

CHAPTER FOUR

THE END OF SUFFERING:

The Third Noble Truth

In the Majjhima Nikaya scriptures, the Buddha said:

Hence, the purpose of the Holy Life does not consist in acquiring alms, honor, or fame, nor in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart: that, verily, is the object of the Holy Life, that is the essence, that is the goal.

Buddhism traditionally divides spiritual training into three modalities: *sila*, *samadhi* and *prajna*. Sila is the cultivation of ethical or moral practices; samadhi training develops a mind of deep calm; and prajna is the development of intuitive wisdom.

In the scriptural passage above, the Buddha carefully names all three trainings and, no doubt, there is enormous benefit to each practice. “Alms, honor, or fame” have come to more than one person who has developed even one of these modalities of practice, let alone all three.

In this passage, the Buddha says that the purpose of the training is not to gain morality, nor to achieve the bliss that comes from tremendous concentration. It is not even to open the eye of knowledge so that you can “fathom all mysteries and all knowledge,” as Paul said in First Corinthians. “*That unshakable deliverance of the heart*” is the North Star of the Buddha way; it is the object, the essence and the goal of our journey on this earth.

The message of the Third Noble Truth is a promise that the Buddha made to each of us at the dawning of his illumination. It is the same promise uttered by thousands of seekers who found their way home to Truth since the beginning of recorded history. Those who have opened their eyes to reality – dharma – tell us one thing over and over: Illumination is what you already are; it is your true nature. No one, not the most enlightened teacher on earth, not some great guru capable of astonishing feats, thrilling thousands of listeners and, perhaps most

difficult for us to accept, not even a Divine being can give you what you already possess. Waking up is an inside job. A mother hen may try to help break through the shell from the outside, but it is indeed the little chick that has to do most of the work of breaking out. This is a dividing line between Buddhism and most of the world religions, and it can be, initially, a hard message to swallow:

No one saves us, but ourselves.
No one can and no one may.
We ourselves must walk the path,
Buddhas merely teach the way.

Paul Carus

The Third Noble Truth may be the most profound statement about human existence that any of us will ever read. Quite simply and magnificently, it says that we are not condemned to suffer. It promises each of us the unshakable deliverance of the heart *in this very life*. It does not hedge its bet by suggesting that our goal on earth is to deeply accept the reality of suffering: that is the goal of the First Noble Truth. Nor does it attempt to explain to us why we suffer: that is the goal of the Second Noble Truth. The Third Noble Truth soars far beyond the borders of our rational mind. It says that you and I can *end* all suffering.

A subtle and surprising barrier is established with the Buddha's utterance of the Third Noble Truth, and we must look at it with clear eyes. Many of us have a tendency to rush past the Third Noble Truth toward the promised land of the Fourth Noble Truth. In other words, we read that there can be an end to suffering and quite naturally we want to find out how to do that. Jumping to the question, "How do I do that?" seems to be everyone's default setting, but when we skip too quickly past the Third Noble Truth, without gazing quietly at its subtle barrier, we may seriously handicap our journey.

As difficult to accept as the First Noble Truth may be, it is relentlessly logical. If you have the psychological strength to bear reality – in other words if you have an adult mind – and eyes to see and ears to hear, you must eventually acknowledge the truth of the Buddha's first great insight. Suffering hammers at every door of every house on earth: Front door, back door, patio door. You name the door. Living guarantees losing: the ones we love, the love we never had, our own dear little bodies.

The second great insight that the Buddha taught is the cause of suffering. Because of ignorance (*avijja*), we cling to the delusion that there is a separate entity living inside our bodies called “me.” Not only does it have a name, it also has a shape. We watch our bodies get sick and grow old, while this separate ego entity, that which watches, seems to stay eternally young. Whether we have a healthy love for ourselves – called self-esteem – or we despise ourselves, the one thing we all seem to share is that we cling like glue to this feeling of being a separate personality. The feeling of being a separate personality creates a need to feel special, and this need to feel special is a calamity that has caused incomprehensible suffering on this planet. Ponder for a moment the consequences of seven billion humans needing to feel special. The message of the Second Noble Truth is that clinging inevitably leads to suffering.

The third insight is neither obvious nor logical, even to a psychologically mature mind. The mind can acknowledge the truth of suffering, and it can grasp the Buddha’s insight that clinging must be the universal cause of suffering. However, the Buddha’s third insight no longer rises purely from logical analysis. It is, in fact, a proposition, or as stated earlier, it is a promise that comes from profound transformative experience. The Third Noble Truth surpasses the realm of science and enters that of spirituality.

And for the disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, and naught more remains for him to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so, neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, nor tastes, nor contacts of any kind, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such an one to waver. Steadfast is his mind, gained is deliverance.

The Third Noble Truth presents us with a dilemma, and our adult mind will need a little assistance to proceed on this journey. Do you believe that you have the potential to be utterly unshaken by the winds of fate? Can you imagine yourself a rock so solid that “neither forms, nor sounds, nor odors, not tastes, not contacts of any kind, neither the desired not the undesired” will cause you to waver in the slightest? Even if we experience fleeting moments in which this seems possible, who can really

sustain this perspective and for how long? Do you believe that you have within your own being the ability to become completely enlightened in this very life?

The subtle barrier that we face at the Third Noble Truth is nothing other than our own doubt and disbelief. At first the rational mind may have been drawn to the Buddha's infallible logic, but at this point, his elegant argument is no longer sufficient to carry us forward. It may be necessary, but it is no longer sufficient. Now, understanding must be conjoined with faith.

Most of us have grown up in an age and culture that devalues faith, and lots of us who regularly attend church or temple wear our faith as lightly as possible. In this age, we have been witness to the horrific danger of blind faith. We have seen the mass suicide of people trapped in the insanity of cults, both religious and political. Many of us have been sorely wounded by exclusivity and profound meanness coming from "people of faith."

Without a doubt, many of us who have been drawn to Buddhism have arrived at its cool fountain as refugees from the darkness of organized religion. We see and recoil at the childishness of blind faith based in fear of the unknown, or in magical beliefs, or in the charisma of wonderful preachers, teachers, politicians, psychic healers, priests and monks. We have seen the incredible dangers of adhering to blind faith.

So it can be unsettling, to hear the news that without faith we cannot actually proceed from the Third Noble Truth to the Path that follows. We have been comforted by the many references suggesting that the Buddha's teachings are now being validated by contemporary quantum physics. We have found in the Buddha way a rational, scientific answer to our spiritual needs, so how on earth can we give that up, and why should we?

A person seeking the Buddha way can no more leave her faith at the gate as she enters the meditation hall than can a Christian entering the sanctuary. The only difference is the direction that faith turns. It is one thing to have faith in a higher power that can save you. It is quite another thing to have faith or trust in your inherently pure essence, to realize that you are the treasure you seek. Ta Hui says:

If you want to study the Path, you must have settled faith, so your mind does not waver whether favorable or adverse environments are encountered – only then do you have some direction in the Path.

If you're half light and half dark, half believing and half not believing, then whenever you meet with situations, encounter circumstances, your mind produces doubt and confusion – this is mind having attachments to objects.

The question of faith is not easy. No one ever accused duality of being simple! Since the mighty thin plank must have two sides, surely the other side of faith has to be doubt, and faith without doubt is the destroyer of truth. This is the paradox of Ch'an Buddhism which urges its followers to cultivate "settled faith" and "great doubt" at the same time.

In *The Faith to Doubt*, Stephen Batchelor describes the two sides of the mighty thin plank with uncommon clarity:

Thus faith and doubt are brought together. Clearly, doubt in this context does not refer to the kind of wavering indecision in which we get stuck, preventing any positive movement. It means to keep alive the perplexity at the heart of our life, to acknowledge that fundamentally we do not know what is going on, to question whatever arises within us. The acceptance of such doubt as basic to Buddhist practice qualifies the meaning of faith. *Faith is not equivalent to mere belief.* Faith is the condition of ultimate confidence that we have the capacity to follow the path of doubt to its end (italics mine).

The Third Noble Truth points us toward the Path. Faith in our capacity to follow the Path to its end is the key that opens the gate.

Earlier, in the Introduction, I questioned whether we really believe that it is possible to end suffering for all time in this very life. We accept the proposition that we can improve our function – that we can gain equanimity with suffering and that we can mature psychologically – that we can, to use Freud's famous expression, learn to love well and work well. But that this ego self, this palpable sense of "me" can literally die years

before the body dies? I wonder how many of us even desire that kind of faith! Perhaps we have tread the path of Western culture far too many hundreds of years for such a radical aspiration. We want to grow, we want to function better, but is it in our psychological makeup to be inspired by the notion of complete ego death?

As a means of furthering this discussion, let us look at a description of a course in Vipassana that was offered recently at a local junior college in Los Angeles. From the outset, let me say that that I do not intend to denigrate the approach to Vipassana represented in this college course. Indeed, it is possible that this course points us in the direction Buddhism is heading in America, like it or not. My interest is in seeing more clearly the radical message of the Third Noble Truth. The course was described as follows:

Vipassana/Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life.

Explore Vipassana Meditation in a gentle and caring class for students of all levels. The practice of this simple, direct, and powerful sitting-walking-moving meditation invites you to expand your awareness and learn to see things as they really are, freeing your heart and mind. Learn to be fully present in the moment, developing your patience and self-acceptance. Potential benefits from doing this include improved decision making, communication, health, and happiness. The consistent use of this meditation technique can help you become more effective in all areas of your life. Wear comfortable clothing you can move in easily.

In this class, the emphasis is on technique, improvement, and becoming more effective. “Becoming” is the tenth *nidana* in the Buddhist teaching: *Upadana – paccaya bhava*, which translates as, “Clinging conditions becoming.” Underneath the cover of becoming is the endlessly restless ego personality, always looking for “next.” We will study the 12 *nidanas* in later chapters.

In the Vipassana/Mindfulness class, emphasis is placed on improved psychological functioning – decision making – and developing patience and self-acceptance. Here, Vipassana Meditation has been lifted out of the

context of Theravada Buddhism and reframed into the language of our culture. In the brochure, there are no disturbing words about suffering or attachment to desire and nothing as unsettling as the suggestion of penetrating through to the delusion of personality or awakening. Not even a hint. Something intrinsic to the Buddha's core teaching has vanished. In promoting and extolling *improvement*, we have completely missed the Buddha's promise of "that unshakable deliverance of the heart," and we have eliminated any need for faith. One wonders if the path of improvement could ever lead to the end of that which restlessly seeks to improve.

And what about the Buddha's message that we can be *free* of our personal story? His radical message is so startling that we tend to dismiss it out of hand. For one thing, he says that the human condition is one of addiction. We all crave *something*: If it's not pain killers, perhaps it's T.V. or reading every novel we can get our hands on. Perhaps we are addicted to our partners – called codependence in modern language – or we live through our children, another form of codependence. Some of us are addicted to a fantasy of perfection, "If only I can learn to do it perfectly, or look perfect, I will finally be happy." Meditators can even become addicted to the silence that comes from gaining strong concentration, and for sure, most of us are addicted to an idea of improvement.

What the Buddha promises in the Third Noble Truth is hard for us to get our minds around: We can be released from all addictions. That which craves is no more. Once, a student came for her interview with Gurdjieff, excitedly telling him that she had finally broken a life-long addiction to smoking. "Good," he said, "Now have a cigarette!"

There are two very different ways of looking at our capacity to heal. The Buddha way is a path of radical change. It posits nothing less than the complete and radical transformation of who we are. Our Western path imagines progress and steady improvement. It posits healing not as an exploding or instantaneously transformative moment, a spark of fire that burns away delusion, but as a process occurring through time. The Vipassana/Mindfulness class clearly describes this process of becoming through time. This must be what Nisargadatta means when he says that what takes time is false.

Surely this does not make the path of improvement inferior. Many

hospitals in America are now teaching Vipassana techniques to help patients manage chronic pain. They are taught to direct mindfulness *toward* the pain; and when mindfulness merges with equanimity, the pain can be penetrated, meaning that consciousness can literally move into the physical. It makes complete sense. Usually, when we think of watching sensations we immediately go to our default of thinking *about* pain. It never seems to occur to us that thinking “about” is a core problem. *Consciousness must penetrate experience.* As consciousness penetrates into the physical sensation, the pain no longer seems to be a block of sensation. It breaks down into its separate energetic parts – heat, cold, throbbing, stabbing, expanding, contracting: on and on. As the block which we called pain breaks into disparate parts, it becomes manageable; the body begins to relax as unconscious resistance is reduced. Eventually the pain may diminish and even vanish altogether.

Thus, suffering is reduced. Shinzen Young’s famous and brilliant equation, $P \times R = S$, explains the power of Vipassana to reduce suffering: *Pain times Resistance equals Suffering.* In other words, 10 units of pain plus 10 units of resistance equals 20 units of suffering. But 10 units of pain *times* 10 units of resistance produces 100 units of suffering, and that is a lot of suffering.

Shinzen’s equation describes our human condition precisely. If we can learn to reduce our resistance to pain, we automatically reduce the level of suffering. Many Western teachers such as Shinzen Young and Jon Kabat-Zinn have introduced Vipassana into the American mainstream, and the benefits of this teaching are inestimable.

There is a psychological parallel. Our resistance to emotional pain is certainly the primary inhibitor to growing up psychologically. A person’s capacity to tolerate mental discomfort is the *sine qua non* of her ability to stay with grief, fear and loneliness long enough for it to become her teacher and guide. Many people who have sat for years – including weekend or week long retreats – overlook the most obvious benefits of Vipassana and Zen meditation: learning to sit with and tolerate unpleasant and painful feelings. Slowly, we learn to open to our emotional pain rather than repress it. We may be waiting for enlightenment to strike like a lightning flash, but unseen, and often unnoticed, the nervous system is silently rewiring itself, and through the process of tolerating discomfort, we actually begin to stretch psychologically.

Even if our only goal is to use Vipassana as a technique to reduce physical or psychological pain, it is still a precious gift. How could we minimize the relief it may give a cancer patient who is lying in a hospital bed, enduring pain beyond imagination? And Vipassana, as well as yogic breathing techniques, offers effective tools to someone suffering from the horrible crawl of panic attacks.

Beyond managing pain, Vipassana or Zen meditators who use sitting as a technique to improve their lives can gain immeasurable benefits. What price could one put on equanimity? Compassion – another benefit of meditation – opens our hearts to a deep understanding that all beings experience pain and want to feel better.

The other side of the mighty thin plank is the Buddha way, the path of radical change. It imagines something that is, in fact, unimaginable: a state of *nonresistance* rather than lowered resistance. Why is this so? The Buddha's core teaching posits a reality where the one who resists, the one who creates suffering, no longer exists.

Imagine that you were privileged to have an interview with an enlightened teacher. You enter his or her room with much anticipation and trepidation and wait expectantly. The teacher looks at you kindly, but you notice – as Stephen Batchelor described when he first saw his Korean Zen master – a hint of anarchy in his eyes! The teacher offers you two paths: the path of improvement, which offers you the possibility of much greater happiness in your life, or the path of radical change, which offers you the possibility of inner freedom. Which would you choose? Perhaps many of us avoid that inner choosing, hedging our bets. This could be the biggest mistake of our lives.

In truth, life asks this question of us every single day: *Why are you doing this?* What is the underlying purpose of your practice? Are you sitting to learn techniques that may help to improve your life, calm your mind, and perhaps reduce dissatisfaction and discomfort? If the answer is “yes,” surely that is excellent. But the other possibility is to dare to believe in the Buddha's profound message, and to embrace the idea of dying to this small suffering self.

Once, at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, a

Vipassana teacher shared his experience of sitting in a Zen monastery in Korea. He approached the Abbot of that monastery when the master was visiting the United States, and asked him if he could come to Korea and be his student. One wonders if he detected a hint of anarchy in the Zen master's eyes! The Abbot said, "Of course. Just be prepared to die."

Earlier, we said that that our adult mind will need a little assistance if it is to proceed on the Path. That little assistance is a fragile presence - a "feathered thing" in Emily Dickinson's words - our innate capacity to have faith in something mysterious extending beyond our capacity to see through the eyes of reason. Faith resides only in the heart of the child within, and it is the child who must take the adult by the hand. Understanding (discernment) must unite with the child's heart of faith if we are to move into the unknown. One thing more must be added as we remember the Zen master's invitation to come to Korea. Clearly, we must also have courage.