

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

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A DISCUSSION WITH MR. GODWIN SAMARARATNE

GODWIN: Today we will be discussing the Four Noble Truths, You may perhaps recall that when Prince Siddhartha left his wife and children and the palace, he wanted to find a solution to the problem of suffering. And with the attainment of enlightenment he discovered the Four Noble Truths. It is the core, the essence of Buddhism. The Buddha often says: the only thing I teach is suffering and the way out of suffering.

STUDENT: *It's just four aspects of one truth.*

GODWIN: Right. The Four Noble Truths can be seen as four different aspects, four different dimensions, or facets of the same truth. I am sure that in your meditations you would have realised how suffering arises - whether in relation to resisting pain, holding on to a state of calm, or comparing yourself with others.

And you will also have seen how suffering arises in relation to activities outside, whether getting hurt because of someone else's behaviour, being disappointed with your own behaviour, being unhappy or frustrated by losing something which you have been identifying with, or losing someone dear to you.

In all such situations it should become clear that if there is suffering, that suffering is self-inflicted. And if it is something self-inflicted then there is a way out of it. So in every situation, we have a choice, a very clear choice. Either to experience sorrow, *dukkha*, or not to experience *dukkha*. Whatever the situation is. You can think of any event, any situation in life where we have the complete freedom to suffer or not to suffer.

So the Four Noble Truths deal with four aspects: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way to work with suffering. These are the four aspects. Now I would not like to burden you with the first three aspects. I assume that you have experienced these in your meditations. How suffering is brought about by our expectations, by our identifications, by our likes and by our dislikes. And that when they are absent there is no suffering, there is a cessation of suffering.

Before I present the fourth aspect, the way, the path leading to the absence of suffering, I would like to present an analogy and discuss it in relation to death. You will all explore that analogy. Supposing we have to climb a mountain peak, let's say the Himalayas. How are we to set about it? What are the things that we have to think of?

STUDENT: *Supplies that we would need.*

STUDENT: *We might want a guide.*

STUDENT: *Appropriate clothing and equipment.*

STUDENT: *Decide on the path that we want to take.*

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GODWIN: Yes, to decide on the path, perhaps we might have to have a map. So we have to have some cognition, some understanding about what we are going to undertake. What about discipline? Do we need to discipline yourself in preparation? Perhaps we might need to cut down on our smoking, or eat less. We can't give in to sluggishness, sleepiness. We'll have to have some alertness when we are climbing to see whether we are following the right path, the right landmarks according to the map.

So the path, or the way to attain enlightenment also has some of the features that we've discussed with the analogy of climbing a peak. The first one is right understanding, right view. And understanding revolves around the idea of suffering and the overcoming of suffering. In relation to climbing the peak, there should be some understanding of why you are doing it, how you are going to do it. So in the same way in relation to the problem of suffering, one has to understand the nature of suffering and you have to have had a glimpse of what causes suffering, and you have also to have had a glimpse of what happens when there is cessation of suffering.

So with the cessation of suffering there is an encouragement, an incentive for you to pursue the way and the path to eradicate suffering altogether. So right understanding would be having a kind of vision, perspective about the path and the way leading to the goal.

The next step is right intention, right thoughts. When we have to climb the peak, one has to engage in some thinking in relation to the whole expedition. And here again the thoughts would be in relation to the problem of suffering and its overcoming.

The third step is right speech. And right speech would be where there is absence of lying, slander, gossiping. So that is where a kind of discipline has to be present.

The next step would be right livelihood. One has to choose a livelihood which is most conducive, most helpful to overcoming greed, hatred and delusion because they are responsible for your suffering. A livelihood like being a butcher would not enable you to overcome hatred or delusion.

And if we have to climb the peak there has to be effort. In the same way, in following the path of the eight-fold way the next step has to be right effort. And there again the effort would be aimed at reducing suffering.

And the next is right mindfulness, which you are all familiar with. And the eighth one is right concentration.

You can divide the eight-fold noble path into three divisions. In Pali they are *sila*, *samadhi* and *pannya*. *Sila* would cover the area of morality, right action, right speech. *Samadhi* and *pannya* cover right concentration and right mindfulness. So morality, concentration and wisdom are indispensable for the attaining of complete liberation.

Do you have any questions?

STUDENT: *In reference to right livelihood: you said that being a butcher would not be a good occupation. And I was wondering would it be possible for someone to butcher livestock without feeling any hatred towards what he was killing?*

GODWIN: According to Buddhism it is not possible to kill, it is not possible to take another's life, without an element of hatred. Secondly, as we don't like being killed, as we like to live,

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it is considered that animals also don't like to experience pain, or don't want to be killed. So in Buddhism, whether in relation to human beings or animals, one have loving-kindness because in both situations they are considered living beings.

STUDENT: *Your answer has prompted another question. You said that one consideration for not killing is for example that we ourselves like to live, but that's a like and something that we have a sort of attachment to - our own lives and isn't that something undesirable?*

GODWIN: When we are killing others, when we are taking life, we don't know whether in the case of an animal or man that they don't want to live. So that the right to live should be considered whether in relation to human beings or animals, and in taking life we are depriving them of the right to live.

STUDENT: *What if they want to die and told you that they want to die, and wanted you to kill them? Like someone who had been in an accident and was left totally paralysed.*

GODWIN: I think in a situation like this where you see an animal suffering then perhaps through compassion for the animal you decide to kill that animal. According to Buddhism, there the intention is a noble intention because you are feeling sorry, you are feeling compassionate, towards the animal. But the fact that you are killing that animal is not a wholesome act.

So for an act to become completely wholesome, skilful, the intention must be wholesome and the consequences also must be wholesome. So here the question revolves around the means and the end. Here the end is something noble but if the means adopted entails harmful behaviour as in the case of killing, it is not considered completely wholesome. So if you see that act in terms of getting marks, you won't get an hundred for it. You may get some marks for the compassion you have shown towards the animal, but you won't get any marks for the killing. Any other questions?

STUDENT: *According to Buddhism, do plants also want to live and if so what are humans supposed to eat?*

GODWIN: Now according to Buddhism, there is a distinction that is drawn between what is considered life and what is not considered life. And one criteria of that is whether there is consciousness, willful action. So that in the case of animals and human beings it is considered that the doctrine of karma and reincarnation operates in the realm of beings, and animals would also come under the realm of beings. Plant life is excluded because it lacks that sophisticated awareness, that consciousness which is related to the doctrine of karma and reincarnation. Because it does not have a mind in the sense defined, where the law of karma and reincarnation operates.

Any more questions?

STUDENT: *What about carnivorous animals? Are they condemned or not? Are they condemned for killing or is that nature's way?*

GODWIN: Carnivorous animals are those which live off other animals. Certainly that wouldn't be considered something wholesome.

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STUDENT: *Considering that doctrine and considering that carnivorous animals kill other animals for their food while herbivores only kill plants, and assuming that humans can be reincarnated as animals, would it be better to be reincarnated as a flesh-eating or plant-eating animal?*

GODWIN: I think that it would be better to be born as a plant-eating animal because there it doesn't involve killing.

STUDENT: *With regard to right livelihood, one of the guidelines was that it should not promote greed, and I was wondering if that would include such occupations as being a banker?*

GODWIN: In the texts the livelihoods that are described are, for example, being a butcher because while doing that occupation you'll be accumulating more and more unskillful actions and thoughts, and you'll also be encouraging others to do that also.

Another occupation that I just thought of that is mentioned in the texts is selling weapons, where by doing that you are encouraging other people to kill. So that is another criterion. While you are accumulating more and more unskillful states you will also be encouraging others to do so as well. So that is an extremely important point to remember when one has to choose one's livelihood.

Perhaps another livelihood that I can think of is being a lawyer. Where sometimes one has to thrive on telling lies and falsehoods. And when you reflect you know that you are resorting to telling lies. Then one has to avoid such livelihoods that result in such a lack of spiritual growth.

STUDENT: *Do entire nations or governments accumulate bad karma? Say for example the US selling weapons to some country or the USSR doing likewise? Or is it on the level of the individual?*

GODWIN: Yes, I think it is on the level of the individuals who would be doing these things. And it is the individuals who are accumulating unskillful states of mind by doing that. And also would be affecting other individuals in other countries by their actions.

STUDENT: *How do you apply this doctrine to the killing of an unborn child? Is that also an unwholesome act according to the Buddha?*

GODWIN: What you mean is abortion. In Buddhism, abortion is considered unwholesome because it means getting rid of a foetus that has been formed and is considered to be alive. But family planning, preventing a birth from taking place, does not conflict.

What I personally feel is that with meditation one develops what I call a sensitivity. And then with that sensitivity you will be attuned, act skillfully, there will be wholesome action, so that you will not be following a moral code but there will be a natural behaviour which will be determined by your state of mind. So there is a kind of natural morality that Buddha speaks about, without being moralistic, without being preoccupied or concerned with merely following a set of rules.

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When you develop love and compassion you will be completely incapable of taking life. So I would emphasise the kind of morality which stems from sensitivity or meditation. Such a person is really incapable of telling lies, being dishonest, of stealing something from another person. He doesn't feel the need to be intoxicated. Otherwise morality can become a burden, you will suffer as a result of these particular codes, but if you develop your mind through meditation that morality just flows from such a mind. Then living becomes much more easier, it's a beautiful way to live with others. There is harmony.