

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

The Eightfold Path

Hundreds of years ago, a Chinese Zen master told his students that the Buddha way has three secrets: discipline, meditation and wisdom. Welcome to the Fourth Noble Truth! There is something oddly anticlimactic about the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth, at least in the sense of dramatic presentation. However hard the First Noble Truth may be to bear, it is certainly easy to memorize: Life is suffering. Ayya Khema, in *When the Iron Eagle Flies*, says that Dukkha is our best teacher, concise and to the point. If we can let suffering teach us, it will lead us to the Second Noble Truth, as surely as it guided Prince Siddhartha Gautama so long ago: Suffering is caused by clinging. As Joseph Goldstein says, it doesn't matter what you are clinging to – figure it out and let it go!

The Third Noble Truth is even simpler to memorize: There can be an end to suffering. These three truths or insights have been taught for over twenty-five hundred years, and those of us who study the Buddha Dharma know them well. We listen attentively as a teacher reminds us of these three truths. Perhaps we begin to feel the “feathered thing” of hope as she tells us that there really is a Path leading away from suffering.

Then we come to the Fourth Noble Truth, and the whole thing falls apart. It's too long; it's too wordy. In this age of astonishingly short attention spans, if the Buddha wants to sell you something, he will need to package it skillfully, giving it a good hook that the mind can grasp. He will need to distill its essence into Power Point and make it easy to understand. Probably this will be his only shot at getting a few precious minutes on Oprah. Make it short, make it very compelling and wear good make up.

The mind can no longer hold the Fourth Noble Truth. Imagine the difference in the Buddha's time. People had no choice but to remember what they heard. They did not get a handout to go along with the Buddha's sermon, nor was there a CD to purchase when he had finished talking. There was no book to order on-line to jog the memory. People had to listen carefully. I suspect that this fact alone accounts for the remarkable

stories of hundreds of people experiencing enlightenment as they listened to the Buddha's sermons. Of course, it was the Buddha talking, but also people truly listened. They had to!

According to the Buddha, the Fourth Noble Truth is *Atthangika-magga*. Translated into English the Pali words describe the Fourth Noble Truth as a path (magga) of eight aspects, folds or steps. It's not a good way to start the show. The fourth is actually eight? How can a path have eight folds? Really, what kind of path has folds in it? It simply does not sit well in our English minds. Ten Commandments, yes, clear and precise. But a path with eight folds makes no sense to me. How about layers? Perhaps a little better. A Path of eight steps works although it isn't very sexy, and, after all, we already have a Twelve Step program. So we start off on a bad footing as the Buddha announces that the fourth actually contains a first through an eighth, and the situation goes from bad to worse.

There is something mystical, even magical, about the word "path." One might think of Robert Frost's lovely poem *The Road Not Taken*. From the yellow brick road to the Tao, our hearts are lifted when we hear of a path that can lead us out of the dark forest. Even if we are not able to see it, it gives us hope when we hear that somewhere in this thicket we call "life" exists a path that will lead us to safety. Jesus said "I am the way and the truth and the life." However you want to interpret his words, they are uplifting and inspiring, and undoubtedly His words have given hope to countless millions. The Buddha also told his disciples that there was a Way of truth, a Path that that would lead them out of the confusion and sorrow of their lives, and surely they listened with at least the same rapt attention as anyone listening to a spiritual teacher spreading the word today.

Imagine it happening today. You are sitting and listening with an open heart as a great teacher declares the Buddha's message of hope. *There is a Path that leads to the end of clinging*. And then the teacher begins to describe the Path, "The first step of the Path is Right Understanding." Heaven help us if the teacher dares to bring the Twelve Nidanas into it. Our minds are trying hard to hold on to the fact that the Fourth is the Eighth, and now we are adding the First step to the Fourth and Eighth, and she tells us we really do need to understand the Twelve Nidanas in order to understand the first step of Right Understanding? Please. Before you know it, someone in the audience is snoring, and that poor soul very well could be me.

Too many words. Too boring. Too intellectual. And what do all these concepts have to do with attaining silence? What do they have to do with meditation? Get me to a Zen temple where they just sit in choiceless awareness. Or better still, get me to an Adyashanti retreat were I am assured by a delightful and clearly awake teacher that I already am enlightened! None of these words, concepts, techniques are going to lead me home. So why get lost in all the verbiage?

As I was pondering the nearly inexplicable fact that not one person in our sangha is likely to remember all eight aspects of the Fourth Noble Truth, I was feeling a little arrogant. “How can they continue with this strange amnesia when I have gone over it and over it?” Just to reassure myself that I am certainly superior to all these lazy people, I retraced each of the eight steps in my mind. For the life of me I could only name seven.

So once again, this time, for myself as well as you, here are the eight steps of the Eightfold Path.

- Right Understanding
- Right Thought
- Right Speech
- Right Conduct
- Right Living
- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

We will discuss these eight steps, folds, aspects for the remainder of this paper. And yes, dear friends, we will talk at length about the Twelve Nidanas.

As a way to put the Eightfold Path in perspective, consider this: The Ten Commandments are essentially covered by Right Conduct. From the Judaic- Christian standpoint, that’s a rather sobering, if not humbling, fact. The profound teaching of the Heart Sutra, chanted in Zen temples throughout the world is covered by Right Understanding. Vipassana meditation is essentially covered by Right Mindfulness. I suspect that it is not too outrageous an argument to suggest that cognitive psychotherapy is covered by Right Thought. My point is that the Eightfold Path is nothing but the vast Buddha Dharma in words. Volumes can and have been written about the first step of Right Understanding. Volumes have

certainly been written about the seventh step of Right Mindfulness. But we have never come close to exhausting the content of the Eightfold Path through words, and we never will.

As we mentioned previously, the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth, better known as the Eightfold Path, is divided into three main sections: *Sila*, *Samadhi*, and *Prajna*. Try to spend a few moments letting these three words sink into your mind. Really, close your eyes and silently say these three Pali words, "Sila, Samadhi and Prajna" (they won't contaminate you). Every spiritual tradition has these three aspects in some form or other. Your life and my life have these three aspects in one form or other. For most of us, one of the three is probably more developed than the other two. Some us, perhaps, have developed two of the aspects. Rarely are all three equally sturdy and balanced.

Sila is the Pali word for morality, or if you prefer, ethics. *Sila* comprises three of the eight steps of the Eightfold Path.

- 1) Right Speech (The one I could not remember.)
- 2) Right Conduct (or Right Action)
- 3) Right Living (also called Right Livelihood)

There is a saying that your true character is based on who you are when no one is looking. This is *Sila*. It is the truth of who we really are, not who we pretend or wish we were to ourselves or others. We proclaim ourselves to be nonviolent as we march against war, waving signs proclaiming nonviolence as our guide. All the time we feel virulent hatred toward the ones we blame for causing the war. Whether we admit it or not, we call this "justified hate." We compare our President to Hitler and have no problem with such an odious comparison. We feel compassion for someone condemned to death by a jury, and yet we feel nothing for an aborted fetus because we tell ourselves it was never really a living human. We cram our beliefs into our political ideology, and are a mess of contradictions. This is the truth that Nisargadatta put into words that ring as clear as temple bells, "What is supremely important is to be free of contradictions: behavior must not betray belief." Such beautiful words. *Sila* is the bottom line of who we really are inside.

Samadhi is the Pali word for concentration, and it also comprises three of the eight steps.

- 1) Right Effort
- 2) Right Mindfulness
- 3) Right Concentration

Some teachers call this the meditation part of the Path. For sure, these three aspects of the Eightfold Path are the core of our meditation practice whether it be Zen, Vipassana, Tibetan, Yoga, Advaita, analysis of a dream, or Christian contemplation. Indeed, saying the Lord's Prayer requires Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Those who are convinced that "The Secret" will bring them success will not get very far in manifesting their intention without some help from these three.

Prajna is the Pali word for wisdom. It makes up two of the eight steps.

- 1) Right Understanding (Right View)
- 2) Right Thought

These two comprise the "highest" and most subtle of the three divisions. In the Buddhist scriptures, it is said that a person cannot possibly attain the wisdom necessary for liberation without having first gained mastery over concentration. This makes complete sense. In the Zen tradition, some teachers ask their students to inquire "Who am I?" Nisargadatta urges us to stay with the feeling I Am. The very term "stay with" implies the ability to concentrate. How do we stay with (follow) the breath, or sensations, if our mind relentlessly jumps from one object to another like a monkey swinging with abandon from limb to limb?

The scriptures go further, however. They say that a life has to be "settled" for the mind to be ready to develop powerful concentration. Think of any form of addiction: The need to self-soothe by reading two novels a week; the need to escape from reality by sitting in front of a computer screen watching pornography; the need to smoke pot every few hours to take the edge off crawling discomfort that seems unbearable. How on earth can a person develop concentration as a conscious spiritual tool if his mind is caught in one trance or another? Tara Brock's marvelous expression "the trance of unworthiness" describes unconscious concentration perfectly: the mind is trapped in obsession.

This is why the role of Sila is so crucial. Right conduct, speech and livelihood create a stable base, a balanced life that allows us to turn the light inward. So there must be some mastery over our basic behavior, internal as well as external. We practice goodness not because it will get us to heaven. We practice it so that our minds will not be caught in guilt or distraction. It is like becoming an Olympic runner. He carefully guards his behavior because he understands that discipline is absolutely necessary if he is to run the race to the full extent of his ability. This is why the Chinese master called Sila “discipline.”

Surprisingly, the Eightfold Path does not begin with conduct or morality, a set of rules or Commandments, which is the traditional blueprint for spiritual practice. Nor does it begin with concentration, which in one form or other, is part of all religions. The Buddha begins the Eightfold Path with *prajna*, wisdom, turning what would otherwise be a logical, linear path into a wheel where the beginning is also the end. Not only is wisdom the crown and culmination of the Path, it is also the way to enter it. The first step we take on a spiritual journey begins with some fleeting, silent glimpse of truth or understanding. It is that fragile intuition that leads us toward the Dharma.

The Buddha called the Eightfold Path the “Middle Way.” On one level the middle way describes a Path that travels between the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence. But the middle way has a far deeper meaning. It is the journey of the razor’s edge, where we try to live in but not of the world. The middle way is the way of the Tao where we balance the Relative and the Absolute. Here is how Man-an, an eighteenth century Zen master of the Soto school, described the journey of the middle way:

Although the Way of Buddhahood is long and far, ultimately there is not an inch of ground on earth. Although there may be five hundred miles of dangers and difficult road, the treasure is nearby.

The Eightfold Path



This is the language of truth, and it is always a language of paradox. Man affirms that there is a Buddha Way, but it is a Path that exists beyond the boundaries of time and space. In the vastness of the infinite, the Holy Ground can be found in only one place. It rests only beneath your own two feet.

We begin with Right Understanding.