

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 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 develops a mind of deep calm; and prajna is the development of intuitive wisdom.

In the scriptural passage quoted 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, let alone all three.

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 Pole Star of the Buddha way; it is the object, the essence and the goal of our journey on this earth.

The Third Noble Truth may be the most profound statement about human existence ever uttered. 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 merely to learn how to accept the reality of suffering as a life sentence, adjusting to it with a measure of grace. The message of the Third Noble Truth is far more radical than that. It soars far beyond the borders of the rational mind, saying that you and I can *end* all suffering.

The journey will not be easy. Enlightened teachers and wise gurus may inspire us on the way, perhaps a Divine being can touch our hearts; but the hard teaching of Buddhism is that waking up is an inside job. A mother hen may help break through the shell from the outside, but it is the little chick that has to do most of the work of breaking out. This is a dividing line between Buddhism and most world religions, and not an easy 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

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. The question "How can I do that?" seems to be everyone's default setting. 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 knocks at the 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 is the cause of suffering. Because of ignorance (*avijja*), we cling to the illusion that there is an entity living inside our bodies. Not only does it have a name, it also has a vague shape that approximates the shape of the physical body. We watch our physical bodies get sick and grow old, while this ego entity clings to the illusion that it is not subject to the aging process. How many of us have looked in the mirror at an old body, amazed because we feel so young inside! Of course the "young" person living inside the body eventually discovers that his body is now lying in a hospital or nursing home, withered, old and in pain. So much for illusion!

Whether we have a healthy love for ourselves or we despise ourselves, the one thing we all seem to share is that we cling like glue to the idea that we are a separate personality inhabiting a body. That illusion leads to another: Not only are we an entity separate from the body, we are also an entity that is separate from every other living being on this planet. Western psychology wisely teaches us that consciousness needs to separate or individuate itself from the collective in order to create a cohesive and healthy sense of self. But when this natural process of individuation does

not eventually make the crucial turn back toward connectedness with all living beings, the need to be special becomes an death warrant to spiritual realization. Ponder the consequences of seven billion humans needing to feel special. The message of the Second Noble Truth is simple: 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 inevitably leads to suffering. But the Buddha's third insight no longer rises purely from logical analysis. It is, in fact, a promise that comes from the profound transformative experience that he and other enlightened beings have experienced. The Third Noble Truth surpasses the realm of rational analysis and enters the realm of spirituality where the mind has been freed to see beyond the limits of sense data.

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. Can we actually believe that we have the potential to be utterly unshaken by the winds of fate? Can we imagine ourselves as 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 us 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? How do we dare believe that we have within our own being the ability to completely awaken 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 even those of us who regularly attend church or temple sometimes wear our faith as lightly as possible. In this age, we have been witness to the horrific danger of blind faith. We see and recoil at the childishness of a 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 mass suicide of people trapped in the insanity of cults, both religious and political. Many of us have been sorely wounded by the exclusivity and downright meanness radiating 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 have been comforted by the increasing evidence that the Buddha's teachings are validated by no less than contemporary quantum physics. We have found in the Buddha-way a rational, scientific answer to our spiritual needs. So it can be unsettling, to say the least, to hear the news that without faith we cannot actually proceed from the Third Noble Truth to the Path that follows.

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.

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 innate essence of purity and light 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 – or, 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 be released from the chains of ignorance? How many of us have faith that this is possible? 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 release from delusion?

As a means of furthering this discussion, let us look at a description of a course in Vipassana meditation that was offered recently at a local 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 evolving in America, like it or not. My interest is in seeing more clearly how radical the message of the Third Noble Truth really is. 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,” which is the tenth nidana in the Buddhist teaching, *Upadana – paccaya bhava*, translates as, “Clinging conditions becoming.” Underneath the cover of becoming is the endlessly restless ego personality, always looking for a “better” experience. 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 a suggestion that this practice is about awakening. But hasn’t something intrinsic to the Buddha’s core teaching vanished? Promoting and extolling improvement is a far cry from the Buddha’s promise of “that unshakable deliverance of the heart,” and the need for “faith” has been eliminated entirely.

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 not pain killers, perhaps 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 peace that comes from gaining strong concentration.

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!”

We are presented with 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 toward a goal that is somewhat nebulous. 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 that process.

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. Patients are taught to direct mindfulness *toward* the pain; and when mindfulness merges with equanimity, the pain can be penetrated - consciousness can literally experience the physical, while maintaining an awareness of itself. Usually, when we try to watch a painful sensation we immediately go

to a default setting, either thinking *about* the sensation (dissociation) or completely getting lost in the sensation (merging).

When consciousness neither dissociates nor merges, but can penetrate into the physical sensation with awareness intact, the pain no longer seems to be a block of sensation. It breaks down into separate energetic parts – heat, cold, throbbing, stabbing, expanding, contracting, etc. As the block of pain breaks into disparate parts, it becomes manageable; the body begins to relax and the unconscious resistance is reduced. Eventually the pain may diminish and even vanish altogether.

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 pain. But 10 units of pain *times* 10 units of resistance produces 100 units of suffering. Pain has turned into 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.

Learning to reduce our resistance to pain applies equally to psychic distress. Our resistance to emotional pain is 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 and spiritually.

Western teachers such as Shinzen Young have introduced Vipassana into the American mainstream as adjuncts to our Western modes of healing. The work of Jon Kabat-Zinn's Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center has been extremely valuable in this regard, as well as the more recent development of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which appears to offer great promise in the treatment of depression. So, even if our goal is to use Vipassana specifically 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 an ultimate realization that the one who is resisting, the one who is creating suffering is only a mirage.

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 – 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 there is nothing wrong with that choice. But the other possibility - daring to believe in the Buddha’s profound message of radical awakening - is to embrace the idea of complete liberation in this very life.

Once, at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, I heard a Vipassana teacher share his experience of sitting in a Zen monastery in Korea. He told us that he approached a famous Zen master who was visiting the United States, and asked him if he could come to Korea and be his student. 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 lovely 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, and it is the child within each of us who must take the adult by the hand. Understanding (discernment) must unite with the child’s heart of faith if we