

The Four Noble Truths

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THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

What is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering: in short the five categories affected by clinging are suffering.

There is this Noble Truth of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

This Noble Truth must be penetrated by fully understanding suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

This Noble Truth has been penetrated by fully understanding suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

[Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 11]

The First Noble Truth with its three aspects is: "There is suffering, dukkha. Dukkha should be understood. Dukkha has been understood."

This is a very skilful teaching because it is expressed in a simple formula which is easy to remember, and it also applies to everything that you can possibly experience or do or think concerning the past, the present or the future.

Suffering or dukkha is the common bond we all share. Everybody everywhere suffers. Human beings suffered in the past, in ancient India; they suffer in modern Britain; and in the future, human beings will also suffer. What do we have in common with Queen Elizabeth? - we suffer. With a tramp in Charing Cross, what do we have in common? - suffering. It includes all levels from the most privileged human beings to the most desperate and underprivileged ones, and all ranges in between. Everybody everywhere suffers. It is a bond we have with each other, something we all understand.

When we talk about our human suffering, it brings out our compassionate tendencies. But when we talk about our opinions, about what I think and what you think about politics and religion, then we can get into wars. I remember seeing a film in London about ten years ago. It tried to portray Russian people as human beings by showing Russian women with babies and Russian men taking their children out for picnics. At the time, this presentation of the Russian people was unusual because most of the propaganda of the West made them out to be titanic monsters or cold-hearted, reptilian people - and so you never thought of them as human beings. If you want to kill people, you have to make them out to be that way; you cannot very well kill somebody if you realise they suffer the way you do. You have to think that they are cold-hearted, immoral, worthless and bad, and that it is better to get rid of them. You have to think that they are evil and that it is good to get rid of evil. With this attitude, you might feel justified in bombing and machine-gunning them. If you keep in mind our common bond of suffering, that makes you quite incapable of doing those things.

The First Noble Truth is not a dismal metaphysical statement saying that everything is suffering. Notice that there is a difference between a metaphysical doctrine in which you are making a statement about The Absolute and a Noble Truth which is a reflection. A Noble Truth is a truth to reflect upon; it is not an absolute; it is not The Absolute. This is where Western people get very confused because they interpret this Noble Truth as a kind of metaphysical truth of Buddhism - but it was never meant to be that.

You can see that the First Noble Truth is not an absolute statement because of the Fourth Noble Truth, which is the way of non-suffering. You cannot have absolute suffering and then have a way out of it, can you? That doesn't make sense. Yet some people will pick up on the First Noble Truth and say that the Buddha taught that everything is suffering.

The Pali word, dukkha, means "incapable of satisfying" or "not able to bear or withstand anything": always changing, incapable of truly fulfilling us or making us happy. The sensual world is like that, a vibration in nature. It would, in fact, be terrible if we did find satisfaction in the sensory world because then we wouldn't search beyond it; we'd just be bound to it. However, as we awaken to this dukkha, we begin to find the way out so that we are no longer constantly trapped in sensory consciousness.

SUFFERING AND SELF-VIEW

It is important to reflect upon the phrasing of the First Noble Truth. It is phrased in a very clear way: "There is suffering", rather than "I suffer". Psychologically, that reflection is a much more skilful way to put it. We tend to interpret our suffering as "I'm really suffering. I suffer a lot - and I don't want to suffer." This is the way our thinking mind is conditioned.

"I am suffering" always conveys the sense of "I am somebody who is suffering a lot. This suffering is mine; I've had a lot of suffering in my life." Then the whole process, the association with one's self and one's memory, takes off. You remember what happened when you were a baby...and so on.

But note, we are not saying there is someone who has suffering. It is not personal suffering anymore when we see it as "There is suffering". It is not: "Oh poor me, why do I have to suffer so much? What did I do to deserve this? Why do I have to get old? Why do I have to have sorrow, pain, grief and despair? It is not fair! I do not want it. I only want happiness and security." This kind of thinking comes from ignorance which complicates everything and results in personality problems.

To let go of suffering, we have to admit it into consciousness. But the admission in Buddhist meditation is not from a position of: "I am suffering" but rather, "There is the presence of suffering" because we are not trying to identify with the problem but simply acknowledge that there is one. It is unskilful to think in terms of: "I am an angry person; I get angry so easily; how do I get rid of it?" - that triggers off all the underlying assumptions of a self and it is very hard to get any perspective on that. It becomes very confused because the sense of my problems or my thoughts takes us very easily to suppression or to making judgements about it and criticising ourselves. We tend to grasp and identify rather than to observe, witness and understand things as they are. When you are just admitting that there is this feeling of confusion, that there is this greed or anger, then there is an honest reflection on the way it is and you have taken out all the underlying assumptions - or at least undermined them.

So do not grasp these things as personal faults but keep contemplating these conditions as impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self. Keep reflecting, seeing them as they are. The tendency is to view life from the sense that these are my problems, and that one is being very honest and forthright in admitting this. Then our life tends to reaffirm that because we keep

operating from that wrong assumption. But that very viewpoint is impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self.

"There is suffering" is a very clear, precise acknowledgement that at this time, there is some feeling of unhappiness. It can range from anguish and despair to mild irritation; dukkha does not necessarily mean severe suffering. You do not have to be brutalised by life; you do not have to come from Auschwitz or Belsen to say that there is suffering. Even Queen Elizabeth would say, "There is suffering." I'm sure she has moments of great anguish and despair or, at least, moments of irritation.

The sensory world is a sensitive experience. It means you are always being exposed to pleasure and pain and the dualism of samsara. It is like being in something that is very vulnerable and picking up everything that happens to come in contact with these bodies and their senses. That is the way it is. That is the result of birth.

TO INVESTIGATE SUFFERING

I encourage you to try to understand dukkha: to really look at, stand under and accept your suffering. Try to understand it when you are feeling physical pain or despair and anguish or hatred and aversion - whatever form it takes, whatever quality it has, whether it is extreme or slight. This teaching does not mean that to get enlightened you have to be utterly and totally miserable. You do not have to have everything taken away from you or be tortured on the rack; it means being able to look at suffering, even if it is just a mild feeling of discontent, and understand it.

It is easy to find a scapegoat for our problems. 'If my mother had really loved me or if everyone around me had been truly wise, and fully dedicated towards providing a perfect environment for me, then I would not have the emotional problems I have now.' This is really silly! Yet that is how some people actually look at the world, thinking that they are confused and miserable because they did not get a fair deal. But with this formula of the First Noble Truth, even if we have had a pretty miserable life, what we are looking at is not that suffering which comes from out there, but what we create in our own minds around it. This is an awakening in a person - an awakening to the Truth of suffering. And it is a Noble Truth because it is no longer blaming the suffering that we are experiencing on others. Thus, the Buddhist approach is quite unique with respect to other religions because the emphasis is on the way out of suffering through wisdom, freedom from all delusion, rather than the attainment of some blissful state or union with the Ultimate.

Now I am not saying that others are never the source of our frustration and irritation, but what we are pointing at with this teaching is our own reaction to life. If somebody is being nasty to you or deliberately and malevolently trying to cause you to suffer, and you think it is that person who is making you suffer, you still have not understood this First Noble Truth. Even if he is pulling out your fingernails or doing other terrible things to you - as long as you think that you are suffering because of that person, you have not understood this First Noble Truth. To understand suffering is to see clearly that it is our reaction to the person pulling out our fingernails, 'I hate you,' that is suffering. The actual pulling out of one's fingernails is painful, but the suffering involves 'I hate you,' and 'How can you do this to me,' and 'I'll never forgive you.'

However, don't wait for somebody to pull out your fingernails in order to practise with the First Noble Truth. Try it with little things, like somebody being insensitive or rude or ignoring you. If you are suffering because that person has slighted you or offended you in some way, you can work with that. There are many times in daily life when we can be offended or upset. We can feel annoyed or irritated just by the way somebody walks or looks, at least I can. Sometimes you can notice yourself feeling aversion just because of the way somebody walks or because they don't do something that they should - one can get very upset and angry about things like that. The person has not really harmed you or done anything to you, like pulling out your fingernails, but

you still suffer. If you cannot look at suffering in these simple cases, you will never be able to be so heroic as to do it if ever somebody does actually pull out your fingernails!

We work with the little dissatisfactions in the ordinariness of life. We look at the way we can be hurt and offended or annoyed and irritated by the neighbours, by the people we live with, by Mrs Thatcher, by the way things are or by ourselves. We know that this suffering should be understood. We practise by really looking at suffering as an object and understanding: 'This is suffering'. So we have the insightful understanding of suffering.

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

What is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering?

It is craving which renews being and is accompanied by relish and lust, relishing this and that: in other words, craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being. But whereon does this craving arise and flourish? Wherever there is what seems lovable and gratifying, thereon it arises and flourishes.

There is this Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

This Noble Truth must be penetrated to by abandoning the origin of suffering....

This Noble Truth has been penetrated to by abandoning the origin of suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

[Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 11]

The Second Noble Truth with its three aspects is: 'There is the origin of suffering, which is attachment to desire. Desire should be let go of. Desire has been let go of.'

The Second Noble Truth states that there is an origin of suffering and that the origin of suffering is attachment to the three kinds of desire: desire for sense pleasure (*kama tanha*), desire to become (*bhava tanha*) and desire to get rid of (*vibhava tanha*). This is the statement of the Second Noble Truth, the thesis, the *pariyatti*. This is what you contemplate: the origin of suffering is attachment to desire.

THREE KINDS OF DESIRE

Desire or *tanha* in Pali is an important thing to understand.

What is desire? *Kama tanha* is very easy to understand. This kind of desire is wanting sense pleasures through the body or the other senses and always seeking things to excite or please your senses - that is *kama tanha*. You can really contemplate: what is it like when you have desire for pleasure? For example, when you are eating, if you are hungry and the food tastes delicious, you can be aware of wanting to take another bite. Notice that feeling when you are tasting something pleasant; and notice how you want more of it. Don't just believe this; try it out. Don't think you know it because it has been that way in the past. Try it out when you eat. Taste something delicious and see what happens: a desire arises for more. That is *kama tanha*.

We also contemplate the feeling of wanting to become something. But if there is ignorance, then when we are not seeking something delicious to eat or some beautiful music to listen to, we can be caught in a realm of ambition and attainment - the desire to become. We get caught in that movement of striving to become happy, seeking to become wealthy; or we might attempt to

make our life feel important by endeavouring to make the world right. So note this sense of wanting to become something other than what you are right now.

Listen to the bhava tanha of your life: 'I want to practise meditation so I can become free from my pain. I want to become enlightened. I want to become a monk or a nun. I want to become enlightened as a lay person. I want to have a wife and children and a profession. I want to enjoy the sense world without having to give up anything and become an enlightened arahant too.'

When we get disillusioned with trying to become something, then there is the desire to get rid of things. So we contemplate vibhava tanha, the desire to get rid of: 'I want to get rid of my suffering. I want to get rid of my anger. I've got this anger and I want to get rid of it. I want to get rid of jealousy, fear and anxiety.' Notice this as a reflection on vibhava tanha. We are actually contemplating that within ourselves which wants to get rid of things; we are not trying to get rid of vibhava tanha. We are not taking a stand against the desire to get rid of things nor are we encouraging that desire. Instead, we are reflecting, 'It's like this; it feels like this to want to get rid of something; I've got to conquer my anger; I have to kill the Devil and get rid of my greed - then I will become....' We can see from this train of thought that becoming and getting rid of are very much associated.

Bear in mind though that these three categories of kama tanha, bhava tanha and vibhava tanha are merely convenient ways of contemplating desire. They are not totally separate forms of desire but different aspects of it.

The second insight into the Second Noble Truth is:

'Desire should be let go of.' This is how letting go comes into our practice. You have an insight that desire should be let go of, but that insight is not a desire to let go of anything. If you are not very wise and are not really reflecting in your mind, you tend to follow the 'I want to get rid of, I want to let go of all my desires' - but this is just another desire. However, you can reflect upon it; you can see the desire to get rid of, the desire to become or the desire for sense pleasure. By understanding these three kinds of desire, you can let them go.

The Second Noble Truth does not ask you to think, 'I have a lot of sensual desires', or, 'I'm really ambitious. I'm really bhava tanha plus, plus, plus!' or, 'I'm a real nihilist. I just want out. I'm a real vibhava tanha fanatic. That's me.' The Second Noble Truth is not that. It is not about identifying with desires in any way; it's about recognising desire.

I used to spend a lot of time watching how much of my practice was desire to become something. For example, how much of the good intentions of my meditation practice as a monk was to become liked - how much of my relations with other monks or nuns or with lay people had to do with wanting to be liked and approved of. That is bhava tanha - desire for praise and success. As a monk, you have this bhava tanha: wanting people to understand everything and to appreciate the Dhamma. Even these subtle, almost noble, desires are bhava tanha.

Then there is vibhava tanha in spiritual life, which can be very self-righteous: 'I want to get rid of, annihilate and exterminate these defilements.' I really listened to myself thinking, 'I want to get rid of desire. I want to get rid of anger. I don't want to be frightened or jealous any more. I want to be brave. I want to have joy and gladness in my heart.'

This practice of Dhamma is not one of hating oneself for having such thoughts, but really seeing that these are conditioned into the mind. They are impermanent. Desire is not what we are but it is the way we tend to react out of ignorance when we have not understood these Four Noble Truths in their three aspects. We tend to react like this to everything. These are normal reactions due to ignorance.

But we need not continue to suffer. We are not just hopeless victims of desire. We can allow desire to be the way it is and so begin to let go of it. Desire has power over us and deludes us only as long as we grasp it, believe in it and react to it.

GRASPING IS SUFFERING

Usually we equate suffering with feeling, but feeling is not suffering. It is the grasping of desire that is suffering. Desire does not cause suffering; the cause of suffering is the *grasping* of desire. This statement is for reflection and contemplation in terms of your individual experience.

You really have to investigate desire and know it for what it is. You have to know what is natural and necessary for survival and what is not necessary for survival. We can be very idealistic in thinking that even the need for food is some kind of desire we should not have. One can be quite ridiculous about it. But the Buddha was not an idealist and he was not a moralist. He was not trying to condemn anything. He was trying to awaken us to truth so that we could see things clearly.

Once there is that clarity and seeing in the right way, then there is no suffering. You can still feel hunger. You can still need food without it becoming a desire. Food is a natural need of the body. The body is not self; it needs food otherwise it will get very weak and die. That is the nature of the body - there is nothing wrong with that. If we get very moralistic and high-minded and believe that we *are* our bodies, that hunger is our own problem, and that we should not even eat - that is not wisdom; it is foolishness.

When you really see the origin of suffering, you realise that the problem is the grasping of desire not the desire itself. Grasping means being deluded by it, thinking it's really 'me' and 'mine': 'These desires are me and there is something wrong with me for having them'; or, 'I don't like the way I am now. I have to become something else'; or, 'I have to get rid of something before I can become what I want to be.' All this is desire. So you listen to it with bare attention, not saying it's good or bad, but merely recognising it for what it is.

LETTING GO

If we contemplate desires and listen to them, we are actually no longer attaching to them; we are just allowing them to be the way they are. Then we come to the realisation that the origin of suffering, desire, can be laid aside and let go of.

How do you let go of things? This means you leave them as they are; it does not mean you annihilate them or throw them away. It is more like setting down and letting them be. Through the practice of letting go we realise that there is the origin of suffering, which is the attachment to desire, and we realise that we should let go of these three kinds of desire. Then we realise that we have let go of these desires; there is no longer any attachment to them.

When you find yourself attached, remember that 'letting go' is not 'getting rid of' or 'throwing away'. If I'm holding onto this clock and you say, 'Let go of it!', that doesn't mean 'throw it out'. I might think that I have to throw it away because I'm attached to it, but that would just be the desire to get rid of it. We tend to think that getting rid of the object is a way of getting rid of attachment. But if I can contemplate attachment, this grasping of the clock, I realise that there is no point in getting rid of it - it's a good clock; it keeps good time and is not heavy to carry around. The clock is not the problem. The problem is grasping the clock. So what do I do? Let it go, lay it aside - put it down gently without any kind of aversion. Then I can pick it up again, see what time it is and lay it aside when necessary.

You can apply this insight into 'letting go' to the desire for sense pleasures. Maybe you want to have a lot of fun. How would you lay aside that desire without any aversion? Simply recognise the desire without judging it. You can contemplate wanting to get rid of it - because you feel guilty about having such a foolish desire - but just lay it aside. Then, when you see it as it is, recognising that it's just desire, you are no longer attached to it.

So the way is always working with the moments of daily life. When you are feeling depressed and negative, just the moment that you refuse to indulge in that feeling is an enlightenment experience. When you see *that*, you need not sink into the sea of depression and despair and wallow in it. You can actually stop by learning not to give things a second thought.

You have to find this out through practice so that you will know for yourself how to let go of the origin of suffering. Can you let go of desire by wanting to let go of it? What is it that is really letting go in a given moment? You have to contemplate the experience of letting go and really examine and investigate until the insight comes. Keep with it until that insight comes: 'Ah, letting go, yes, now I understand. Desire is being let go of.' This does not mean that you are going to let go of desire forever but, at that one moment, you actually *have* let go and you have done it in full conscious awareness. There is an insight then. This is what we call insight knowledge. In Pali, we call it *nanadassana* or profound understanding.

I had my first insight into letting go in my first year of meditation. I figured out intellectually that you had to let go of everything and then I thought: 'How do you let go?' It seemed impossible to let go of anything. I kept on contemplating: 'How do you let go?' Then I would say, 'You let go by letting go.' 'Well then, let go!' Then I would say:

'But have I let go yet?' and, 'How do you let go?' 'Well just let go!' I went on like that, getting more frustrated. But eventually it became obvious what was happening. If you try to analyse letting go in detail, you get caught up in making it very complicated. It was not something that you could figure out in words any more, but something you actually did. So I just let go for a moment, just like that.

Now with personal problems and obsessions, to let go of them is just that much. It is not a matter of analysing and endlessly making more of a problem about them, but of practising that state of leaving things alone, letting go of them. At first, you let go but then you pick them up again because the habit of grasping is so strong. But at least you have the idea. Even when I had that insight into letting go, I let go for a moment but then I started grasping by thinking: 'I can't do it, I have so many bad habits!' But don't trust that kind of nagging, disparaging thing in yourself. It is totally untrustworthy. It is just a matter of practising letting go. The more you begin to see how to do it, then the more you are able to sustain the state of non-attachment.

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

What is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering? It is the remainderless fading and cessation of that same craving; the rejecting, relinquishing, leaving and renouncing of it. But whereon is this craving abandoned and made to cease? Wherever there is what seems lovable and gratifying, thereon it is abandoned and made to cease.

There is this Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

This Noble Truth must be penetrated to by realising the Cessation of Suffering....

This Noble Truth has been penetrated to by realising the Cessation of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

[Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 11]

The Third Noble Truth with its three aspects is: 'There is the cessation of suffering, of *dukkha*. The cessation of *dukkha* should be realised. The cessation of *dukkha* has been realised.'

The whole aim of the Buddhist teaching is to develop the reflective mind in order to let go of delusions. The Four Noble Truths is a teaching about letting go by investigating or looking into - contemplating: 'Why is it like this? Why is it this way?' It is good to ponder over things like why monks shave their heads or why Buddha-rupas look the way they do. We contemplate...the mind is not forming an opinion about whether these are good, bad, useful or useless. The mind is actually opening and considering. 'What does this mean? What do the monks represent? Why do they carry alms bowls? Why can't they have money? Why can't they grow their own food? We contemplate how this way of living has sustained the tradition and allowed it to be handed down from its original founder, Gotama the Buddha, to the present time.

We reflect as we see suffering; as we see the nature of desire; as we recognise that attachment to desire is suffering. These insights can only come through reflection; they cannot come through belief. You cannot make yourself believe or realise an insight as a wilful act; through really contemplating and pondering these truths, the insights come to you. They come only through the mind being open and receptive to the teaching - blind belief is certainly not advised or expected of anyone. Instead, the mind should be willing to be receptive, pondering and considering.

This mental state is very important - it is the way out of suffering. It is not the mind which has fixed views and prejudices and thinks it knows it all or which just takes what other people say as being the truth. It is the mind that is open to these Four Noble Truths and can reflect upon something that we can see within our own mind.

People rarely realise non-suffering because it takes a special kind of willingness in order to ponder and investigate and get beyond the gross and the obvious. It takes a willingness to actually look at your own reactions, to be able to see the attachments and to contemplate: 'What does attachment feel like?'

For example, do you feel happy or liberated by being attached to desire? Is it uplifting or depressing? These questions are for you to investigate. If you find out that being attached to your desires is liberating, then do that. Attach to all your desires and see what the result is.

In my practice, I have seen that attachment to my desires is suffering. There is no doubt about that. I can see how much suffering in my life has been caused by attachments to material things, ideas, attitudes or fears. I can see all kinds of unnecessary misery that I have caused myself through attachment because I did not know any better. I was brought up in America - the land of freedom. It promises the right to be happy, but what it really offers is the right to be attached to everything. America encourages you to try to be as happy as you can by getting things. However, if you are working with the Four Noble Truths, attachment is to be understood and contemplated; then the insight into non-attachment arises. This is not an intellectual stand or a command from your brain saying that you should not be attached; it is just a natural insight into non-attachment or non-suffering.

ALLOWING THINGS TO ARISE

Before you can let things go, you have to admit them into full consciousness. In meditation, our aim is to skilfully allow the subconscious to arise into consciousness. All the despair, fears, anguish, suppression and anger is allowed to become conscious. There is a tendency in people to hold to very high-minded ideals. We can become very disappointed in ourselves because sometimes we feel we are not as good as we should be or we should not feel angry - all the shoulds and shouldn'ts. Then we create desire to get rid of the bad things - and this desire has a righteous quality. It seems right to get rid of bad thoughts, anger and jealousy because a good person 'should not be like that'. Thus, we create guilt.

In reflecting on this, we bring into consciousness the desire to become this ideal and the desire to get rid of these bad things. And by doing that, we can let go - so that rather than becoming the perfect person, you let go of that desire. What is left is the pure mind. There is no need to become the perfect person because the pure mind is where perfect people arise and cease.

Cessation is easy to understand on an intellectual level, but to *realise* it may be quite difficult because this entails abiding with what we think we cannot bear. For example, when I first started meditating, I had the idea that meditation would make me kinder and happier and I was expecting to experience blissful mind states. But during the first two months, I never felt so much hatred and anger in my life. I thought, 'This is terrible; meditation has made me worse.' But then I contemplated why there was so much hatred and aversion coming up, and I realised that much of my life had been an attempt to run away from all that. I used to be a compulsive reader. I would have to take books with me wherever I went. Anytime fear or aversion started creeping in, I would whip out my book and read; or I would smoke or munch on snacks. I had an image of myself as being a kind person that did not hate people, so any hint of aversion or hatred was repressed.

This is why during the first few months as a monk, I was so desperate for things to do. I was trying to seek something to distract myself with because I had started to remember in meditation all the things I deliberately tried to forget. Memories from childhood and adolescence kept coming up in my mind; then this anger and hatred became so conscious it just seemed to overwhelm me. But something in me began to recognise that I had to bear with this, so I did stick it out. All the hatred and anger that had been suppressed in thirty years of living rose to its peak at this time, and it burned itself out and ceased through meditation. It was a process of purification.

To allow this process of cessation to work, we must be willing to suffer. This is why I stress the importance of patience. We have to open our minds to suffering because it is in embracing suffering that suffering ceases. When we find that we are suffering, physically or mentally, then we go to the actual suffering that is present. We open completely to it, welcome it, concentrate on it, allowing it to be what it is. That means we must be patient and bear with the unpleasantness of a particular condition. We have to endure boredom, despair, doubt and fear in order to understand that they cease rather than running away from them.

As long as we do not allow things to cease, we just create new *kamma* that just reinforces our habits. When something arises, we grasp it and proliferate around it; and this complicates everything. Then these things will be repeated and repeated throughout our lives - we cannot go around following our desires and fears and expect to realise peace. We contemplate fear and desire so that these do not delude us any more; we have to know what is deluding us before we can let it go. Desire and fear are to be known as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. They are seen and penetrated so that suffering can burn itself away.

It is very important here to differentiate between *cessation* and *annihilation* - the desire that comes into the mind to get rid of something. Cessation is the natural ending of any condition that has arisen. So it is not desire! It is not something that we create in the mind but it is the end of that which began, the death of that which is born. Therefore, cessation is not a self - it does not come about from a sense of 'I have to get rid of things,' but when we allow that which has arisen to cease. To do that, one has to abandon craving - let it go. It does not mean rejecting or throwing away but abandoning means letting go of it.

Then, when it has ceased, you experience *nirodha* - cessation, emptiness, non-attachment. *Nirodha* is another word for Nibbana. When you have let something go and allowed it to cease, then what is left is peace.

You can experience that peace through your own meditation. When you've let desire end in your own mind, that which is left over is very peaceful. That is true peacefulness, the Deathless. When you really know that as it is, you realise *nirodha sacca*, the Truth of Cessation, in which there's no self but there's still alertness and clarity. The real meaning of bliss is that peaceful, transcendent consciousness.

If we do not allow cessation, then we tend to operate from assumptions we make about ourselves without even knowing what we are doing. Sometimes, it is not until we start meditating that we begin to realise how in our lives so much fear and lack of confidence come from childhood experiences. I remember when I was a little boy, I had a very good friend who turned on me and rejected me. I was distraught for months after that. It left an indelible impression on my mind. Then I realised through meditation just how much a little incident like that had affected my future relationships with others - I always had a tremendous fear of rejection. I never even thought of it until that particular memory kept rising up into my consciousness during meditation. The rational mind knows that it is ridiculous to go around thinking about the tragedies of childhood. But if they keep coming up into consciousness when you are middle-aged, maybe they are trying to tell you something about assumptions that were formed when you were a child.

When you begin to feel memories or obsessive fears coming up in meditation, rather than becoming frustrated or upset by them, see them as something to be accepted into consciousness so that you can let them go. You can arrange your daily life so that you never have to look at these things; then the conditions for them to actually arise are minimal. You can dedicate yourself to a lot of important causes and keep busy; then these anxieties and nameless fears never become conscious - but what happens when you let go? The desire or obsession moves - and it moves to cessation. It ends. And then you have the insight that there is the cessation of desire. So the third aspect of the Third Noble Truth is: cessation has been realised.

REALISATION

This is to be realised. The Buddha said emphatically: 'This is a Truth to be realised here and now.' We do not have to wait until we die to find out if it's all true - this teaching is for living human beings like ourselves. Each one of us has to realise it. I may tell you about it and encourage you to do it but I can't make you realise it!

Don't think of it as something remote or beyond your ability. When we talk about Dhamma or Truth, we say that is here and now, and something we can see for ourselves. We can turn to it; we can incline towards the Truth. We can pay attention to the way it is, here and now, at this time and this place. That's mindfulness - being alert and bringing attention to the way it is. Through mindfulness, we investigate the sense of self, this sense of me and mine: my body, my feelings, my memories, my thoughts, my views, my opinions, my house, my car and so on.

My tendency was self-disparagement so, for example, with the thought: 'I am Sumedho,' I'd think of myself in negative terms: 'I'm no good.' But listen, from where does that arise and where does it cease?...or, 'I'm really better than you, I'm more highly attained. I've been living the Holy Life for a long time so I must be better than any of you!' Where does THAT arise and cease?

When there is arrogance, conceit or self-disparagement - whatever it is - examine it; listen inwardly; 'I am....' Be aware and attentive to the space before you think it; then think it and notice the space that follows. Sustain your attention on that emptiness at the end and see how long you can hold your attention on it. See if you can hear a kind of ringing sound in the mind, the sound of silence, the primordial sound. When you concentrate your attention on that, you can reflect: 'Is there any sense of self?' You see that when you're really empty - when there's just clarity, alertness and attention - there's no self. There's no sense of me and mine. So, I go to that empty state and I contemplate Dhamma: I think, 'This is just as it is. This body here is just this way.' I can give it a name or not but right now, it's just this way. It's not Sumedho!

There's no Buddhist monk in the emptiness. 'Buddhist monk' is merely a convention, appropriate to time and place. When people praise you and say, 'How wonderful', you can know it as someone giving praise without taking it personally. You know there's no Buddhist monk there; it's just Suchness. It's just this way. If I want Amaravati to be a successful place and it is a great success, I'm happy. But if it all fails, if no one is interested, we can't pay the electricity bill and everything falls apart - failure! But really, there's no Amaravati. The idea of a person who is a

Buddhist monk or a place called Amaravati - these are only conventions, not ultimate realities. Right now it's just this way, just the way it's supposed to be. One doesn't carry the burden of such a place on one's shoulders because one sees it as it really is and there's no person to be involved in it. Whether it succeeds or fails is no longer important in the same way.

In emptiness, things are just what they are. When we are aware in this way, it doesn't mean that we are indifferent to success or failure and that we don't bother to do anything. We can apply ourselves. We know what we can do; we know what has to be done and we can do it in the right way. Then everything becomes Dhamma, the way it is. We do things because that is the right thing to be doing at this time and in this place rather than out of a sense of personal ambition or fear of failure.

The path to the cessation of suffering is the path of perfection. Perfection can be a rather daunting word because we feel very imperfect. As personalities, we wonder how we can dare to even entertain the possibility of being perfect. Human perfection is something no one ever talks about; it doesn't seem at all possible to think of perfection in regard to being human. But an arahant is simply a human being who has perfected life, someone who has learned everything there is to learn through the basic law: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.' An arahant does not need to know everything about everything; it is only necessary to know and fully understand this law.

We use Buddha wisdom to contemplate Dhamma, the way things are. We take Refuge in Sangha, in that which is doing good and refraining from doing evil. Sangha is one thing, a community. It's not a group of individual personalities or different characters. The sense of being an individual person or a man or a woman is no longer important to us. This sense of Sangha is realised as a Refuge. There is that unity so that even though the manifestations are all individual, our realisation is the same. Through being awake, alert and no longer attached, we realise cessation and we abide in emptiness where we all merge. There's no person there. People may arise and cease in the emptiness, but there's no person. There's just clarity, awareness, peacefulness and purity.

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

What is the Noble Truth of the Way Leading to the Cessation of Suffering? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

There is this Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before....

This Noble Truth must be penetrated to by cultivating the Path....

This Noble Truth has been penetrated to by cultivating the Path: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.

[Samyutta Nikaya LVI, 11]

The Fourth Noble Truth, like the first three, has three aspects. The first aspect is: 'There is the Eightfold Path, the atthangika magga - the way out of suffering.' It is also called the ariya magga, the Ariyan or Noble Path. The second aspect is: 'This path should be developed.' The final insight into arahantship is: 'This path has been fully developed.'

The Eightfold Path is presented in a sequence: beginning with Right (or perfect) Understanding, samma ditthi, it goes to Right (or perfect) Intention or Aspiration, samma sankappa; these first two elements of the path are grouped together as Wisdom (panna). Moral commitment (sila) flows from panna; this covers Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood - also referred to

as perfect speech, perfect action and perfect livelihood, samma vaca, samma kammanta and samma ajiva.

Then we have Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, samma vayama, samma sati and samma samadhi, which flow naturally from sila. These last three provide emotional balance. They are about the heart - the heart that is liberated from self-view and from selfishness. With Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, the heart is pure, free from taints and defilements. When the heart is pure, the mind is peaceful. Wisdom (panna), or Right Understanding and Right Aspiration, comes from a pure heart. This takes us back to where we started.

These, then, are the elements of the Eightfold Path, grouped in three sections:

1. Wisdom (panna)

Right Understanding (samma ditthi)
Right Aspiration (samma sankappa)

2. Morality (sila)

Right Speech (samma vaca)
Right Action (samma kammanta)
Right Livelihood (samma ajiva)

3. Concentration (samadhi)

Right Effort (samma vayama)
Right Mindfulness (samma sati)
Right Concentration (samma samadhi)

The fact that we list them in order does not mean that they happen in a linear way, in sequence - they arise together. We may talk about the Eightfold Path and say 'First you have Right Understanding, then you have Right Aspiration, then....' But actually, presented in this way, it simply teaches us to reflect upon the importance of taking responsibility for what we say and do in our lives.

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH AS A REFLECTIVE TEACHING

In this Eightfold Path, the eight elements work like eight legs supporting you. It is not like: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 on a linear scale; it is more of a working together. It is not that you develop panna first and then when you have panna, you can develop your sila; and once your sila is developed, then you will have samadhi. That is how we think, isn't it: 'You have to have one, then two and then three.' As an actual realisation, developing the Eightfold Path is an experience in a moment, it is all one. All the parts are working as one strong development; it is not a linear process - we might think that way because we can only have one thought at a time.

Everything I have said about the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths is only a reflection. What is really important is for you to realise what I am actually doing as I reflect rather than to grasp the things that I am saying. It is a process of bringing the Eightfold Path into your mind, using it as a reflective teaching so that you can consider what it really means. Don't just think you know it because you can say, 'Samma ditthi means Right Understanding and Samma sankappa means Right Thought.' This is intellectual understanding. Someone might say, 'No, I think samma sankappa means....' And you answer, 'No, in the book it says Right Thought. You've got it wrong.' This is not reflection.

We can translate samma sankappa as Right Thought or Attitude or Intention; we try things out. We can use these tools for contemplation rather than thinking that they are absolutely fixed, and that we have to accept them in an orthodox style; any kind of variation from the exact interpretation is heresy. Sometimes our minds do think in that rigid way, but we are trying to transcend that way of thinking by developing a mind that moves around, watches, investigates, considers, wonders and reflects.

I am trying to encourage each one of you to be brave enough to wisely consider the way things are rather than have someone tell you whether you are ready or not for enlightenment. But actually, the Buddhist teaching is one of being enlightened now rather than doing anything to become enlightened. The idea that you must do something to become enlightened can only come from wrong understanding. Then enlightenment is merely another condition dependent upon something else - so it is not really enlightenment. It is only a perception of enlightenment. However, I am not talking about any kind of perception but about being alert to the way things are. The present moment is what we can actually observe: we can't observe tomorrow yet, and we can only remember yesterday. But Buddhist practice is very immediate to the here and now, looking at the way things are.

Now how do we do that? Well, first we have to look at our doubts and fears - because we get so attached to our views and opinions that these take us into doubt about what we are doing. Someone might develop a false confidence believing that they are enlightened. But believing that you are enlightened or believing that you are not enlightened are both delusions. What I am pointing to is being enlightened rather than believing in it. And for this, we need to be open to the way things are.

We start with the way things are as they happen to be right now - such as the breathing of our bodies. What has that to do with Truth, with enlightenment? Does watching my breath mean that I am enlightened? But the more you try to think about it and figure out what it is, the more uncertain and insecure you'll feel. All we can do in this conventional form is to let go of delusion. That is the practice of the Four Noble Truths and the development of the Eightfold Path.