

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

Humans have a radically different way of processing information, a vertical potential that allows the brain to download, or see, everything all at once. This is how Mozart experienced the creation of his music, and it helps us to understand one of the most awesome moments of illumination in recorded history. It happened over twenty five hundred years ago to an Indian prince from an obscure region of northern India. One sacred night, after six years of relentless spiritual practice, Prince Siddhartha Gautama sat under a fig tree, and with the morning star he became illumined. He became a Buddha, an enlightened one. From that moment on, that fig tree was called the Bodhi Tree, the tree of awakening.

Consider the difference. In the case of Mozart, the transformation that was born out of one transcendental burst of creativity, manifested as a monumental work of art. In the case of an enlightened being, a Buddha, the monumental work of art is the being itself. What a difference. Rajneesh says that the scientific approach needs an external laboratory, but on the spiritual journey the laboratory is oneself.

We are going to study what is perhaps the most complete blueprint for building a spiritual laboratory ever recorded in human history. It is called the Eightfold Path, and it is a major theme of the extraordinary dharma symphony heard by the Buddha that sacred night of his illumination. The blueprint of the Eightfold Path is so comprehensive that it does not require you to be a Buddhist: It allows you to be a Jew, a Christian, or an atheist. It speaks not only to the progeny of those people in India who sat near the Buddha, basking in the light of his truth; it also speaks across the ages to a Western culture that has developed in a profoundly different psychological direction.

It is also important to remember that this discussion is mostly limited to the first sermons that the Buddha gave to his followers. These were his first teachings, the bare bones or skeleton of the Buddha-dharma. Some Buddhist sects consider the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to be elementary sermons that the Buddha gave for beginners, and surely his dharma talks did become more layered and subtle as the depth of

understanding and insight increased in those who followed him. Remember, the Buddha taught for forty-five years. Imagine the sangha that sat with him for over four decades! From the deeply wise Sariputa to the mystical Mogallana, awakened beings made up the core Sangha.

There is no question that the muscular, non-flowery and not-so-subtle message of the Buddha's early sermons remains absolutely shocking, and adult, to this day. No god, no angel nor devil got you into this mess, this mental prison we call mind, and no one other than yourself can get you out of it. When you cut to the chase, the fact remains that this really is *our* life to live or to waste. It is in this very life that we have an opportunity to find complete and absolute liberation.

Those of us who meditate together believe in the possibility of liberation for ourselves and for others. We have heard the stories of real human beings who actually made the journey to the other shore, and something in our deepest heart rests in this truth. Let us now listen to the music of the Buddha's dharma. Like all the great classical symphonic works, it begins with an opening movement: The First Noble Truth.

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: *DUKKHA*

The First Noble Truth is what the Buddha saw/heard on that sacred night of his illumination. He saw and spoke a very plain truth and he stated it in words as simple as the mountain songs that I learned in my youth: "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." Those words are the rock upon which the Buddha built the entire edifice of the Buddha-dharma. As simple as they sound, they are nearly impossible for us to accept. As we turn to the first words that the Buddha taught, it is vital that we recognize our profound resistance to them, word by word. This is the moment for each of us to pay careful attention to our conscious attitude. Are we blocking the way between what the Buddha saw twenty-five centuries ago and the deep wisdom of a heart longing to hear the truth?

The Buddha's first insight is what he called the Noble Truth of *Dukkha*, or the Noble Truth of Suffering. *Dukkha* is also translated as "dissatisfaction" by many teachers, "pain" by others, and some translate this Pali word as "anxiety." In *The Religions of Man*, Huston Smith says:

Dukkha then means a pain that seeps at some level into all finite existence. The word's more constructive overtones suggest themselves when we discover that it is used in Pali to refer to an axle which is off-center with respect to its wheel, also to a bone which has slipped out of its socket.

The Buddha does not say that the axle has slipped off-center for only one of our vehicles, like the old broken-down truck sitting forlornly in the barn. He says that off-center is an intrinsic part of our human condition. In other words, we were born with slipped disks. As Huston Smith describes it, pain "seeps at some level into all finite existence." These are hard words; indeed, the Buddha's words are nearly impossible to accept. Most of us, including the one writing this paper, would rather live in a dream that promises a tomorrow of non-pain than awaken to the Buddha's truth that pain is the ongoing subtext and an intrinsic part of human experience in this present moment. He says:

What is the truth of dukkha? Birth is dukkha; decay is dukkha; death is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha; not getting what you want is dukkha; in short: the five skandhas (the five aggregates of existence) are dukkha.

The Buddha's words quoted above are from Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, an excellent English translation of Pali and Sanskrit scriptures published in 1932. I have taken the liberty of slightly modernizing Goddard's words throughout the paper; hopefully, neither Mr. Goddard nor Mr. Buddha will mind.

The Pali word for "aggregates" is *skandhas*. It refers to form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. The five skandhas are a key aspect of the Buddha's core teaching, and we will return to them in a later chapter. From here he develops each aspect of suffering, beginning with birth:

What is birth? Being conceived, developing the five aggregates of existence, the arising of sense activity, being born and springing into existence is called birth.

Western psychologists and Buddhists commentators have both focused on the actual trauma of the birthing process, the agony and ecstasy of that original separation between the mother and her baby. While

Western psychologists and scientists have theorized about the effects of in-utero development on the psychological state of the baby, Buddhism paints a far more disturbing picture: The pain that seeps at some level through all finite existence began at the very moment of conception. The following passage by the Tibetan master Kālu Rinpoche blasts a gaping hole in our fantasy of baby floating in the “oceanic bliss” of mother’s womb:

In the first week in the mother’s womb, the suffering is like being roasted or fried on hot copper. At that time, the appearance is of soft rice; this stage is named Mery Mery. In the second week, the All-Touching Wind causes the four elements to manifest and the appearance is like cold butter and is called Nur Nur. In the third week, the Storing Up Wind causes the four elements to manifest strongly; now the shape is like an insect and is called Tar Tar. And so, similar changes take place stage by stage until the seventh week when the Twisting Wind gives rise to the four arms and legs; the suffering is like having the limbs pulled out by a strong person and being spread out by a stick. By stages, the shape forms and sorrows come; in the eighth week, the Hole Forming Wind comes and the nine orifices and there is the additional suffering as if a finger were probing an open wound.

Kalu Rinpoche’s description of the creation and development of bones and skin, limbs and brain is incredible to contemplate. It strikes at the heart of our denial of suffering as intrinsic to human existence. If we can fantasize that baby is having a ball in mama’s womb, just lying there enjoying the process, we have subtly built an argument that suffering is not universal. Thus, opening to the idea that suffering begins with the moment of conception can shatter our wall of denial. The Buddha offers no detour or bypass around this message: Suffering is as pervasive as the air we breathe. The ego’s denial of suffering must be completely uprooted by the transforming power of wisdom if one is to become free of the defilements that keep us chained to the wheel of samsara. Different religions posit different paths to liberation, but the Buddha-dharma points us in one direction only:

As long as the truth of dukkha and what causes it was not quite clear in me, I didn’t clearly understand the key to ending suffering or the path to liberation. Some part of me was not sure whether I had truly won complete freedom. But as soon as

the true knowledge and insight into suffering became perfectly clear there arose in me an assurance that I had won supreme and unsurpassed enlightenment. It is a truth that is so difficult to perceive and it cannot be gained by mere reasoning. It is a truth that is visible only to the wise.

One can not reread these words too many times. Essentially, the Buddha came to the complete realization that it did not matter how evolved he had become through years of rigorous meditation and spiritual practice. It did not even matter that he had awakened from the dream-life of his youth. It was not until a profound and utterly shattering insight – called Path Knowledge – rose in his mind that he saw the truth that sets us free. As long as we cling to the illusion that suffering is nothing but a temporary run of bad luck, we will never break through the iron walls of our own delusion.

After birth comes the inexorable process of aging. Isn't this fun?

And what is decay? The decay of all sentient beings as they go through a process of growing old, becoming frail, gray and wrinkled; the failing of their vital force, the wearing out of their senses. This is what is meant by decay.

Did you ever see in the world a man or a woman, eighty, ninety, or a hundred years old, frail, crooked as a gable-roof, bent down, supported on a staff, with tottering steps, infirmed, youth long since fled, with broken teeth, grey and scanty hair, or bald-headed, wrinkled, with blotched limbs? And did the thought never come to you, that you also are subject to decay, that you cannot escape it?

If such a depressing thought comes to our minds, we get rid of it and as quickly as we can, don't we? It seems abnormal to contemplate such awful stuff:

Did you never see in the world a man or a woman, who, being sick, afflicted and grievously ill, and wallowing in their own filth, was lifted up by some people and put to bed by others? And did the thought never come to you, that you also are subject to disease, that you cannot escape it?

Were the Buddha teaching us today, he might simply ask, “Have you visited a nursing home lately?”

After birth and aging comes death:

And what is death? The parting and vanishing of beings, their destruction, disappearance, and completion of their life-period. Death brings about the dissolution of the five skandhas and the discarding of the body. This is death.

During a retreat in Barre, Massachusetts, Ruth Denison, one of the pioneer female dharma teachers in the West, talked about the truth of dukkha. Ruth was never one to pull any punches as she reminded us that, at best, our little canoe is full of holes and sinking. Some canoes have slow leaks and some have fast leaks, but the point is all of our little canoes will fall to the bottom sooner or later.

That is the fundamental truth of dukkha. We can deny the fact that this little canoe is sinking and spend our days trying to plug and patch up the holes. We can bail out the water as fast as it seeps in. We can work out three days a week at the gym and keep our bodies in fabulous shape, or at least in decent shape, by jogging and taking a yoga class every once in a while. We can even have plastic surgery to keep the little canoe looking good, but we cannot stop it from sinking.

There are a few wise ones who hear the Buddha’s truth, look beyond life in the canoe and see that there is land on the other side of the river. They understand that there is only so much time before the canoe sinks and only so much energy left for rowing. What is the better choice: to keep on bailing or head toward the other shore with all due haste? The Buddha said, “Yet there are beings whose eyes are only a little covered with dust: they will understand the truth.”

From birth, aging and death, the Buddha then turns to the meaning of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, and not getting what we want. He describes sorrow as arising from the losses that all of us encounter, and lamentation as the way we express those losses. Some cultures have ritualized lamentation so that the grieving individual can begin the process of moving through the sorrow. Periods of mourning are not only acceptable, they are expected. Our culture urges us to get over it as fast as possible.

Pain refers to the physical aspects of suffering: “bodily pain and unpleasantness, the painful and unpleasant feeling produced by bodily contact.” Grief refers to mental aspects of suffering: “mental pain and unpleasantness and unpleasant feeling produced by mental contact.”

Many of us live in a place of quiet despair, mourning a childhood that we never had, a career that never happened, or a love that never came our way. At first, hope keeps us going but eventually it becomes our jail keeper. We stay within its safe walls, clinging to the dream that we can recover what was lost, or what we never had in the first place. Tragically, some of us live our lives waiting for a rescue that will never come. Living in a state of constant wanting *is* suffering.

Like a skilled lawyer, the Buddha has built an airtight case. Now he presents his closing argument: Everything that is transient and impermanent is ultimately unsatisfactory and painful. “All formations are transient; all formations are subject to suffering; and all things are without ego.”

This is the very core of the Buddha’s teaching: the famous three characteristics. The Buddha says that all formations – physical objects, thoughts, feelings – all things or phenomena are transient, painful and empty. If it was born, it will die, so it is transitory, impermanent. The pyramids have lasted for thousands years, but slowly they crumble. The sun may shine for another 10 billion years, but one day it will cool, and our solar system will freeze. How much more transitory is this human body?

When consciousness emerges beyond the blanket of the ego’s denial – when it awakens to truth – it sees not only the first characteristic of impermanence, it also opens to the second characteristic: all formations are fundamentally unsatisfactory. In other words, when consciousness recognizes the impermanence of an object, it also sees that the object can only bring it pain and disappointment in the end. How can one depend on anything that will not last?

The third characteristic is anatta, or no-self. This is the core aspect that separates Buddhism from most of the major world religions. One meditator in our sangha said, “I can understand impermanence and I can understand dissatisfaction, but I am a country mile away from understanding no-self.” Undoubtedly, she spoke for almost everyone in

the room. No soul? No spirit? No self? If she has no self, who was asking the question? And who heard and tried to answer her question? Or as another meditator asked, “Well, who is it who lives in my apartment, drives a car and has two cats?”

If the insight into no-self is the ultimate and final opening that leads us into illumination, we certainly need to relax a little at this present level of understanding. Perhaps we can practice some willing suspension of disbelief. Simply stated, the Buddha said that there is no me, I or mine in any experience. There is seeing, hearing, touching, thinking, loving, but there is no “I see, I hear, I touch, I think, I love.” Anatta does not attempt to define what we are; it teaches us who we are not.

Kalu Rinpoche captures its mystery in this perfect poem:

We live in illusion
And the appearance of things.
There is a reality:
We are that reality.
When you understand this,
You will see that you are nothing.
And, being nothing,
You are everything.
That is all.

Humans who have reached this level of awareness all report the same experience. It is nothing less than the unburdening of a ponderous weight that has pressed us down for all of our lives. Someone once said that we are all made of stardust. If we are nothing more, we are surely nothing less.

At the end of his closing argument, the Buddha again refers to the five skandhas of material form, and the four mental aspects of feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness itself. He calls them a “bundle,” a heap of suffering:

Whoso delights in bodily form, or feeling, or perception, or mental formations, or consciousness, he delights in suffering; and whoso delights in suffering will not be freed from suffering.

Joseph Goldstein says that dukkha is something we process slowly and only in stages. Surely this makes sound psychological sense. It is a fundamental truth of psychology that we can digest only what we can consciously bear. So, our understanding of the truth of dukkha deepens as our conscious ability to embrace it deepens. This is precisely the meaning of “process.” As our journey continues into the second noble truth and beyond, we can trust that our understanding of the Buddha’s first insight will deepen and mature. We are the laboratory, and the laboratory has begun the process of change. But Joseph's insight has answered only part of the question for me; I still wonder why it is so hard for us to stay with this first noble truth.

In my office there is a little statue of three monkeys sitting one on top of the other. Their hands cover their eyes, ears and mouth: “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” The monkeys remind us that each of us has to work through every defense mechanism imaginable - from denial to rationalization - as we struggle toward the real. Even if we successfully deny the truth of suffering, does that mean that we have escaped its sting? Are the wonderful monkeys who cavort, eat, sleep, lust and care for each other protected from the fact of dukkha because they cannot pronounce the word? Have they proved that ignorance really is bliss? Have we proved that ignorance is bliss?

The world is given to pleasure, delighted with pleasure, enchanted with pleasure. Inconceivable is the beginning of this Samsara, not to be discovered a first beginning of beings, who, obstructed by ignorance and ensnared by craving, are hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths.

When the Buddha speaks of “beings obstructed by ignorance,” he is referring to all sentient beings, humans as well as monkeys. How does our cleverness and cunning differ from that of any average monkey ego, except that we have more intellect and thus more defensive strategies at our command? Indeed, the paradox of being human is precisely that, unlike our monkey cousins, we have the capacity for greater mischief as well as the possibility of bearing the truth of suffering consciously. This is why Tibetan Buddhism practices deep gratitude for being born in a human body. Our human incarnation gives us a chance to transform from an animal to a spiritual mind.

Beyond the fact of our psychological denial, the thing that makes it so hard for us to truly grasp the simple fact that *we are really suffering* is our capacity to suffer almost beyond comprehension. Reflect for a moment on the suffering of millions of Jews, as well as gypsies and homosexuals in the concentration camps of Germany and Poland. Think of the untold millions of nameless humans who were murdered in the frozen gulags of the Soviet Union or in the killing fields of Cambodia. Who can count the numbers of people martyred by the murderous rage of hatred? The human capacity to suffer is a universal trait shared by all sentient beings on this poor planet. Could it be our very ability to tolerate suffering that makes it seem so normal? We have watched the mind-boggling spectacle of New Orleans sinking beneath cascading waters that broke through the frail levees. We remember the heart shattering images of desperate men and women jumping from windows high above the burning floors of the World Trade Center, victims of people gone mad with unconscious rage. Yet somehow in the face of incomprehensible suffering we pick ourselves up and we go on.

Suffering did not look normal to the Buddha! And this is why he chose to spend his life teaching those who were willing to listen. The revolutionary thought that suffering is not normal gives us an entirely different paradigm to work with as we ask for the umpteenth time, “now what is the purpose of meditation?”

Many of us sit in order to calm our restless minds or to learn how to concentrate. Some of us sit because we believe deeply that meditation is a key to happiness and a few of us even sit because we want to become enlightened and drop the illusion of self. But perhaps the Buddha had a far more practical purpose in mind when he taught his disciples to meditate. Through steadfast meditation practice, he trained himself to stay with a problem. In fact this is the true meaning of contemplation – not to run away, deny or try to fix something: just to stay with it. In the radical transformation of his consciousness, the Buddha must have realized that all humans have the capacity to transcend the animal monkey mind, so used to suffering, by developing a human-spiritual mind capable of staying with the truth of dharma long enough to be transformed by it.

The truth of the Buddha-dharma begins with a shattering insight: Suffering is as familiar to us as our heart beat. The Buddha places this truth of dukkha in front of us like an enormous boulder, and not for a moment does he try to couch his message in soft lights. His message is the

message of Zen: This affair is a matter of life and death. His message is a boulder standing square in the middle of the road of our spiritual journey. His truth of dukkha is an amazingly patient teacher, calling us back to this present moment over and over, asking us to stop, look, listen, and learn – the opposite position of the three monkeys.

What the Buddha saw is that our infatuation with life and its peaks and valleys, its joys and its pleasures, our constant hope that tomorrow will be a better day is like an opiate that keeps us constantly on the treadmill of addiction. Seeing the truth of dukkha is a fatal blow to the ego's basic job description. No wonder it uses every desperate trick in its arsenal to keep us distracted.

A mind that experiences the shattering insight of suffering – pain that sometimes is as blatant as a train wreck, but more often that not merely a subtle dissatisfaction following behind like a shadow – when that mind sees that dukkha seeps through every aspect of our existence, it will immediately turn in a different direction. This turn – aptly called the change of lineage – is the beginning of transformation. We are leaving forever the world of our monkey cousins.

When we embrace the truth of suffering, something profound happens. There is an opening, a tiny fracture in our hearts. It may be imperceptible at first but as our practice deepens, the heart is transformed; as the heart is transformed, a life is transformed. The natural state of a heart that is tender and cracked open is love.

From the first great insight that suffering seeps at some level into all finite existence, the Buddha saw a second truth. He saw the cause of suffering. We will explore his second great teaching, the truth of *Tanha* in the following pages.