

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH: THE EIGHTFOLD PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT (PART ONE)

We've been practicing the Padma Sambhava sadhana, the tantric meditation of Guru Rinpoche, the Lotus-Born guru. I think it is very interesting, if we really go into this, to see what happens to us. So to go further into it on our own, I'd like to assign a little homework. Since we're in Cambridge here, we should take a Cambridge, university-like approach to things — study the Dharma, and do some homework. Therefore, as homework, when you leave here, when you go out the door, apply the practice. Let's see if we can carry this with us to at least the first being we meet; not just human being — whatever crosses our path, human or pussycat, whatever. Let's see if we can radiate Padma Sambhava's awakening light rays, love, equanimity, and caring to that being, whatever it is. See if you can do that. Notice if your ordinary self-image, self-visualization takes over in a more reactive, judgmental way. See if you can carry out this practice, at least for one meeting. Of course, we could say, why don't you see if you can carry it on for the whole night or for an hour? But to be practical, let's try for at least the first encounter with someone. Notice the difference, if there is one, between how you usually hold and contain yourself and how Padma Sambhava space can be held, if it can be held.

Actually if you let go sufficiently, you don't have to hold it; just take refuge in Padma Sambhava's open space and let him contain and uphold the encounter. This could be very illuminating. Beam some love at the first person you see, and see what comes in between you and continuing on like that in life. Of course, it's a little easier to do it here in our nice, little perfumed Zen garden, but out in the smelly streets it gets a little more challenging. So let's meet that challenge, so that we can really apply and live these teachings, not just study them at Monday night class here in a Buddhist temple. It's silly to pretend that we are calm and clear and compassionate here, and live our lives in a contradictory fashion.

The Lotus-Born Guru Padma Sambhava personifies the enlightened principle. It's not a person really, but a metaphor for our own spiritual (lotus-like) blossoming, rooted in the mud of our ordinary base nature but blossoming right in that very mud. In the mud, but not of it, however muddy we might seem. As Trungpa Rinpoche used to say, even shit can be used as manure to help the flowers grow. So the manure of our own experience can help us grow.

But that's not what I intended to talk about tonight. I want to pursue the path we have been on for the last month or so, Buddhism from the ground up, explored

and explained in an American way, towards an American Buddhism. We've been talking about the original enlightenment experience of Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path (the eight principles of enlightened living).

We looked into the First Noble Truth, *dukkha*; all-pervading, overarching, dissatisfactoriness; the dissatisfaction that most of us feel gnawing at us, impelling us to seek something beyond that. And the Second Truth, its cause, which is craving, clinging, attachment. And the Third Truth, which is the end of suffering; the relinquishment of craving, clinging, and attachment; the end of conditioning; the relinquishing of our addictive habits — the realization of Nirvana.

Buddhists repeat daily the threefold refuge, the three things we can really rely on: the Buddha, enlightenment, Buddhahood; the Dharma, truth; and the Sangha, community. It helps us get through our hard time, and it supports us. We don't feel that nobody understands us. It helps us keep going, through all the various ups and downs, over the long haul.

We all sometimes feel out of tune with things, as if trying to swim upstream. With the current of our society, it seems like everybody is rushing to the shopping malls, and we're looking into something different. But maybe we're in tune with a deeper flow. It's hard to remember that until you have an inner strength, so the community of kindred spirits is very supportive. It reflects the best and worst in you, for your objective observation. That's why we all try to connect and collaborate — otherwise, we'd become lonely and alienated in these turbulent, rootless times. We gather in any number of ways to collaborate and connect and to support each other, to remind each other that we are doing something real, valid, and beautiful; something traditional that actually works and informs our life with meaning.

An example would be when we sit in meditation together. Since you all come here regularly, I know you feel that group sitting helps you. You might feel that there's more power in group sitting. Sometimes you feel like leaving or moving, but you're embarrassed to because all the other people are watching you — even at that gross level of embarrassment or self-consciousness, it keeps you going; it keeps you propped up; it's a good crutch for the weak and infirm, like us. But more deeply, there's a lot of juice, blessings, and excellent vibes in group practice. A lot of Vajrayana rituals are really made for group practice. Like the vajra feast (*tsok*) that we do on the 10th and 25th lunar days of each month, Guru Rinpoche day and dakini day. It hardly makes sense for me to do it at home alone. So at home I do it in the most cursory fashion, just to uphold my tantric commitments. But it's really made for a group. It's called a gathering, a circle feast. It's a sangha activity, a spiritual celebration, a fête.

Many of the things we do would be well-served by doing them together: meditation practice, spiritual study, community service, having a right livelihood business, hospice work, or whatever. It creates a community that heals and renews itself through working together. I think it is very important.

The downside of it is group phenomena. Whenever you get two or three people together, you have politics. With religious people, you get Dharma politics. It's because it's just the same folks getting together. You can dye your clothes any color you want — Catholic color, Buddhist color, Democratic color, Republican color, Communist color — but it's still us folks inside. We didn't quite dye our hearts a different color yet. So we bring with us whatever is in our can of worms. But that can also be the path, the fertile field for growth; rubbing off our sharp edges, learning how to fit together. Like in the three-year retreat, all the disciples from different countries were just thrown together. We were in different stages of development, different ages, with different languages and different ways of doing things. I really learned by living closely like that in a cloister with 23 people for 3 1/2 years that even if you don't like everybody, you come to love everybody. That was one of the best teachings I got out of the three-year retreat: that we're all more or less the same. Beneath the tip of the iceberg — the personality level, where one person is a scholar and one person is an anti-intellectual, where one person is a fundamentalist, dogmatic Buddhist and another person is an iconoclastic skeptic, or whatever — you realize that we are all on the same team here, playing in the same game, dealing with these irritating delusions. Naturally, you start to love everybody more and help everybody deal with these delusions.

Therefore, I think sangha is a very good teaching tool. The word comes from the word for truth. So it means a true gathering, a gathering in truth. A true way of being together.

Ananda once asked the Buddha, "Lord, is it true that the good, friendly sangha is half of the holy life?" Buddha replied, "No, Ananda, the good, friendly sangha is the whole of the holy life."

Just today I was writing for Tricycle magazine books about celebrating the tsok offering, the vajra feast. They're publishing a book about Buddhist traditions regarding food practices. One senior, venerable old monk from Cambodia said the main Buddhist practice about food is not to eat after noon. My chapter is about celebrating the vajra feast. It's a whole way of celebrating and affirming things, and integrating everything into the path. Not just cutting it all off at noon. Dancing, singing, and creativity of all kinds can all be included in celebrating the vajra feast.

I found that, through regularly meditating, a lot of things just fall into place, and we don't necessarily have to figure them all out — which we can't do, anyway. Not that we should become anti-intellectual or stop questioning or seeking or studying, not that we have to cut those limbs off, but you know how you get a knot in your shoelace and the more you fight with it the more you can't open it? Sometimes if you just stop and take a breath, then the knot just opens, although the more you fought with it, the more you tore at it, the tighter the knot became. With meditation, with a single moment of awareness, things can fall into place, if we would just stop battering our head against the wall. We might find that there is an open window or door next to the wall, which we'd overlooked in our frenzy. As long as we are battering our head, it's unlikely that we'll find it even if someone is calling to us from that open door.

I think these spiritual practices are very helpful in balancing many of our neurotic tendencies and in restoring us to inner peace, sanity, and wholeness. Then an enlightened, sane, and joyful life becomes possible. It's not just a dream. It's not for somebody else, somewhere else, who has different possibilities than we do. It's actually possible for each of us. That's the whole notion of the path in Buddhadharmā. It's a path, a journey, that we are on. It's not something we have to believe. It's not something that somebody else gives to us. It's something we live and apply ourselves. It is our path. It is right beneath our feet.

So the big question is: How to relinquish, how to let go of, these addictive patterns, all this craving, clinging, greed, and aversion. How to give up that which causes suffering and how to experience the deathless peace and fulfillment of Nirvana, which is the end of craving, clinging, conditioning, karma, and so on? So *how-to* is the main Dharma teaching. It is a kind of operating manual for enlightened living — a do-it-yourself operating manual with very clear instructions that anybody can do. This is the Fourth Noble Truth, the truth of the path. It's called the Eightfold Path, or the eight principles of enlightened living. Eight steps to enlightenment, a great highway of awakening.

This is a big subject. I will discuss the eightfold way of looking at it. But first I'll discuss how those eight were originally taught, as the three trainings, the three facets of enlightened living that support each other: *sila*, *samadhi*, and *prajna*, that is, virtue or ethics, meditation or concentration, and wisdom-awareness.

Sometimes we think (it's explained this way sometimes) that first we have to develop self-discipline (*sila*) to control ourselves enough to settle down, to pacify our nature and cool down enough so that we can practice *samadhi* (meditation and contemplation). And then we practice that enough so that we can develop wisdom. But each of these is actually mutually supportive. It is wise to be ethical

and straightforward, isn't it? It's not that morality comes first and then comes wisdom; they are all intertwined. So we have to look into ourselves and see, first of all, what we can start doing; and second, which of the three we are more out of balance on. Like we might be very concentrated meditators, but we might be lying, addictive thieves and drug dealers. So we ought to clean up our act. It's not sufficient just to try to meditate and quiet our mind, so we won't think about how paranoid we are that someone might be tapping our phones and searching our house. If we're paranoid like that, we are always looking over our shoulders. It's very hard then to have the simplicity of meditative awareness that can bring wisdom, hard to just be present with and aware of things just as they are, moment by moment.

So the first principle of enlightened living, sila, is very important and helpful. It's not just like the Ten Commandments imposed on us from the outside. It's sensible. It's a natural morality to be impeccable, virtuous, righteous, straightforward, and honest. How can we pursue wisdom and truth if we are lying, if we are manipulating, if we are deceiving ourselves and others, if we're taking what's not given, sometimes called stealing? Traditionally theft is described as taking what's not given. It's a little subtler than stealing. It's also using things that aren't ours, exploiting others, and hoarding or squandering resources that belong to everyone.

The point of developing some kind of ethical ground or self-discipline is very helpful when we enter into meditation, the second training. If we have a life that is straight, we don't have to worry about telling different lies to different people and whether they will find out. We don't have to be paranoid. We don't have to remember anything. It's much more simple to just be honest and straightforward, isn't it? If we deceive ourselves, don't we harm ourselves in the end? What are we getting away with? It says in the teachings that the wheel of karma grinds exceedingly fine. In the theistic teachings it would say God sees everything. In Buddhism, we don't talk about things we don't know about, like God and his activities; we say that cause and effect is very tightly fitting. Sweeping the dirt under the rug is fine, but how long before the rug starts to lift up at the corners? Put the radioactive waste in the ocean, maybe we'll never see it again, but what about our children and grandchildren? They might face it by surprise, and an unpleasant surprise indeed.

Therefore, it seems to me that it is incumbent upon us to act responsibly, and even impeccably. Impeccable is a good word in this regard, because it is not so codified. What does it mean to be impeccable? And yet, don't we know when we are not? I think it is a good ideal for sila, to live a righteous and virtuous life, for our own betterment as well as for the benefit of society. If we cannot be role models for coming generations, who will be?

Living a morally unimpeachable life will help very much to develop our samadhi, our focus, our concentration and meditation. We won't be distracted by wondering every time we hear a sound: Are they coming to get me? So when we enter into meditation and introspection, if we're not straight with ourselves, if our character is weak, if our lives are riddled with hypocrisy, then how can we be simple and at ease with ourselves and others, and really find truth within?

Out of that wholeness and focus grows wisdom, common sense, and total integrity. Our inner gyroscope starts to guide us more and more reliably. Inner wisdom, spiritual understanding, helpfulness, and personal power grow.

That's the relation between sila, samadhi, and prajna — morality, meditation, and wisdom. Each develops from and enhances the other. It's wise to be ethical, not to harm others; no one likes to be harmed. It's wise to be focused rather than scattered and dissipated, isn't it? It's not that we have to meditate all day, but it does imply being attentive and focused; examining our own life, not just fragmenting ourselves all over the place totally unreflectively. Moreover, it is extremely important and relevant to be practical and commonsensical, which is the beginning of wisdom. Let's not be so foolish as to over-mystify the spiritual life; it transpires right here, where the rubber meets the road, in our daily activities and relationships — or not at all.

If we find ourselves having some problems, we can reflect on this threefold scheme and see where we are with it: Is our life so complex and riddled with contradictions that we can't just show up and be at ease, dealing with each situation just as it happens? Do we feel like we need a more high-octane teaching, some powerful beneficent presence to give us some kundalini energy or huge blessing or healing, to change our mind because it is so riddled with all kinds of fabrications? We must be lights unto ourselves, as Buddha exhorted.

If we live a morally unimpeachable life, we will feel much more content, relieved, and at ease. And there is unbelievable wisdom in just *being*. We don't have to do very much to just *be*. We don't have to have all kinds of Dharma chemotherapy to cure the inner rot. Just a little sunlight is enough to open the lotus-like inner lotus bulb. Just a moment of that spiritual sunlight. I feel that this path is really practicable, through applying these three principles. They're not so mysterious — sila, samadhi, and prajna; virtue, contemplation, and wisdom. We can talk about them more next week in terms of the eightfold path. These three were taught by Buddha as his way of life, not as dogma to be believed but wise steps to be taken on the highway to enlightenment, which he laid out with his own footprints.

What is virtue, contemplation, and wisdom? When you unpack them, the three become the eightfold path. Sila becomes right or impeccable action, impeccable speech, impeccable effort, and impeccable livelihood. Samadhi is impeccable concentration and impeccable meditation. And prajna is impeccable view and impeccable understanding. So there is body, speech, and mind impeccability there. We can actually practice those with body, speech, and mind. That's enlightened living. It's not something we have to do now so we get the jackpot later, in other lifetimes. That *is* the jackpot, here and now: heaven on earth, in the form of an enlightened life.

If and when you look into this path, you see that it is not just about meditation. Westerners often just extract the meditation component from the entire Dharma teaching and then wonder why their lives are still the same. We just suppress our thoughts for a half-hour every morning, try to control our minds, then wonder why our life is still such a mess. Well, I guess you didn't suppress all life; you just suppressed thoughts for half an hour. If you could delete the whole program, everything would be fine, but a half-hour won't do that. For that, there is the eightfold path, the path of action, introspection, and wisdom. Complete, impeccable effort; impeccable livelihood; impeccable action; impeccable speech; impeccable thought; impeccable view; impeccable meditation; impeccable mindfulness. So it's not just mindfulness meditation. It also includes impeccable livelihood, or finding our true vocation. Thus this is not a quietist or life-denying path, but an engaged way of life that can accommodate all sorts of different individual styles.

Impeccable speech is very interesting: When you do a silent, intensive retreat, you find that actually you don't have to talk that much. There is enough inner chatter to keep us occupied all day anyway, but in retreat you realize that you spend your whole life talking and there really isn't that much that you need to talk about after all. You find yourself just being with a flower or the sound of rain, instead of looking for somebody else to talk to or turning on the TV.

When I was in retreat, when we started talking again — of course, we were talking about the teachings — still, so much of it seemed unnecessary, extra, and fabricated; that it was just trying to stir up something like entertainment or relationship, or trying to prove something, or become something. My friend Joseph Goldstein said that he was in retreat once and decided that the only thing he would talk about was what was absolutely needed. He took a vow not to talk about any other person or happening. Joseph found that there was hardly anything to say, from that time on! Not talking about anybody else had removed almost all objects of conversation. How interesting. What do we all have to discuss about everybody else that takes us most of our day, everyday, to say?

Silence, vocation, and so on are spiritual disciplines we can explore and apply, to become more aware of what we usually give our energy to. Then we can consciously retool ourselves and channel our energy into more fulfilling, enlightening pursuits. We get to choose, of course. Nobody's telling us that's what we have to do. But we might find it sensible to more intentionally, more masterfully direct ourselves rather than just blowing along in the winds.

These principles of enlightened living are very practical tools that create a luminous, impeccable life. Not just light rays pouring out of the bump on top of your head like in medieval religious paintings, but being a light in the world. Illuminating the way for ourselves and others.

In summation, the three trainings are sila, samadhi, and prajna, which are unpacked as the eightfold path of impeccable view (seeing things as they are), impeccable thought (helpful and wholesome, rather than harmful, deluded, and negative), impeccable speech, impeccable action, impeccable effort, impeccable vocation, impeccable meditation, and impeccable mindfulness. If you're interested, you can study this in the traditional sutras. It's a very interesting subject. It hasn't been taught much in the modern way lately. I've been looking for somewhere to study it myself, to see who has been thinking about this. For example, we might hear the phrase *right livelihood* and think of mere economic sustenance, but I think we should include in this matter finding our true vocation and following our true calling. This path is not just about virtue, self-discipline, and morality. It develops character and integrity. It's not just right view, like subscribing to the Buddhist dogma. Seeing things as they are is impeccable outlook, the enlightened perspective.

We do not have this pure perception because of delusion, selfishness, and ego. That's why it's not enough just to say "impeccable speech" or "thou shalt not lie." How to actualize that possibility is the question. So we must look into it more. What would it mean not to criticize, not to put others down, not to gossip or slander? Maybe we have to see why we are putting ourselves up, why are we so critical. Maybe we're self-critical, so it spills out in others, whether they deserve it or not. It's just our critical nature looking for expression.

The problem starts at home with both giving and receiving criticism. If we don't identify with others' criticism of us, then we don't feel attacked. What's the problem, really, if people criticize you or if you feel different than them? Maybe it's your feeling that is making the separation. How are we different than everybody else? You can't force others to look at things differently. You can try all you want, but it's not going to be very satisfying.

As the Buddha said, “When I was enlightened, everybody was.” That’s enlightened vision, but that’s pretty steep and difficult to understand. Maybe he means outside of time: For instance, like in the eyes of God, everyone is God, but in the eyes of man, everyone is screwed up. Which side of the mirror do you want to use? Or can you access both? Can you see the problem while also holding the bigger perspective, at one and the same time?

It is very challenging to say that when you awaken, everything is perfect. That’s steep, nondual, and ultimately absolutely true. But to transform that down to something that we can relate to, we have to return to the basic teaching of Buddha: give up what is harmful, adopt what is wholesome and helpful, and purify the heart and mind. So if we give up what is negative and adopt what is positive and purify ourselves, things improve. That’s the teaching of the Buddha. The more positive we are, the more positive feedback we get. This is karma, cause and effect. Wouldn’t you say that’s true, usually? The more negative we are, the more we project anger, then everybody seems against us. But on a good day, the same things seem utterly different. We really do determine our experience, by how we relate to the things around us.

The Buddha never taught himself unless asked. That was his way, not to be a missionary. And Buddhist teachers through the ages have followed that way: only teach when asked, only go where invited, and so on, so as to not proselytize and try to shove the truth down people’s throats. Please don’t try to convert others, or defend your beliefs. Try to contribute to others, in a very friendly, easygoing way.