would be making it into something much smaller than it is, and probably excluding aspects that are vitally important for some people. The Dharma is whatever helps us to grow, and the diverse needs of people cannot be summed up in one simple formulation.*

*But there are some formulations of the Dharma that are so fundamental that they **can** give us a basic framework for our understanding. One of these is the Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha taught in his first discourse after his Enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths are fundamental because they tackle our basic problem - the fact that life as we normally live it does not give us complete fulfilment. They do this using the traditional format used for diagnosis in ancient Indian medicine: they describe the disease, the cause of the disease, the prognosis, and the cure.*

*As usually stated, the Four Noble Truths are:*

- 1. The Truth of Dukkha –(which means dissatisfaction, discomfort, or suffering;)*
- 2. The Truth of the origin of Dukkha, which is selfish craving;*
- 3. The Truth of the cessation of Dukkha, which is that it can be overcome by going beyond selfish craving;*
- 4. The Truth of the way leading to the cessation of Dukkha, which is the Noble Eightfold Path.*

*The First Truth is sometimes wrongly said to mean 'Life is suffering.' What it actually means is closer to 'life as it is normally lived is inevitably unsatisfactory.' Any life lived on the basis of constantly trying to get what we like and avoid what we don't like in the world around us will be unfulfilling, because it will not express our spiritual potential, on which all real fulfilment depends. It will also involve more suffering than it needs to, because trying to arrange the constantly changing world to our satisfaction is an attempt to achieve the unachievable, so we will constantly be frustrated and disappointed. Hence the Second Truth states that our selfish desire is the very cause of our unhappiness.*

*But if life as it is normally lived leads to dissatisfaction, the good news is that a different sort of life leads to happiness – so the Third Truth states that our dissatisfaction can be overcome, by transcending our narrow, egocentric vision of life, and living in a more*

*open, expansive way. The Fourth Truth then goes on to say that the way to do this – the way to go beyond our egotism - is to follow a path of spiritual development that helps us to grow into a larger being. If we do this we will not build our quest for happiness on getting short-lived sensory pleasures or impermanent possessions, but we will get a far deeper sense of happiness and fulfilment, no matter what the changeable, fleeting universe throws at us.*

*That is one way of explaining the Four Noble Truths. But even with something so fundamental, different Buddhists are likely to see the meaning in slightly different ways. In the following four edited excerpts from talks given on BBC Radio, four modern Buddhists give their slant on the Four Truths. Each speaker focuses on one Truth, but in the process each deals to some extent with the whole formulation from a slightly different angle.*

## **The Four Noble Truths – extracts from four radio talks**

### **Programme one - Stephen Batchelor**

We live in an unstable world, in which everything from an idle thought to a solar system comes into being, then hastens to its end. This is a place where things happen that we don't want to happen. Cars skid on ice and swerve off roads into trees. Your rival wins the hand of the person you love. Floods and earthquakes destroy in moments what years of labour have created. But we tend to ignore these facts. Paradoxically, though, to confront such inescapable truths may turn out to enrich our existence.

According to legend, Siddhartha Gautama, the prince who was to become Buddha, was raised in palaces, where his attention was constantly diverted from the transience and unreliability of his existence. Then one day he asked his father to let him see the world outside the palace walls. Despite the King's efforts to ensure that no distressing sights would spoil the young man's enjoyment, Siddhartha chanced upon a person crippled with age, another ridden with disease, and a corpse. For the first time, he was struck by the impermanent nature of human life

The contradiction between his pursuit of pleasure and his awareness of the transience of life became intolerable for the young man. Late one night, when everyone was asleep, he slipped away into the surrounding forest, discarded his royal garb, and assumed the life of a wandering ascetic. Six years later, after much effort, he experienced an awakening that at last provided an adequate response to the question posed by the riddle of birth, sickness, ageing and death. He thus came to be known as 'Buddha', the 'Awakened One'.

For the next forty years he taught his followers how to reach awakening through cultivating a middle way of ethical integrity, meditative stillness and penetrating inquiry. His awakening entailed coming to terms with four inter-related Truths: suffering, its origins, its cessation, and the path that leads to that cessation. These Truths revealed to him both the nature of the human dilemma, as well as the possibility of its resolution. The path that brings anguish to an end, he discovered, starts by gazing unflinchingly into the heart of suffering itself.

This process of coming to terms with existential unease is comparable to following a course of medical treatment. Buddha referred to himself as a healer and his teachings as a course of treatment. The crucial thing is to recognise that our existential unease is

there. We might then realise that a great deal of our suffering stems from a tight, existential grip. This grip is so intimately familiar that for most of the time we fail to notice it. It solidifies our experience in such a way that everything, including ourselves, appears inert, opaque and lifeless. The task is to find a way to release this grip.

## **Programme two- Robert Thurman**

When the Buddha gave his teaching he started out with what are called 'The Four Noble Truths'. The first of them is a recognition of the human predicament, that the unenlightened life is suffering. The second is a diagnosis of that unenlightened human condition, why we have suffering and what is the reason for it. The third is the prognosis of our human potential, how we can become what we can become if we do free ourselves from suffering. And the fourth is the therapy or methodology, enabling human beings to realise their potential.

People have often thought that Buddhism is a depressing teaching, because they hear that the First Noble Truth says all life is suffering. But the Buddha didn't say that. What the Buddha actually said was that the unenlightened life is suffering, implying that the enlightened life is bliss, happiness, Nirvana. The most important of the Four Noble Truths, of course, is the Third, the Buddha's discovery that there is such a thing as complete freedom from suffering. Buddhism is the art of happiness.

So now with that misunderstanding out of the way, let's look at the way in which we do become free of suffering, which is by understanding the cause of suffering, the Second Noble Truth. The Second Noble Truth is really very simple. It is the truth of ignorance. What the Buddha discovered was that the reason we suffer is that we do not know our own real condition. We think that reality is one way, when actually it is another. And the key element of that distorted understanding of reality is that each of us perceives ourselves to be the centre of reality. Each of us thinks that we are some sort of fixed, independent, real entity.

That wrong knowing of the nature of the world puts us in an impossible situation. If I'm the most real thing in the world, that makes me the most important thing in the world. It will be universally recognised that not a single other person in the world will agree with me on that point. The material world doesn't pay that much attention to me. And time doesn't pay much attention to me as a temporary, ephemeral mind and body complex. And therefore the world is against the reality that I perceive. So I am in conflict with the world all the time, from my basic perception of things. And being in conflict with the world, both other beings and inanimate things, I am going to lose that conflict, always. If you think you're the greatest, the most important, and the world disagrees, you are going to lose that argument with the world. You will die, you will get sick, people will not like you, people will not do what you want, and you will be forced to do what they want. And therefore you will suffer.

The Buddha investigated the nature of himself. He looked for himself as being there in that independent, self-sufficient way that we habitually feel. And when he did so with great concentration, that sense of self dissolved, and he was liberated. This liberation from the sense of being a separated self did not mean that he became non-existent. But it meant that he now began to perceive himself as part of the world, as one relational element in the world, not more important than the world, not in conflict with the world, sometimes perhaps under some stress, but capable of harmony with the world, harmony with other beings, harmony with the inanimate elements in the world.

That discovery of something not just simple oneness and not just simple difference, but a kind of complex, relative difference within ultimate oneness, that discovery gave him the supreme bliss, the total cessation of suffering, and that's why that wonderful smile is on the face of the Buddha, as we see in all of his representations in art. The happy Buddha comes from that realisation, the overcoming of the state of stress and conflict, overcoming the state of being in competition with the universe.

So that, therefore, is the truth of causation. That when we perceive ourselves as a fixed separate being we come into disagreement with the universe. When we are in disagreement with the universe, we fight with the universe. When we fight with the universe, we lose. The only way we can get out of that is by investigating our habitual perception, analysing it, and experiencing its falsity, which we can do. The Buddha assured us, and over the centuries many millions of Buddhists have also tried this methodology and assured us that it worked, that they had thereby achieved one degree or another of freedom from suffering.

Once I realise the higher happiness of being truly relational with the universe, of realising other beings as in some way inseparable from myself, I liberate my true feeling of compassion and love and friendliness for those beings. Then I become really happy in a new way, in an inner directed way, not depending on some temporarily pleasant stimulations. And at that time I perceive my old way of being - even when I was having temporary pleasure, which I perceived as being happy – and I realise that this was a suffering.

### **Programme three - Christina Feldman**

The cessation of suffering is the Third Noble Truth, and lies at the heart of all Buddhist practice and teaching. Throughout his life the Buddha described his enlightenment as the understanding of the Deathless, as Unconditioned, timeless, the highest peace and happiness, the end of all suffering, and as Nirvana. In discovering for ourselves this profound freedom of heart and mind, through letting go of the causes of suffering, we're liberated.

The Third Noble Truth is the teaching that has continued to inspire the spiritual journeys of countless people over the centuries. As human beings, we long to be free, to find the end of pain and discover an abiding peace and balance. The Third Noble Truth affirms that this is a genuine possibility for all of us. The Buddha taught that the causes of sorrow and the causes of joy lie within our own hearts. Suffering is not a life sentence. Its continuation relies upon the continuation of ignorance and craving. Its end comes with the cessation of ignorance and craving.

The Buddha stressed repeatedly that freedom is available for anyone willing to commit themselves wholeheartedly to cultivating goodness of heart and depth of understanding. We can all cultivate the honesty, integrity and dedication that makes us more enlightenment-prone, rather than prone to confusion and suffering

Nirvana is the cessation of clinging, craving and ignorance. Liberation is not a device to make life go away, nor will it guarantee that we will then have only pleasant sensations, thoughts and feelings. The Buddha's enlightenment didn't exempt him from an ageing body, illness and death. It did allow him to meet all of life's adversity, challenge, and unpredictability with equanimity, compassion and balance. It is the cessation of clinging, demand and attachment, born of understanding, that allows us to embrace all the moments of our life with poise, fearlessness and care.

At times, the Buddha described enlightenment as awakening from a dream - a dream born of ignorance. The Buddha defined ignorance as mistaking pleasure for genuine happiness. We can spend our lives prowling the world in pursuit of a succession of pleasant sensations, events and experiences. We can be equally intent on avoiding the unpleasant. No matter how successful we are in avoiding the unpleasant and attaining the pleasant, somehow the quest for enduring happiness remains unsatisfied. Craving is an unquenchable thirst and one of the building blocks of pain.

It really only takes a few moments of contemplation for us to see experientially that everything that arises in this life will also pass. Ignorance is a denial of this reality. We seek the unchanging within the changing, the eternal within the ephemeral, the constant within the fluid, and so we struggle and suffer. We think that we suffer because of change. In truth, we suffer because of our refusal to embrace the truth of change.

We go through life living within a constructed illusion of being an independent, unchanging self, living within a world of equally independent selves, separate and apart from us. We can feel so confined and limited by this idea, yet it's also one we fiercely protect. As we contemplate our sense of self, we see that it's constructed of everything we grasp hold of. We identify with our bodies, our emotions, our perceptions, states of mind, our opinions, our gender and race. We see that each moment our personal story is born, and with it is born the limitation and confinement of that story.

With mindfulness and equanimity, the tendency to grasp hold of anything at all within the changing world of experience is released. So too is the suffering born of grasping. The cessation of ignorance is a cessation of suffering, separation and struggle. It's the liberation of the heart and mind, the highest happiness and peace, the unshakeable refuge, and the birthplace of compassion.

#### **Programme four - Ajahn Sucitto**

The teachings, called 'Dharma', are likened to medicine, and everyone who practises Dharma can choose the medicine they need in accordance with the nature of the problem that needs curing. But the general theme that covers all Dharma teachings is the four noble truths: dukkha or suffering, its ceasing, and the path which leads to the end of suffering - the Noble Eightfold Path. The eight factors of this eight-fold path are right view, right intent, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

The most important point about the elements of the Eightfold Path is that they are a way of living. They lead to an awakening to ultimate truth, but do not define it. So the Buddhist approach is through direct experience, in which the first thing to consider is where both our innermost pain and our most reliable sense of well-being are to be found. Circumstances such as illness or good fortune come and go, but what lingers with us are internal conditions. If we have peace of mind, we can weather through the rough patches, but guilt, hatred or depression will cloud the brightest day. A millionaire or a king can be beset with worry and mistrust, but a propertyless monk can dwell in ease and fulfilment. Suffering and the cessation of suffering live in our minds and hearts.

In a nutshell, the Eight-fold Path can be seen as covering ethics, meditation and understanding. The practice of ethics and meditation is immensely remedial, in terms of

clearing out stress, worry and obsessive moods. It has a further development, which is the understanding that liberates the practitioner from the very source of suffering and stress. This understanding, called 'insight', both attunes you to the ephemeral nature of what is happening and puts you in touch with the steady ever-presence of awareness itself. Sensing this time and time again, a shift takes place. Your centre moves to that pure awareness. In daily life, you can act from that awareness with compassion and clarity, and in meditation you can let all events subside and dwell in the bright, unhindered presence. This leads to Nirvana, the fulfilment of the Eight-Fold Path. As you get to sense this, even in glimpses, you don't get caught up in hankering and dejection. There's no frustration, no need to defend, and nothing you have to prove. Just this is an end to suffering and stress.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Briefly express your own understanding of the Four Noble Truths in your own words – maybe a sentence for each Truth
2. How do you respond to the idea that life as it is normally lived – chasing what we like and avoiding what we dislike – is bound to be unsatisfactory? Do you think this is true? Do you like the idea? (Notice that these are different questions!)
3. Does your experience support the idea that we suffer most when we are focussed on our own wants and fears, while we are happiest when we are focussed on something beyond ourselves?
4. (A) Do you think there are some desires which we are **right** to try to fulfil? What distinguishes these from the cravings that are the cause of suffering?  
(B) Do you think there are some ways of being unselfish which do not liberate us from suffering? What distinguishes unhealthy self-sacrifice from the self-transcendence that brings liberation?
5. “If the Four Noble Truths have got it right, the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society will actually make us more unhappy”. Discuss!