

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH: THE EIGHT-FOLD PATH (PART TWO)

It says in the Lankavatara Sutra that things are not what they seem to be, nor are they otherwise. We are not what we think we are, so who and what are we? This is a deep question, a koan that one might chew on for a long time. Who are we? What are we? Where are we? Who is experiencing our experience? Where is that experiencer? Is it in our head? Is it in our brain? Is it in our heart? Is it in our body? What is it? Is it mind? Is it ego? Is it soul? Is it self? Is it male or female? American or otherwise? What is it? Who do we think we are anyway? I think if we look into this, if we lift this lid off of Pandora's box, all kinds of things might fly out. So maybe we'd better stop there.

I'd like to talk tonight about the Fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path. We've been going through the basic teachings of the Dharma, beginning with the enlightenment experience of the Buddha. That enlightenment experience is the crucial experience that we could all have in the Buddhist path. And from that, the first teachings given by the Buddha of the dissatisfactoriness of all conditioned things; dukkha, suffering. And the Second Truth, the cause of suffering: clinging, greed, or thirst. And the Third Truth: the end of suffering, Nirvana, the relinquishment of craving, attachment, and greed.

And the Fourth Truth, which is the Eightfold Path, the eight-faceted way of enlightened living, the eight principles of enlightened living. It is the way to the end of suffering, which is Nirvana. It is the way to the relinquishment of attachment, of greed, of resistance, of partiality — the ultimate alleviation of insatiable thirst; not just temporarily alleviating thirst by drinking more and more salt water, the salt water of our sensual desires, which just makes us more thirsty, addictive, and dependent. Rather, it is the ultimate fulfillment of our thirst for freedom and peace and love; the end of suffering, the end of doubt and despair.

The Eightfold Path of awakening is divided into three trainings: sila, samadhi, and prajna — morality or self-discipline, meditation or reflection, and wisdom or awareness. This path is explained further in eight, so we can apply these principles in life.

The first two pertain to wisdom, since wisdom comes first. We can live our life according to wisdom, so wisdom comes first. We don't just live our lives to *develop* wisdom. Wisdom or prajna is explained in two:

- **Impeccable understanding:** Seeing things as they are in the present moment, without coloration, without distortion, without self-deception, without projections; seeing karma at work, seeing that as we sow so shall we reap. Seeing that we are responsible for the kind of experiences we experience. Virtue brings its own reward. Wholesomeness furthers itself, and negativity brings back negativity to us. Seeing that deeply moment by moment, we become more and more at one with that, rather than out-of-tune with it and unaligned.
- **Impeccable attitude:** Impeccable thought, free from aversion and desire and ignorance. We should make it practical. As Trungpa Rinpoche would say, it's about being cheerful, friendly, and positive. He knew all the fancy words; he could have said much more fancy words, but he said cheerful. That was one of his favorite words. Maitri, loving-kindness, actually means friendly-ness. Positive, buoyant. Not just as an ideal that we should be like this, but actually cultivating these things. Why not? Unleashing our spontaneity and buoyancy and child-like nature. Wishing the best for one and all.

I remember when I was a kid, I wanted everybody to be happy. By everybody, I meant the people in my world, you know, the three or six of us in my family. I really wanted that. Didn't we all, when we were little children? But then what happened? Is that how we go through life today? We might pray it or say it, but it is not really in the forefront of our consciousness as it was then. I remember how much it would upset me if any one of our little circle weren't happy, if something was bothering them. I really thought that everybody should be happy. But as time progressed, life seemed to get more complex, and that purity of heart was socialized out of me and I became a competitor and striver like everybody else. This is an example of something we can reconnect with: impeccable thought, impeccable attitude, the second part of the eight principles of enlightened living.

From the wisdom of seeing things as they are, when we cultivate this impeccable attitude, we can see that everyone more or less wants and needs what we do and are just striving for it in a myriad of different ways.

When I think of compassion I think of this sense of empathy. Compassion has become a kind of buzzword today. When you feel what others feel, or if you put yourself in their shoes, then you can treat them like you would be treated — you would be helpful, compassionate, and kind, rather than abusive, exploitative, and aggressive.

The more we cultivate compassion, loving-kindness, well-wishing prayers, charity, service, and altruism, then of course we warm up the whole environment.

It really is a force. Not just that we radiate light and compassion, but out of that comes naturally action, caring, and helping. It also resonates with others in a way that generates some consensus.

So from impeccable view — impeccable understanding — and impeccable attitude comes the second group, ethics, self-discipline, character, virtue: Impeccable speech, impeccable action, and impeccable livelihood.

- **Impeccable speech:** Not lying, manipulating, gossiping, slandering, speaking harsh words, putting people down, and so on. Also being true to ourselves. Not talking about others all the time. As we talked about last week, Joseph Goldstein found out that when he vowed not to talk about others for a whole day, he almost didn't have anything to say to anyone anymore. Aren't we all like that? Impeccable speech implies saying what is helpful and wholesome and appropriate and necessary. Not squandering our energy in producing endless static for no reason, just chattering, twitting like parakeets all the time; defusing our energy rather than focusing it. That's why this kind of self-discipline, impeccable speech, is helpful for meditation and for deepening spiritual experience into wisdom — containing, focusing our energy, rather than just dispersing it, frittering it away, distracting ourselves.
- **Impeccable action:** Not harmful, but helpful, wholesome, sane. Refraining from killing and stealing and all that negativity. Refraining from sexual misconduct, addictive, obsessive, and exploitative behavior. And not harming our own bodies through our negative actions and addictive behavior.
- **Impeccable livelihood or vocation:** Following our own calling. Living positively and helpfully. Doing what we love so we can do it fully, not just try to get it over with so we can live our real life on the weekend or after 5 p.m. Rather, pursuing — creating even — a livelihood in tune with ourselves and others. Not being harmful, not pimping, drug dealing, arm sales, and all that, but also forsaking more subtle forms of exploitation: selling out-of-date pharmaceuticals in India and Africa and destroying the environment like many oil and mineral companies do. We have to look at our own responsibility in these things, in terms of our own vocation or our own investments. We have to look at which side we are on of those ethical issues. So impeccable vocation is very helpful in living the enlightened life and achieving clarity in our dealings with the world.

First, we discussed impeccable understanding and impeccable attitude. Then impeccable speech, action, and livelihood. Now the last triad of meditation: impeccable effort, impeccable concentration, and impeccable mindfulness or awareness.

- **Impeccable effort:** There are different kinds of effort. One that gets you started — sometimes translated as launching effort — and one that sustains you, persevering effort, patient and heroic effort that keeps you going in the long run. Not just launching and jumping, but also keeping going after the honeymoon wears off, after the honeymoon of meditation-bliss wears off and you get into the boredom and, worse, the madness and chaos of your own mind. Impeccable effort is balanced effort, not compulsive effort. It implies continuous, joyous effort. Delighting in what we find meaningful to do, so there is inner motivation, like following our own true calling. We are passionately in love with what we are doing, interest runs high, so we don't have to force or strain ourselves. We are naturally motivated, so it's an effortless effort. Not just a grim chore, hoping to get it over with, get it over already, so we can enjoy Nirvana, so we can veg out on the other shore, Nirvana.
- **Impeccable concentration** or focus, contemplation: Having balanced attention; attentive and yet open. Focused, yet lucid and free; luminous. One with what we are doing. Centered, not distracted. Really doing what we are doing, 100%. That is the way. That is enlightened living. Not for some other reason. We're doing it anyway; we might as well really be doing it. Why wish we were elsewhere? If we wish we were elsewhere, we should go elsewhere. No one's keeping us here. This isn't elementary school. We are all responsible, autonomous adults; let's not abdicate that responsibility.
- **Impeccable mindful awareness** is the last part of the concentration samadhi triad: Simply being aware with total presence of mind, rather than being absent-minded. Totally mindful, rather than mindless. There's nothing mysterious about this. It is utterly mysterious, of course, but we don't have to mystify it and make it into something we cannot understand, like theological concepts of God or Tathagatagarbha or some kind of mumbo-jumbo. We must endeavor to be conscious, rather than unconscious; present, rather than absent. There is a big debate going on now in Buddhist circles about whether a Buddhist meditator should be more and more absent, or more and more present. (I vote for more and more present.) The more we empty ourselves of our preoccupations and selfishness, the more present we might become, mysteriously enough. The more truth might show up. Those who lose themselves will find themselves, as the good book says. There's a little mysticism everywhere if you look. Regarding this impeccable awareness or mindfulness, the Buddha said in the original teachings, "In hearing there is just hearing. No one hearing and nothing heard." There is just that moment, indescribable. Then we make it into something: "Oh, it's a beautiful bird." Or "Ugh. Traffic." That's the second and third and fiftieth moment of discursive

chains of thought. In the first fresh instant, there's just hearing, just seeing. In seeing, there is just seeing; no one seeing, and nothing seen. (I'm quoting the Buddha — he went through the five senses.) In thinking, there is just thinking. No one thinking, and nothing thought. "Me and mine" is just a thought, just a concept. Of course, it's a bunch of thoughts. And when you have a lot of thoughts together, it becomes a whole ball of wax. It becomes very heavy. But it just begins with that thought. If we can just stay with that first moment, just the thought; try to be present before "who's thinking?" or "why am I always thinking?" or "damn thoughts, when are they going to stop so I can meditate?" Before those concepts, upstream from that, there's just a flashing, an incandescent, indescribable moment. That's the dawn of creation, in every moment. Nothing has happened yet. Samsara has not yet seceded from Nirvana. The war of dualism has not yet begun. You are there!

Impeccable awareness, total presence, is imperturbable as a mountain, unchanging as the ocean amidst all of its different, superficial changes. It never leaves its bed. Unmoved, yet totally reflecting clearly whatever appears in it, like a mirror. Whether it's faced with gold or shit, or a wet paint brush even, the reflection doesn't stick. Totally at ease, at home in every situation — that's impeccable awareness, with a little Dzogchen to spice it up. You never heard those four examples in the sutras, I'm sure. That's view, meditation, and action, according to the Dzogchen pith-instructions. Like a mountain, like an ocean, like a mirror, and at home, always.

As we go into these more, we see that the whole Dharma teaching is explained through these eight principles of enlightened living. That's why it's so very interesting. Not just like the Eight Commandments: You should do this, then you'll get to heaven later. Rather, it is simply sanity. Isn't it sane to be helpful rather than harmful? We don't need another ulterior motive for that. It is sane to be present, rather than to be distracted and absent-minded. It is sane to be pursuing one's true vocation, rather than compromising one's life, isn't it? It is sane to be energetic and buoyant and doing one's best to endeavor to keep on, to have courage, to keep going and make efforts towards that which is meaningful. These are principles of sanity and enlightened living.

Rather than calling it the Eightfold Path, I like to call it the Eight Principles of Enlightened Living. It's really eight facets of one jewel. If you look at that jewel, of course it can have infinite facets, but I think these eight pretty well sum up everything. But I will say there is a very important one that's not here. As the Ninefold, the ninth inning, I say we should include *exercise*. If the Buddha had taught today, I'm sure he would have included exercise! Not just physical exercise, perhaps, maybe also mental and emotional exercise. Exercising and

developing our faculties for health and relaxation. Yoga, martial arts, whatever level you want to tap into. Exercise is extraordinarily useful and healthy.

And, come to think of it, there should be another extra principle of enlightened living: humor. If we can appreciate the lighter side of things, it just ain't funny!

It's healthy to exercise our freedom to inquire or debate about things. We should exercise our speech that way. Not just swallow the Dharma whole. You know the old Zen koan: Does dogma have Buddha-nature?

That's all I wanted to say tonight. We've covered the Four Noble Truths — the four facts of life — and the Eightfold Path. We've covered the three basic characteristics of existence — impermanence, dissatisfaction, and without-owner or without-self; *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. We've also talked about the six principles of enlightened living — the six paramitas, the six perfections — generosity, ethics, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom.

So take the opportunity to think about these things and to apply them in your life. I think you'll find it very helpful. The main work is to apply these things in our own life; that is where the rubber meets the road. Then we will lead an enlightened, sane, and righteous life. And we won't have to wait until we die or the Messiah comes to go to heaven. We don't have to wait for anything. We are totally present at the moment of creation, right now, at every moment. There is nothing missing and nothing extra to get rid of. That's the joy of this jewel of the Dharma. Dharma means truth or things as they are.

According to the Buddha's wisdom or law of karma, according to how things are, everything happens for a reason. Sometimes if you look at something it looks random, but if you increase the frame you see what it's connected to. Everything is said to have a cause, according to the law of karma. It doesn't necessarily mean there is a reason like "good" or "bad." It's cause and effect. In physics it says there is no action without a reaction. Everything has a cause. Again, it doesn't mean you did it, you alone. It might have billions of interacting causes. But according to the understanding of how things are, everything happens for some karmic reason, it has a cause. Each cause is also an effect. It's like car accidents. Are they random? Do some people seem to have more than others? Is that connected to their way of driving? Is there something other than pure randomness in these so-called accidents?

I think where it gets interesting is when you think, how can I work with that? How do things work? Where's the operating manual? Where are the gears and levers to better operate this machinery? Then we start to understand how to navigate better. So when those people pop out of your past, it's noticeable, it's dramatic.

But every day things are happening in that way, although usually we hardly notice. The interesting thing is when we look into self-mastery and interdependent origination, we can see that we can actually learn to sail these waters. We are not just at the mercy of every wind. We are not at the mercy of every wave; we can learn to surf. We can snorkel. We can go under the waves also. The waves are just on the surface. We can't control the winds, but we can learn how to sail better.

Our perceptions define our experience. How we relate to things generates our experience. Eskimos sitting here would think it was really hot. But people from Ecuador would be freezing to death. So our perception defines our reality. It's not that it's absolutely, objectively cold now, or it's hot. It's relative to what we are ordinarily used to, and to how we perceive things. We might feel this is a very comfortable, beautiful, and elegant room we are sitting in. Somebody else might look at it differently. I know my mother would say, "Where's the furniture? And the TV? Why are you sitting on the floor? You'll catch cold." So for her it's an unfurnished boarding house. For us it's a sacred space, a zendo. Thus, our biases and perceptions define our reality. When I walk out on this street, I feel it's a really quiet and beautiful street. Some other people might think quite differently about this. For them it might be a dangerous, scary, and dark street, with few streetlights or pedestrians.

So the question is, Why do we perceive things that way? We are reaping what we have sown. We have habituated ourselves to perceive things that way. We are creating our reality. We are creating a scary street or a nice, quiet, beautiful street. We are creating that. There is really just a street. Even that's too much. It's not even a street, if you start to take it apart. A street is just another idea, another concept. I don't know if the birds see it as a street. It all depends on how we look at it. And we can deconstruct everything that way. Then you start to see how our concepts create our reality.

How we live our life so much depends on how we put it together. That is how we condition our outlook on things and events, and create our reality. Isn't it interesting — wherever we go we seem to recreate that reality, don't we? We keep changing our relationships or our place of living, but it all turns into the same thing somehow. We bring it with us.

So karmically speaking, the imprints are embedded in our subtle consciousness, seeking outward expression. We superimpose those habitual tendencies on different things. Yet concepts are not reality. We should be clear on that so we can see the difference. Just because we think about things in a certain way, that's not the reality. We don't have to be limited by our self-concepts either. We might be afraid of the dark, but we can also check it out and know that it is

actually safe around here. Even though we feel afraid, we can risk it. We can step through the fear because we've checked it out. And even if we think we personally are a certain way, we can check it and transcend that concept too. The bad news is that the concepts create the reality, but that's also the good news, because since we conceptualize, we can also decondition our conditioning and go beyond that. It's in our hands. Reality is an open question and we should keep asking.

Everything happens in accordance with some reason. That's what "as it should be" means. It's causal. It doesn't mean that we are happy or that everybody gets their just rewards or that we don't feel any empathy or compassion for tragic situations.

It's a very interesting subject. There is a wonderful book about it by a deep-thinking rabbi: *When Terrible Things Happen to Good People*. There is a lot of suffering in the world. Much of it seems unnecessary, so many of us feel obliged to address it. The Oklahoma bombing is one thing. And there are so many things that one could think about. There's earthquakes. There's holocausts. We didn't study this much in school, but when the Mongols attacked ancient China, China was the most developed culture in the world. Mongol cavalry went through there and murdered 10-20 million Chinese in one week. They burned the capital of China, and melted human fat was running in the streets. These are terrible things. What can you say? It's also terrible when one child has some horrible disease and dies just old enough to suffer from it. These are very difficult things to grapple with. We do what we can, of course; we don't just shrug it all off as inevitable.

The Buddhist teaching of karma — not unlike the biblical teaching of sin and virtue — says that we can only experience what we have sown. Cause and effect. It doesn't just mean that Marion consciously decided to meet her cousin by accident on the corner in Harvard Square on a certain date. But we have karma with that person who is our cousin, and we have a little still left on account so we see them and we recognize them. There's reason for that. It's not random. If you increase the frame and look at all the connections, I think you'd probably see that it's not random. But who knows, really?

Similarly, with what happened in Oklahoma City, since you mentioned that, I think we all have to take some responsibility for that. That is a part of our mind, that extreme, right, militaristic, totalizing mindset. The people that committed that crime are not unconnected to us. The bomber was apparently a gung-ho member of our armed forces in the Persian Gulf war. He was rewarded. He was part of the system. He was one of the good guys. So we created him. Maybe you and I aren't Marines, but our American society creates that. It didn't just happen by

mistake. And it was not Arab terrorists as initially suggested. It was one of our own Midwestern boys, and he's probably connected to a bunch of old boys who are still there. That's all a part of us. We are all connected and implicated in that. If we really check, we see that it's a part of our minds. And if we're not on the far right, maybe we're on the far left, equally anxiety-ridden, paranoid, fanatical, self-righteous. Or maybe we're in the far middle! Who is without blame?

Who's going to control things if oneself is out of control? I think we have to start with what we have. We can master and purify ourselves, act ethically and impeccably and strive in that way to shed some of that light in the world. We can bring it out to the educational system, to the business world, to our families, wherever we live. We can do that.

We also have to be open to the fact that while we are upset about the Oklahoma bombing, someone else might be upset about killing all the cows and chickens and animals we eat. Someone else might be upset about exterminating all the poor insects. It just depends on our frame and where we draw the line. Everyone has their own beliefs.