

The Noble Eightfold Path— First talk  
July 2016

This is the first of the four talks I'll be offering on the Noble Eightfold Path. I would like to start by going over the Four Noble Truths because the Noble Eightfold Path is the fourth of these Truths and can't really be separated from the other three. The Buddha discovered these Truths on the night of His Enlightenment. They are not something he came up with in order to help beings but something he knew in the deep stillness of meditation. They are what the Buddha taught at the first sermon He gave after His Enlightenment to the five ascetics who had helped him during his period of self-mortification. They form the core and essence of all Buddhist traditions.

The First Noble Truth is that of suffering. We've all experienced suffering to some degree, but we may not be aware of the suffering the Buddha was talking about. This Noble Truth is about the suffering or unsatisfactoriness that permeates all of existence. Birth, old age, disease and death, which we all are subject to, can be suffering in and of themselves. Life as we normally see it and live it does not and cannot bring us what we are looking for because it is based on ignorance and looking outside ourselves. It is the ignorance of not knowing things as they truly are, the seeming separation from the true essence of our being or Buddha Nature. Until we do something about ourselves, there will always be a sense that there is something missing, a sense of dis-ease. This can be part of the background noise of our lives or can be a source of deep suffering. My deepest fear and deepest source of suffering before I came to Shasta Abbey was that life was meaningless and that there was only this dark emptiness. No suffering I've experienced since I've been here can compare to that. We may not be aware of or ignore this sense of dis-ease or unsatisfactoriness and continue to try and find happiness in the normal ways. Part of the suffering we experience in doing this is that nothing is permanent, nothing stays the same, life is always changing. There isn't anything we can hold onto as a permanent refuge. We don't yet know the true refuge, which we can always turn towards and rely on and can be an anchor during difficult times and make them possible to bear. We have likes and dislikes, preferences, ideas and opinions, fears and worries. We believe what our thoughts and emotions are telling us. We react to things that are said and done sometimes without reflecting on what we are about to say and do in response. We want to be with those we like and love and not be with those we don't like. We often don't get what we want or get what we don't want. Although we may try to do good, to do what seems right, our actions are generally based on a sense of self and the concerns of the self. It is a human trait to turn away from suffering and turn towards that which seems pleasurable or at least seems to release us from that suffering temporarily and this doesn't work as we all find out, and tends to create even more suffering.

The Second Noble Truth is that there is a cause for our suffering and that cause is craving. When we first discover Buddhism, it can be hard to believe that desire, craving, lust, greed and what it can lead to—ill will, avarice, fear, anger, jealousy, despair, confusion, etc.—can truly be the source of all this suffering. It doesn't seem possible. What about the aggression, the cruelty, the problems in this world we live in? What about how people treat me, what has been done to me? What about my work, my family or lack thereof? As we continue to meditate and follow the

Eightfold Path, we start to see how we are actually creating our own suffering in the things that we think, say and do. There is no perfect situation that will end our suffering. We have to learn how to let go of craving by not indulging it. It is normal for desire to arise. It's when we feel that we "must have" and start craving or lusting after what we desire, and act from that, that we create suffering. And the craving itself is suffering because it can really feel like we must have what we crave.

The Buddha taught us that in order to find the cessation of suffering, we need to stop running away from it and allow ourselves to know it fully without judgement; non-judgement and kindness towards ourselves and others are very important. This means whatever is going on in the mind: greed, craving, ill will, judgments of self and other, jealousy, meanness, anger, stress, worry, fear, confusion—from the moment to moment thoughts that arise and pass, the ideas we attach to, to deep grief, loss, painful memories, old karma, what we've done in the past, etc. When we are mindful and can see these things as they arise, we can choose not to act on them, to be pulled here and there by them, to just let them be there until they pass. The important thing is not to see our thoughts and feelings as real or who we truly are, not to see them as me or mine, no matter how ingrained, convincing or painful they might be. They are impermanent; they just arise, abide and pass away and are not our true essence. Ajahn Chah, one of the great Thai forest monks, said the following: "My way of training people involves some suffering, because suffering is the Buddha's path to enlightenment. [not that we seek suffering, but that we don't run away from it.] He wanted us to see suffering and to see its origination, cessation and the path. This is the way out for all the ariya, the awakened ones. If you don't go this way there is no way out. The only way is knowing suffering, knowing the cause of suffering [and I might add, knowing the cause of our own suffering], knowing the cessation of suffering and knowing the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering." Allowing ourselves to just be with suffering without somehow trying to make it go away takes faith, faith that we can be with it without being overwhelmed, that the suffering isn't all there is, and that it will eventually go. I have found this to be a gradual process and not easy.

Another aspect of allowing suffering into our awareness is to not always avoid what might cause craving, anger or other feelings to arise. As I've been preparing this talk, I've noticed how in many subtle ways I try to avoid having these feelings arise. It's been an eye-opener for me. In one of his books, Ajahn Munindo, another Thai forest monk, tells a lovely story about a female lay trainee who would walk on her way to work past a pastry shop. She would generally go in and have a pastry. She would really enjoy it and eventually she would stop and eat more and more pastries. She knew that her greed was out of control. At this point it felt almost like an addiction. She spoke with Ajahn Munindo about it. Then she thought she had found a solution by walking another way to work and not going by the pastry shop so that her greed wouldn't arise. It seemed to be working for her, but when she mentioned this to Ajahn Munindo, he suggested another way, which was to go back to walking down the original street and when she got to in front of the pastry shop to stop there and see what happened: to allow the craving to be there and not to leave until she had it under control. And it worked. Just as she did, we need to train with the greed, anger

and delusion that naturally arise for us and are just part of the human condition. These feelings can be very uncomfortable, and we don't want to think of ourselves as a greedy, angry or deluded person. However, avoidance does not lead to the cessation of suffering.

Also, non-acceptance of the world as it is, our situation as it is, of who we are, what we are like, what is going on in our training, or of what others are like is another source of suffering, as is comparing ourselves with others. Acceptance and compassion, which also naturally arise as we train, help a lot with this.

The Third Noble Truth is that there is the cessation of suffering, Nirvana, That Which we long for, That Which has always been there and has been covered over by all that goes on in the mind—all the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, ideas and opinions, all the karma, suffering, all that we cling to and believe. The cessation of suffering comes with the letting go of craving in all its forms, the relinquishing of all our attachments and with all-acceptance, the knowing and resting in our Buddha Nature without moving from It. We can have experiences of this cessation of suffering, and experiences alone are not enough. We have to do the hard work of knowing, training and letting go of the self. One evening many years ago I had a small experience of letting go and it felt great. I thought that my life had changed and was surprised and disappointed the next morning when the self was back in full force. Letting go of our attachments happens gradually when we are ready. Although letting go can be difficult, when we let go of something we've been attached to, it feels so much better because we are more in tune with our Buddha Nature. Letting go of deep-seated attachments may even seem impossible: what I have found as I continue in this training is that what seemed impossible to do many years ago is now possible. And although there are still some aspects of letting go that still seem impossible or not quite doable, I trust that as I go on, that will change. Ajahn Chah said the following about letting go: "If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom."

The emptiness that we know when we let go is not a dismal emptiness as I had feared; Rev. Master Jiyu called it the fullest emptiness you will ever know. And Rev. Master Daizui said the following in his book, *Buddhism from Within*: "Enlightenment is said to be unborn and undying, eternal and changeless, simultaneously empty of all things and totally full, the ultimate happiness and at the same time calm and even-minded, filled with a love and compassion which are awe-full [full of awe], wise within unknowing, consciousness unbounded and unfettered. It has been compared to awakening from a long dream, returning home, being released from prison, or becoming sober after a life-long drunk. From these descriptions it is plain to see that whatever enlightenment actually is, it involves both the end of dissatisfaction and the finding of ultimate truths." Ajahn Chah said: "The Buddha mind is free, brilliantly radiant and unentangled without any problems or issues. The reason problems arise is because the mind is deluded by conditioned things, this misconception of self." And the Buddha said: "There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned. If monks, there were no unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned no escape

would be discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned. But because there is an un-born, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, therefore an escape is discerned from what is born, become, made, conditioned.

The Fourth Noble Truth is that there is a Path that leads to the cessation of suffering and this is the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha said the following in a parable called “The Ancient City”. I have paraphrased it somewhat: “Suppose, monks, a man wondering through a forest would see an ancient path, an ancient road traveled upon by people in the past. He would follow it and would see an ancient city, an ancient capital that had been inhabited by people in the past, with parks, groves, ponds and ramparts, a delightful place. Then the man would inform the king or a royal minister [of what he had found]. Renovate that city, sire! Then the king or royal minister would renovate the city, and some time later that city would become successful and prosperous, well populated, filled with people, attained to growth and expansion.

“So, too, monks, I saw the ancient path, the ancient road traveled by the Perfectly Enlightened Ones of the past. And what is that ancient path, that ancient road? It is just this noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. I followed that path and by doing so I have directly known aging-and-death, its origin, its cessation, and the way leading to its cessation, I have directly known birth ... existence ... clinging ... craving ... feeling ... contact ... the six sense basis ... name-and-form ... consciousness ... volitional formations, their origin, their cessation, and the way leading to their cessation. Having directly known them, I have explained them to the monks, the nuns, the male lay followers, and the female lay followers. This spiritual life, monks, has become successful and prosperous, extended, popular, widespread, well-proclaimed among devas and humans.”

There’s something very moving about this quote. It’s more than just the Eightfold Path; it’s what the Eightfold Path is pointing to, where it leads. It’s the Path and its fruition. It is the Buddha Nature calling to us as something that is within each of us and has perhaps been forgotten, covered over or lost until we find it. It is the Path leading us home, to true peace of heart, to ultimate Truth. That is why as we go on in our training, we don’t even think about the Path. It’s what we naturally do or try to do. This Path shows us how to bring the Buddha’s basic Teaching into all aspects of our lives and gives us the ability to transform the whole of our lives from one of suffering to one of peace, contentment and harmony with all life and with who we truly are.