

Week 1 – The 4 Noble Truths

The Nature of the Mind

Many people nowadays have no resistance to believing that meditation is good for them – there's an ever growing infrastructure of meditation apps, and even schools are beginning to see that mindfulness can help younger children to focus and relax. Relaxation itself is something that so many people desire. In the modern world, there's so many opportunities for our attention to be captured and diverted. The desire to have a 'self care' day, to slow down and be present with ourselves is so natural and universal.

But when we get the time, when we've finally found our little retreat, it becomes quite difficult to experience the exact kind of relaxation that we've imagined for ourselves. The thoughts of previous conversations creep in, our worries for the future begin to fester since we're no longer pacifying the senses with constant stimulus. It seems as soon as we find the relaxation we've been desiring, all the sudden we want to back peddle into checking our phones, calling someone, or doing some compulsive action to ease the discomfort of sitting with the mind in complete stillness. Or maybe a separate disturbance pulls us out of our reprieve. We've just sat down to decompress and all of the sudden now I can become aware of the construction noises outside, that it's actually too cold, and that I'm hungry and I need a snack. We seek stillness but upon finding it, it appears so transient and fragile.

I find hotels and vacations to be great examples of this. Here we have a population of people who have made the decision to 'enjoy' themselves in a new place. But in this new environment, it's clear that whatever problems beset people at home have not changed at all. The arguing couple is still arguing, people are still restless waiting in lines at restaurants, and if people are generally carrying the energy of dissatisfaction within them, nothing about a new environment has the power to change this – this energy of dissatisfaction will project itself onto new people and circumstances, ever shifting to meet the present conditions.

The same is true when we sit down for formal meditation. The *idea* of stillness sounds great, the *idea* of having this inner peace is something desirable,

but as soon as I sit the mind begins to stir and I'm face to face with energies that balk so strongly at investigation that it's actually much better to abandon the meditation and go back to distracting my senses with endless stimulus.

In order to break through this, in order to escape the dissatisfaction, the restlessness and the elusive mind – we have to look at where this fundamental restlessness and feeling of dissatisfaction comes from.

The Nature of Suffering

The most sensible starting place to begin any meditation series is in the observation of the truth of suffering – that beings are subject to suffering of the mind. Given our observation of this truth of suffering, of our own and of other's, we are motivated to bring an end to it. We are ready. This truth is the fertile ground upon which we can begin to move toward the removal of suffering – only by first acknowledging suffering in its entirety, so that we may begin to understand its nature, and ultimately be free of it.

What all falls under this umbrella of suffering? Quite literally, all of it. We can think of the most desperate beings aching for clean water and medical care, the cold and hungry, the unhoused, and those experiencing severe mental illness. Taken a bit more generally, we can think of those stuck in desire for a higher pay at work, those who are frustrated with their loved ones, those who are stuck in resentment of politics and the woes of the nation, those frustrated by traffic, those impatiently waiting for an elevator, those endlessly seeking love and validation and never getting enough of it, those turning towards substances or material goods for dopamine and enjoyment, this list could be extended infinitely.

Suffering is very easy to identify in its most acute and distressing forms. When we're in pain or agony, when we've suffered a great loss – or have a burning desire for something just out of reach, the pangs of suffering feel quite obvious. But we don't always perceive suffering in its many subtle forms. The sudden urge to check social media, the desire to scratch an itch, the feeling of temptation to reach for another piece of chocolate, the sense of violation if someone walks too close to us on the sidewalk – the landscape of suffering is quite profound when we extend it to encompass ALL forms of dissatisfaction &

unfulfillment; a general unlocalized hazy feeling that things aren't quite as we'd like them to be – or that they'd *just* be better once some other condition is satisfied.

This elusive sense of dissatisfaction is the unconscious energy that we become more aware of when we begin to sit and meditate. When we find our peace and stillness and all the sudden the thoughts start creeping in, we're taken away by the mind's tendency to rationalize, fixate, ruminate, or solve. If we wish for a higher sense of satisfaction and freedom, we have to stop believing that the contents of the thoughts are the source of my dissatisfaction, such as: "this isn't moving fast enough", "I'm not good looking enough", "I shouldn't have said this", etc. Instead, we can shift our perspective and see that this unconscious generative cycle, whatever IT is that presents us with the unwholesome desires and impulses, is the problem. The problem is the arising of the undifferentiated sense of incompleteness that we feel, which then takes the shape of thought-objects and is processed in terms of people, places and events.

The 4 Noble truths

Realizing the power and scope of suffering, we are even more motivated to understand how we may be free of it. The Buddha laid out what are known as the '4 Noble Truths' to summarize these points:

1 - The truth of suffering. That life, as most people live it, consists of suffering. That our desires, aversions and all other forms of spiritual ignorance interfere with the quality of our consciousness and block us from feeling true joy. Suffering is present when we are not aware of the true nature of our own being.

2 - The truth of the cause of suffering. We suffer, essentially, because of a fundamental attachment to what is inherently an insubstantial, fluctuating experience for which we try to extract endless pleasures & satisfaction. For as long as we grasp onto the phenomenal world and place our desires external to us, we are bound to dissatisfaction. For as long as I believe that I need the chocolate to feel good, for as long as I need the promotion at work to feel validated, for as long as I need to seek sensual companionship to fulfill my romantic desires – for as long as I fail to see that the world in its pure nature is *already* complete, infinite and abundant – I am doomed to suffer, and at my own making. Further, I actually

condition myself to suffer more when I continue to satisfy my worldly desire for more attention, more money or more beauty. If I continue to depend on these impermanent fleeting objects to alleviate my fundamental sense of dissatisfaction, then I fall further into falsely believing that my indulgence has anything to do with satisfaction. And in that way, a dependency is built. People have a clear understanding of how dependency forms from things like alcohol, but many people unconsciously build dependencies on validation, financial security or social status as well.

3 - The truth of the cessation of suffering. Here is the good news - that an end to all suffering is actually possible. How can this be when we've just expanded so much on how vast the landscape of suffering is? It has to do with the removal of our attachment to causes and conditions that lie outside of ourselves. This is a huge, simplified generalization, but the point the Buddha was intending to emphasize was that the permanent, irreversible and complete removal of our suffering is possible through the sincere and persistent work to remove all attachments to external circumstances for our sense of fulfillment and happiness. Doing this gives one access to a sense of harmony that does NOT fluctuate due to external stimuli and our built up dependencies. Relationships can fall apart, jobs can lay you off, homes burn down and the body itself will ultimately get sick and die. True freedom that does not depend on worldly circumstances is the only way out of the conditioned belief that one can only be fulfilled under the proper circumstances.

4 - The way towards the cessation of suffering. Having instructed that the removal of our suffering is possible, the Buddha then laid out the path - the ways of living in which one practices in order to move toward their own liberation. The fourth noble truth comprises elements of moral and mental discipline which one may follow. These components, together, are referred to as The Noble Eightfold Path. Within it we learn how to stop suffering by purifying our actions (Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood), how to stop suffering by way of understanding how it arises in the mind (Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right Effort) and how to stop suffering by seeing the bigger picture - that our views of suffering and its causes are fully understood (Right View, Right Intention).

What have we to lose? Our greed, intolerance, hatred, lust, impatience, addictive impulses, apathy, slothfulness, possessiveness, pride, fear, worry, doubt, anxieties, restlessness, etc. The whole lot of self-centered desire, aversion and spiritual ignorance is what there is to lose.

And what have we to gain? Here, 'gain' is not necessarily the best word. Gain is also a word which implies we are expecting to receive something, which again becomes part of the problem. If we hope to gain love, gain peace, gain understanding, gain more tolerance, then we're already supposing that those things are not already inherent in our nature. So really, there's nothing to gain. The question is - what do we experience in the absence of suffering? This is the infinite landscape which we gain access to as our demands of the world lessen. Spontaneous joy, equanimity, energy, calm, lovingkindness to all beings, radiating in the bliss of life energy and the unconditional, undifferentiated state from which all life stems. This is already present, underneath the layers upon layers of self-identification and ego that we have built, that which perpetuates our suffering.

The Pendulum Mind

We can think of the typical reactive mind as a pendulum, constantly swinging side to side and rotating around. Every time we latch onto the mind with the energy of attachment, we add another 'push' to the pendulum, perpetuating the oscillations.

But what is the true nature of a pendulum? It's tempting to think that its nature is to swing around, but that's only due to external force. The true nature of a pendulum is that of stillness. This can be seen as true every time you pass an empty playground, the swings don't swing by themselves - they are only set into motion by external forces, the same is true of the pendulum-like mind. Our attachment to arisen feelings turns into craving, and in that craving we metaphorically 'grasp' the pendulum mind, which continues to perpetuate its motion.

In meditation, as we get more experience detaching from arisen thoughts in the mind, we'll gain the skill of stopping this perpetual motion. The tricky thing is that we can't just bring the pendulum to a halt - we must become

experts in the skill of not adding additional energy to the pendulum, and wait patiently for the existing motion to subside. By taking on the neutral position of being an 'observer' of the mind, we can become less attached to mental phenomena as it arises, and simply begin to question arisen thoughts with a sense of curiosity and openness.

Buddhism is Experiential

The Buddha does not expect us to swallow these supposed truths in one gulp. In fact, nothing in this philosophy needs to be fully accepted as fact. Everything the Buddha described can be experienced, through practice. So now the question becomes, how do we begin to act on these supposed truths? How do we see them for ourselves? If we see them for ourselves, then there is no pill to swallow. There is no oppressive pedagogy, or religious leaders calling upon us to accept a God that we can't believe in. What is required of us is only a persistent, honest and open effort.

I like to think of the teachings as a scientific theory. We accept gravity because it explains things that we see pretty well. It helps us understand why something falls to the ground, and why we are all pulled towards the center of a sphere-like Earth. In all spiritual matters, I treat the traditions in the same way. Buddhism helps me understand the nature of thoughts, the nature of my character defects, the nature of my suffering and of my deepest fears - it helps me understand why I behave in certain ways and what I'm afraid of. It also gives me a path towards observing and removing all of these barriers. For this reason, I have accepted these teachings in a theory-like way on the same basis that they help to explain phenomena. I am not closed off to other spiritual practices (I actually feel practicing Buddhism can help one connect more deeply to Christianity and other Religions). I remain open, malleable, and with a high level of discernment. As anyone moves through different Buddhist teachings, I encourage the same curiosity and exploration.

Urgency

We should consider ourselves lucky to have any interest in a way of living that actively contributes to the wellbeing of ourselves and denounces greed and desire as things to be rid of. Given the rare combination of being in the human

body, capable of higher thought, given the willingness to entertain spiritual matters, and given the interest to pursue it – we should recognize this timeliness and take advantage of this opportunity.

One of the most famous architects of the 20th century was Le Corbusier, most commonly known for his ‘tower in the park’ designs and as one of the key influencers of the modernist movement. But underneath his works and their bleak aesthetic was a message – that in his observation the human race was, for the first time in history, fully capable of sustaining itself through industrialized agriculture and modern technology. His architecture was a cry for a different way of living. He denounced ornament and opulence and designed his buildings to encourage people to return to nature and to condense cities into ‘towers in the park’, creating an open footprint for streaming greenscapes. His caution was that, now that the race is fully capable of sustaining itself, if we do NOT adopt a way of living freed from greed and extravagance, then we will surely destroy ourselves, that NOW is the turning point (this was in the 1920’s).

His architecture, as well as the Buddha’s teachings, are a push – that if we see the true nature of greed, of hatred, of the normal results that people get from the endless pursuit of their desires, that we ought to be willing to make effort towards a different way of living. We shouldn’t feel bad about procrastination, but we also shouldn’t be complacent with the spiritual ignorance of the world.

Some Encouragement

Beginning a meditation practice is the most difficult part. On the journey of meditation we will certainly encounter the parts of our egos which seek to remain connected to worldly pleasure, and are affected by worldly pain. However, all spiritual traditions ultimately arrive at a place of pure stillness, pure oneness and complete harmony. In Christianity, the wording may be different but the ultimate effect is the same. In that tradition, they may say ‘the realisation of Christhood within oneself’ or ‘the realisation that I am the Father are one’.

Buddhism uses different means and is taught in different traditions, but the ultimate realisation of a higher self that is disconnected from worldly pain and suffering is the same. The power we seek connection with is already present. We never need to seek external to ourselves. The stillness, the bare connection to

our own consciousness and quality of being aware of the beauty and sacredness of life is a bare condition that can never be taken from us. It does not even depend on the body. Even in the absence of a physical body, the universal presence of spirit continues to shine.

Beginning to Meditate

If Buddhism is experiential, then we must experience it. Meditation is not the only means of doing this, but it's quite accessible and practical. Meditating can be hugely intimidating, and like most things that we may hope to gain skill in, we usually don't start off as experts. Just like on day 1 of going to gym, we might be clumsy, weak and a little embarrassed about not being where we ultimately want to be - but a firm commitment to the practice when things become challenging, as with all things that can be practiced, will be of great benefit.

First, find a place. Often, the 'perfect' place doesn't exist. There might be street noise, noisy neighbors, or machinery operating while we meditate. But perfection isn't the goal, wherever in our environment we can find a place that's there for us, that gives us some semblance of safety and comfort, is a good enough place to start. Dedicating a place for your meditation practice will help in establishing it as part of your routine - and chances are, it will be imperfect.

Next, find a time. Meditating can be one of those things that always seems to slip away. All of the sudden the dishes are done, the bed has been made, laundry is done, food is made... but no meditation. We must be motivated that this practice deserves our time, and that the benefits to our quality of life are worth the investment. I try to remind myself of all the other things I'm willing to spend time on - 1 hour for an episode of TV, a 3 hour hike, 45 minutes browsing Pinterest - if I make meditation a priority, I KNOW that there's time for it.

Then, sit! There's many postures, none of which are particularly 'wrong'. I prefer to sit with my back against some support, cross-legged, and keeping my spine and neck erect. This uprightness along the spine is my way of being alert and at attention, that I am in a state of discipline, which differentiates this posture from other times of the day where I may be sitting or slouching. Aside

from the spine, I scan my body slowly to see where tension can be removed. Then I focus on breathing.

Ultimately, some kind of restlessness may tug us out of meditation. The uncomfortable pang of sitting in silence rises and our deeply rooted desire to compulsively jump into action creeps to the surface. If/when this happens – just become aware that this energy has arisen. When we feel this arise, it floods our psyche with the compulsion to move, to shift, to do anything but stay still. When we notice this, we can remember that this time is actually quite special. That even if we're not good meditators, we've set this time aside and that even if I feel uncomfortable, that this time is good for me. Not caving into the mind's obsession to leave a meditation is one of the first victories we get of training the mind that it need not act on compulsive desire.