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Turning Toward: Four Ennobling Truths

The Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion

I was sitting in an airplane on the tarmac in Sacramento when the PA system sputtered to life: "We want to give you an update on our progress." A silent groan went through the passengers: the word "update" meant the problem wasn't fixed. A cheery voice said they had "identified a difficulty" in a "communications board" for which technicians were "seeking a solution."

We took off nearly an hour late. My itinerary gave me 57 minutes in Dallas to make a connecting flight. I'd planned to get a Tex-Mex lunch in the airport and stretch my legs a little before the next leg of the journey. Instead I raced from terminal C to terminal E. The airline had already given my window seat away. The agent found one on the aisle. I scooted on as the ramp closed.

I like to look out airplane windows. The woman by the window closed the shade so she could watch a movie. The woman next to me drank three small bottle of liquor, put on earphones, and laughed as she watched the movie.

I was not interested in the movie. I did not feel like laughing. I read a little, slept a little, worked on my computer a little, stared at a Sudoku puzzle a little. Nothing was satisfying. Turbulence kept the "fasten your seatbelts" sign lit. There was nothing left for me to do but meditate. I didn't want to meditate because I had so much aversion inside about all the things that hadn't gone the way I wanted.

But when I closed my eyes, I was too worn to fight the aversion. I didn't try. I just felt the cranky thoughts and relaxed.

The aversion turned out not to be the pack of grubby monsters I'd feared. It was like a four-year-old complaining that dad had cut the crust off his sandwich: it was sad but kind of sweet and endearing.

I remembered that crucial meditation lesson: resistance is futile. Fighting reality – wanting things to be different than they are – is what Jean Houston calls "schlock suffering." Life has its unavoidable discomforts. But they don't turn into anguish unless we have the hubris to think it should be different just because we want it to be different.

Aversion is like an ocean wave rolling toward us. We can try to run from it. But it's likely to catch us from behind, sweep us away, or knock us flat. The Buddha recommended turning toward discomfort and getting to know it even if this means diving into the wave. Then we experience its true nature: water that passes by in a rush – not so bad after all. And after it passes there is that lovely quiet in the wake.

Sitting on the plane I learned this for the 1000th time. Old habits of turning away are deeply conditioned. So I have to learn it over and over until relaxing into the wave becomes a deeper habit.

It was almost midnight when my sister picked me up at the airport. I was worn, tired, hungry, and unexpectedly light in spirit.

Getting the Ball Rolling

Buddhism is not a religion, philosophy, or even spirituality as much as it's a way of engaging life. It's a way of looking with a quiet, unflinching smile at whatever comes along. It's turning toward the waves that crash toward us. The Buddha didn't promote beliefs or recommend esoteric states. But he did encourage wisdom – seeing clearly and heartfully how life actually works. This turning toward can lead to deep ease and wellbeing that is remarkably stable even as the waves pass over us.

This attitude of "turning toward" appears in the Buddha's first successful sermon. It is called the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*. We might call it, "Getting the Ball Rolling." It brought the core of his teaching into the world and enlightened his first student.

Upaka

Before looking at the sutta itself, a little background:

When the Buddha awakened under the Bodhi tree, he thought his realization was too subtle for anyone to understand. And awakening left him very comfortable with solitude. So he hung out around the Bodhi tree for a month.

Gradually he realized there were some people close to enlightenment. With a nudge or a pointer in the right direction, they might awaken fully. So he set out to teach.

The first person he came upon was a young yogi named Upaka. Upaka recognized something extraordinary about the Buddha and asked, "Who are you? Who is your teacher?"

In *Majjhima Nikaya* 26.25, the Buddha answered him truthfully, directly, and in verse:

I am one who has transcended all,
a knower of all
Unsullied among all things,
renouncing all,
By craving's ceasing freed…

I have no teacher, and one like me
Exists nowhere in all the world
With all its gods, because I have
No person for my counterpart…

And he continues on like this for several minutes.

Put yourself in Upaka's place. You're walking along a public thoroughfare – perhaps a subway. You see a glowing stranger and offer a polite greeting. He replies, rapping in cadence:

I am the Accomplished One in the world,
I am the Teacher Supreme,
I alone am a Fully Enlightened One
Whose fires are quenched and extinguished …

Would you suspect he was on drugs? What would you think?

The sutta describes Upaka's reaction: "When this was said, the ascetic Upaka said: 'May it be so, friend,' Shaking his head, he took a bypath and departed." He took the Buddha for a nut case and politely scooted away.

As Gautama Siddhārtha watched him scuttle away, he must have thought, "Well, that didn't go so well."

Do you know that feeling?

For more than 25 years I came to the pulpit in September after being away for most of the summer. I felt refreshed and inspired with new ideas and insights I wanted to share. I poured my heart into those first Fall sermons.

Afterwards people greeted me at the door with blank smiles and polite remarks: "Very nice." "Wonderful effort."

"Well, that didn't go very well," I'd think. "They didn't get it." The problem

was I was more connected with my ideas and insights than I was with them.

As I reconnected with them in the following days, I held two questions in the back of my mind: "What are their concerns?" and "Do I have anything useful to say about these?"

Within a few weeks, they were greeting me after the service with eye contact, presence, and reflections about the morning's topic: we were back in the groove together.

Most of us have had that kind of experience: being so inspired that we don't really connect with the people we're talking to. We talk right past them.

Being enlightened didn't mean the Buddha knew everything about everything. So as Upaka disappeared down the path shaking his head and muttering under his breath, I imagine Gautama thinking, "That didn't work so well. I need another approach."

Connection

A few days later the Buddha came upon five monks who had been old friends on the path. This time he paid careful attention to who they were and what their concerns were. He spoke in terms they'd relate to. And this time, his words connected. The world has not been quite the same since.

This brings us to the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Saṃyutta Nikaya* 56.11.

Bear in mind that suttas were passed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years before they were written down. The language became stylized to make them easier to memorize. Unfortunately this stylization makes it harder to follow the content. But the original teachings still shine if you listen attentively:

> *Thus have I heard: On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Varanasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There he addressed the monks of the group of five.*[1]

This opening paragraph is a formula. "Thus have I heard" signals that we're about to hear the Buddha's words as recalled by Ānanda at the first counsel after the Buddha's death. Ānanda was the Buddha's cousin and his long time personal attendant. He was reputed to have perfect memory. Monks relied on him to transmit what the Buddha had said.

This paragraph also sets the scene: a game preserve about 14 kilometers from Varanasi (Benares), the ancient sacred city on the Ganges River. The standard phrase says he was "living at Varanasi." From other records we know he actually had just arrived in the Deer Park from his month near the Bodhi tree.

The "group of five" were the five ascetics with whom he had practiced for several years. This is important: he was speaking to very accomplished monks rather than novices. Beginners might find his words difficult to fathom. But he saw that these monks were ripe and close to enlightenment.

The Buddha said:

> *Monks, these two extremes ought not to be indulged by one gone forth from the house-life.* ["Gone forth" means "left the householder life to live as a homeless monk."] *What are the two* [extremes]*? There is devotion to indulgence of pleasure in the objects of sensual desire, which is inferior, low, vulgar, ignoble, and leads to no good; and there is devotion to self-*

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[1] This rendering of the text is a synthesis of the translations of Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ñanamoli Thera, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, and Peter Harvey. In blending them together I've also been guided by study with Bhante Vimalaramsi, the writings of Stephen Batchelor, and my own meditative inquiry.

affliction, which is painful, ignoble and leads to no good.

At that time in India, most people saw a conflict between spiritual and worldly forces. To become more spiritual, we should suppress the worldly – weaken the body and it's earthly cravings. As the body weakened, the spiritual forces would gain strength. At least this was the theory behind "devotion to self-affliction."

These ascetics were devoted to these practices. The Buddha was not speaking past them: he was speaking directly to them when he spoke of "devotion to indulgence of pleasure" being inferior, low, and ignoble. We can imagine them nodding their head in agreement. He had their attention.

Then he said the opposite: "Devotion to self-affliction … is ignoble and leads to no good." We can imagine they stopped nodding their heads. Now he really had their attention.

At this point he introduced the notion of the "middle way" for which Buddhism is now famous.

The middle way discovered by a Perfect One avoids both these extremes; it gives vision and knowledge, and it leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to nibbana. And what is that middle way? It is simply the noble eightfold path, that is to say, right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. That is the middle way discovered by a Perfect One, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to peace, to direct acquaintance, to discovery, to nibbana.

Repetition

You'll notice the repetition of the last phrase. Repetition marks a passage as important. It may also be an artifact of how the suttas were transmitted: monks recited them from memory and were tested on how well they remembered. Repetitive phrases were easy to recall because they didn't have to think about them as much. As you listen to them, you may find yourself not thinking about them as well.

Middle Way

The substance of this paragraph introduces the middle way and its benefits: vision, knowledge, understanding, peace, awakening, and nibbāna. These are in contrast to the extremes of indulgence and asceticism that are painful, ignoble, and unprofitable.

Right, Wise, Skillful, Harmonious

The paragraph also introduces ways to cultivate this middle way: the now famous eightfold path of right view, right intention, etc. The word "right" is a translation of the Pāli word "*sammā*." Jesuits were the first to translate many Pāli texts into English. They used language familiar to them from the *King James Bible* that said a lot about right and wrong. Better translations of "sammā" are "wise," "skillful," and "harmonious."

Some of the other words should be brought into a modern context as well. For example, in the Buddha's time, speech was the predominant mode of communication. Written language was reserved for inventories of goods and other mundane business. Sacred concerns were communicated orally. Today we use written words, emails, videos, and more. So "right speech" might be better translated as "skillful…" or "harmonious communication."

The complexities of modern life mean that our conduct is about more than how we earn a paycheck. "Right livelihood" might be better translated as "wise living" or "harmonious lifestyle."

In fact, the appearance of the eightfold path in this sutta is a little suspect. Later generations who had studied the Buddha's teachings would know what he was talking about in naming these eight. But the five ascetics, who were hearing the Buddha's first words on the subject, would find this list a little cryptic: what exactly did he mean by each of these? Perhaps they were inserted in the sutta by later generations. Or perhaps the Buddha elaborated more but it was reduced and codified to make it easier to memorize. It's hard to know.

But we do know that the substance of the eightfold path includes practices the Buddha talked about over and over: wise perspective, wise intentions, skillful communication, skillful conduct, harmonious lifestyle, wise effort, wise mindfulness, harmonious collectedness.

Four Truths

Now we come to the heart of this sutta: his first articulation of what became known as "the four noble truths."

Suffering, Dissatisfaction

First he describes what the four truths are. Then he describes how to work with them. The first truth is suffering:

> *Suffering, as a ennobling truth, is this: Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the loathed is suffering, separation from the loved is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering — in short, the five clinging-aggregates are suffering.*

The Pāli word for suffering is "*dukkha*." It literally refers to a wheel whose axil is off center: it presses and grinds as it turns. Dukkha can also be translated as "pain," "anguish," "stress," or simply "dissatisfaction." It is important enough that the Buddha went on to indicate what he meant by it. He doesn't try to define it logically or rationally but points to it experientially.

If someone says, "what is green?" we might answer, "you know what green is. You see it all the time. The leaves in spring are green. Grass is green. Bell peppers are green. Jade is green." We're not saying that green is the same as grass or bell peppers or jade. We're just saying that the color we experience in looking at all these is the color green.

Likewise, he wasn't defining suffering as aging, sickness, etc. He's saying, "You know what suffering is. You experience it all the time. Suffering is sickness. Suffering is grief. Suffering is separation from loved ones…" and he goes on to list common experiences that illustrate the experience of dukkha.

He concludes, "in short, the five clinging-aggregates are suffering." This is a curious phrase. In the years after delivering this discourse, he talked about the five aggregates. Collectively they refer to the full range of what is possible to experience in this world. But here there is no explanation of them here. In the generations to come, as Buddhists listened to this sutta, they would know what the phrase meant. But at the time, "clinging-aggregates" would have been more enigmatic than "eightfold path." I suspect the phrase was inserted by later generations.

However, the phrase is probably true to what the Buddha meant. There is a sweetness, lightness, joy, and spaciousness with us all the time: our so-called "Buddha nature." But it is so serene that most people never notice it. In deeper meditation, we begin to touch and taste it consciously. Once we begin to know it, even the greatest worldly pleasures seem dull and coarse in comparison. Even the best the world produces is unsatisfying matched up to the pervasive joy of true awakening.

Origins of Suffering

The second truth is the origin of suffering:

> *"The origin of suffering as an ennobling truth is this: craving makes for renewed existence — accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there —that is, craving for sensual pleasure, craving for being, craving for non-being.*

The word for "craving" is "*taṇhā*." Taṇhā is a preverbal, precognitive, instinctual tightening. When we are about to step off the sidewalk and notice a car coming our way, the body tightens. We don't think about it, contemplate, or decide to stiffen. It just happens with the recognition of a threat. When we see something delicious, the body tightens slightly to prepare it to move toward it. We may not notice the tightening because our focus is on the treat out there and because the inner tightening can be so subtle.

The tightening is not willful – it's not something we decide to do. It may be followed by lots of thoughts and decisions. But taṇhā itself is an unconscious, complex reflex. This tightening is also at the root of a sense of self – identifying various phenomena as a part of "me" or belonging to "myself."

Taṇhā is often translated as "craving." It can be large and powerful like a junkie with darting eyes and trembling hands searching for her next fix. But it can also be as subtle as an inclination, as wispy as a soft yearning, as quiet as a worry, as light as a fantasy. Sitting in meditation we can sometimes feel the mind-heart lean subtly toward or away from an idea or image or experience. When we're bored, we may feel the mind thicken into a fog. These are different flavors of taṇhā.

Taṇhā colors most aspects of human experience. When the airplane pilot announced an "update," the silent groan that spread through the passengers was taṇhā: aversion to sitting on the tarmac and desire to get on with the flight. When I thought wistfully of a Tex-Mex taco, that was taṇhā. When I was annoyed at the laughing drunk in the plane seat next to me, that aversion was taṇhā. When I stared at the Sudoku to get my mind off what I was feeling, that was taṇhā as the urge to space out.

As with dukkha, the Buddha gives general examples of taṇhā: passion, delight, relishing one thing or another, wanting sensual pleasantness, wanting to exist (or difficulty imagining the world without us existing in it), wanting to shrink away or to vanish (such as when we're embarrassed or depressed). This is not meant to be an exhaustive list: just common instances. If we look at these and see what they have in common we'll see that they all have this inner tightening.

Cessation

The third truth is the end of suffering or the cessation of the experience of dissatisfaction:

> *Cessation of suffering, as an ennobling truth, is this: It is remainderless fading way and ceasing of that same craving – the giving up, relinquishing of it, freedom from it, releasing it, and non-reliance upon it.*

If the source of suffering and dissatisfaction is the tightening of taṇhā, then the freedom from them arises from releasing the tightness: the tension relaxes. It's called "fading away" because most tension doesn't release in a snap. Rather it subsides organically when we no longer hold on. And it's called "remainderless" because when the tension is completely released nothing remains behind. We're free of it.

As with the other truths, the Buddha gives examples of cessation. In this case they are synonyms of its various flavors: giving up, relinquishing, releasing, non-

reliance upon. Again, this is not an exhaustive list, just illustrative examples.

Path

The fourth truth is the way to cultivate cessation:

> *The way of practice leading to cessation of suffering, as an ennobling truth, is this: It is simply the noble eightfold path, that is to say, wise view, wise intention; skillful communication, skillful action, harmonious lifestyle; skillful effort, wise mindfulness, harmonious collectedness.*

As we'll see shortly, the first three Truths also point toward a way of cultivating the cessation of pain and dissatisfaction.

Ennobling

The next several paragraphs drill down into these four truths and tell us how to work with them. But first let's explore the phrase, "Four Ennobling Truths."

The four truths allude to a medical paradigm. During the Buddha's time, disease was defined by four elements: (1) name, (2) cause, (3) cure, and (4) treatment. His contemporaries would recognize his Four Truths as a medical prognosis and treatment.

Diseases and their cures are the same for everyone regardless of cast or social status. He was not talking about something beyond the reach of all but the elite. He was talking about something fundamental to the human condition.

The medical allusion also says this path was not about transformation as much as healing – healing the affliction of suffering.

His name for this medical prognosis is most often translated as "The Four Noble Truths." In English "noble" seems to modify "truths." But, there is nothing noble about suffering. There is nothing noble about gallstones, root canals, starvation, or death of a loved one. If anything, deep suffering breaks us down: at best it's humbling, rather than uplifting.

There is nothing noble about the second truth: taṇhā. It's a biological reflex about as elevated as a knee jerk or startle reflex.

There is nothing noble about the third truth: cessation. Cessation may be a relief that we're happy to have. But that doesn't make it noble.

So the English translation is confusing. In Pāli, the phrase is irregular. "Noble" actually refers to the mind that can perceive these truths and know how to work with them. So I have adopted the writer Stephen Batchelor's translation "ennobling": something that potentially lifts our spirits if our mind-heart is able to see the truths clearly and openly.

Not at Catechism

Another common misunderstanding is to imagine the four truths as a catechism or statement of faith. Many Christians define their faith through such creeds. For example, in the Catholic Church, the Nicene Creed begins:

> *We believe in one God,*
> *the Father, the Almighty,*
> *maker of heaven and earth,*
> *and of all that is, seen and unseen…*

Different versions of Christianity have different credos. This format is familiar in the West. So many people think of the Four Truths as a Buddhist Credo or Buddhist statement of faith:

> *We believe that suffering is a part of life.*
> *We believe that the origin of suffering is tension.*
> *We believe that cessation of suffering comes of releasing tension.*
> *We believe in the noble eightfold path that leads to cessation of suffering.*

But the Buddha never said, "Take these statements on faith and you'll be a

Buddhist." He did say, "Don't believe anything anybody says, including me. Look to your own experience and discover for yourself what is true."

Most Christian creeds are about the ultimate nature of life, such as "the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." This assertion cannot be tested empirically. So it must be accepted or rejected by faith alone.

However the Four Truths can be tested empirically. Consider the first: suffering or dissatisfaction is a part of life. We can ask ourselves, "Have I experienced suffering and dissatisfaction?" We can ask in a large group of people, "Will anyone who has never felt dissatisfied, please stand up?"

The Four Truths are rooted in immediate experience in this life, not speculation about other planes of existence.

This leads some people to conclude that the Four Truths are propositions that the Buddha wanted us to test in our own experience to see if we can validate them. If we can, that makes us Buddhist. If not, we're not.

This was not the Buddha's intent. Recognizing an obvious truth is only a starting point. What's important is how we respond. He offered specific ways to engage each truth.

What are these ways? This brings us to the heart of the sutta.

Understand

> *Monks: vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This is the ennobling truth of suffering." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of suffering is to be fully understood." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of suffering has been fully understood."*

The passage begins with the Buddha talking about his wonderful, wise, illuminating insight that no one had ever heard before. He says this over and over. Two-thirds of the paragraph sounds a bit braggadocio. This tone is at odds with the demeanor we expect from a Buddha. What can we make of this?

The claim "never heard before," is probably true. Much of what the Buddha taught could be found in other traditions. But what he says here was uniquely his own, discovered in his own experience.

Bear in mind that he was not talking to shopkeepers, soldiers, or milkmaids. He was talking to five accomplished monks whom he knew well. He knew they were familiar with traditional practices of his time. In this passage he said to them, "This is very important. Please attend closely. This is a point that you and I missed in our earlier practices. This can make a difference for you as it has for me."

If his emphatic tone sounds like bragging, bear in mind that we're reading a translation of a translation of a translation. We're at the end of a 25 hundred-year game of telephone. Nuances of tone and demeanor probably have more to do with how his words were passed from one person to the next than his original delivery. It helps to focus on the essence of the teaching itself.

If we strip out the repetitions, we are left with: "the ennobling truth of suffering is to be fully understood." And "the ennobling truth of suffering has been fully understood [by me]."

Or in modern vernacular: "If you want to know how I became enlightened and how you can become enlightened, the first thing to do is fully understand the nature

of suffering. It will change your life as it has changed mine."

Suffering is not something to be taken on faith. It's not something to be tested. It is something to be "fully understood."

To fully understand someone, we have to do more than diagnose them or draw an intellectual conclusion. To understand someone we have to know them empathetically and intimately from the inside. We know how they tick, what motivates them, how they see the world, what frightens them, what they aspire to.

The Buddha is saying that to awaken we must fully understand the nature of suffering and dissatisfaction. Arms-length analysis is not enough. We have to know how suffering feels, what makes it tick, how it arises, how it moves, how it passes away.

We'll never arrive at this understanding if we're running away or trying to shield ourselves from it. We must experience it afresh without resistance.

The five ascetic friends had been trying to rise above the waves of suffering. The Buddha was saying, "turn toward the waves. Relax into them. Let go of your ideas and see anew. Dive in until you know its true nature. You must understand fully."

When we engage the first ennobling truth this way, we come to see the process of how suffering arises. This brings us to the second truth.

Abandon

> *Monks: vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This is the ennobling truth of the origin of suffering." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of suffering has been abandoned."*

If we strip out the repetition, we're left with, "the ennobling truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned," and it "has been abandoned [by me]."

Earlier he said that the origin of suffering is taṇhā – a pre-conceptual tightening causing us to lean toward or away from something or to space out. When we fully understand dukkha, we see that it arises out of taṇhā: suffering arises out of craving.

Taking this on faith, recognizing this in our own experience, or fully understanding taṇhā is not enough. It is to be abandoned: we relax physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Notice that we don't abandon the suffering: we don't try to walk away from it, rise above it, turn lemons into lemonade, push it under water, or grin and bear it. We understand the suffering and let it be what it is. It is the tension that we abandon by fully relaxing. This does not always bring immediate relief. But without tension, the suffering runs out of fuel. When there is no more desire, aversion, or ignoring, new suffering does not arise.

To say this succinctly, seeing the source of suffering is not ennobling. Softening the tension in it is. The Buddha is not asking us to accept or verify a truth. He's inviting us to engage the truth by relaxing the physical, emotional, and mental tightness that gives flower to so much difficulty.

It is not something we accept. It is something we abandon. And when we have, we experience the third ennobling truth.

Realization

> *Monks: vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This is the ennobling truth of the cessation of suffering." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of the cessation of suffering is to be realized." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized."*

The essence of the passage is "the cessation of suffering is to be realized," and it "has been realized [by me]." Some scholars translate "realized" as "verified" or "personally experienced."

As before, the power of cessation is not in a philosophical understanding. It is a direct experience: we relax into the oncoming wave, feel the tension in it, let it pass through, relax, and experience the peace that is left behind. Cessation is sometimes called "mundane nibbāna": a taste of deeper waking up to come.

The third truth may sound redundant. We might think, "If we relax the tension in the second truth, then cessation follows automatically: we don't need the third truth because it comes when we relax fully."

But the Buddha included it because we can become peaceful without realizing what happened. In fact, the peace he alludes to is always here. But as long as we're resisting, indulging, trying to ignore the waves, or personalizing our experience, we won't recognize the unassuming quiet. Since it is has no energy, our attention slides right over it.

For example, let's say we've been hankering for a chocolate sundae. It's been on our mind all day. That subtle (or not so subtle) craving is uncomfortable. It might be so uncomfortable that we take our mind off the desire and fantasize chocolate: "sweet anticipation" we call it. But if we pay attention to the present moment, desire itself is uncomfortable. It is dukkha.

Then we buy a sundae. We take a scoop and place it in our mouth. The tongue bursts with sweet sensations. We close our eyes to taste it more completely. Ah, bliss!

The bliss lasts about 3 seconds. So we reach for a second scoop. The second time the bliss lasts for 1 second. We gobble down the rest.

Let's look back at that first bite. When we finally taste the chocolate, the craving disappears: we no longer want it because now we have it. There is no more desire. The mind stops churning and falls silent. And the experience is heavenly.

But after a few seconds, the mind starts up again: "Boy, that was great. I want some more." The wanting is back. So we take the second scoop. This time the moment of peace is shorter.

The problem is that we mistake the absence of desire (or absence of taṇhā) with having the object of desire. We think the bliss comes from the ice cream rather than from the absence of taṇhā. In the West we've become masters of fulfilling desires with ice cream, hot tubs, designer clothes, luxury cars, evenings at the theater, varieties of chocolate, three hundred cable TV channels, beds with personalized comfort settings, vacation packages, books, music, and on and on and on. Our technologies for producing comforts surpass anything the earth has ever seen. We are like Gods on Mount Olympus, the envy of the world.

But it ultimately does us no good if we're focused on the objects of desire rather than releasing the desire itself. Pursuit of objects creates stress. The incidents of suicide, depression, violent

acting out, and stress-induced diseases are a plague.

So the problem is not that we don't experience cessation. The problem is we don't realize it: we don't realize how it arose. Our confusion brings no wisdom.

If we do realize that the cessation of taṇhā leaves us happy, we're not necessarily off the hook. Old conditioning and biologically based reflexes are strong. We may savor the peace of a chocolate sundae a little longer. But the mind starts churning again anyway.

So when the cessation passes, another wave surprises us. Old habits kick in. The neural circuits of fight or flight get reactivated. Or the mind becomes lethargic and cloudy. We fall back into old ways of being in the world.

However, the memory of that moment of peace remains with us. We did feel it. We suspect it might be possible again. After all, it wasn't just an idea. It's something we realized. We wonder, "How can I cultivate that experience more wisely? What can free me from this cycle of craving, having, and craving more?"

This brings us to the fourth ennobling truth.

Development

> *Monks: vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This is the ennobling truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed." Vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and illumination arose within me regarding things never heard before: "This ennobling truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering has been developed."*

Stripping this passage down to its essence we have: "This ennobling truth of the way leaning to the cessation of suffering is to be developed," and it "has been developed [by me]." The "way" is a reference to the eightfold path.

The eightfold path is not merely to be memorized and recited. It is to be developed: we develop wise view, wise intentions, harmonious speech, harmonious actions, harmonious lifestyles, skillful motivations, skillful mindfulness, and harmonious collectedness.

Notice that the actions associated with each truth is different. We *understand* the ways suffering and dissatisfaction arise and pass away. We *release* the tightness which gives rise to suffering. We *realize* the peace of cessation by noticing it deeply. We *develop* ourselves using the eight-part path.

Having given these four verbs – understand, release, realize, develop – he concludes his talk by assuring the monks they can use them to awaken.

Awakening

> *"As long as my knowing and seeing of how things are, was not thoroughly purified in these twelve aspects – in these three phases of each of the four noble truths – I did not claim unsurpassed full Awakening in the world with its gods, its Maras and high divinities, in this generation with its monks and brahmans, with its princes and men. But as soon as my knowing and seeing how things are, was quite purified in these twelve aspects – in these three phases of each of the four noble truths – then I claimed unsurpassed full Awakening in the world with its gods, its Maras and high divinities, in this generation with its monks and brahmans, its princes and men. Knowing and seeing arose in me thus: 'My heart's deliverance is unshakable. This is the last birth. Now there is no renewal of being.'"*

The three phases are: (1) knowing what the ennobling truth is, (2) knowing the task required with each truth, and (3) accomplishing the task. So for example, the first truth is dukkha. We must (1) know the truth of dukkha, (2) know that it must be fully understood, and (3) accomplish the full understanding. Since the four truths have three phases each, there are a total of twelve aspects.

The reference to devas, māras, brahmās, renunciants, brahmans, and humans reflects the cosmological understanding of his time.

Stripping this paragraph down to its essence and reframing it into modern English we have the Buddha saying, "So long as I did not completely understand and wisely engage these Four Truths, I was not fully awakened. But when I did, I realized my awakening was complete and unshakable."

The unspoken encouragement to the ascetics was, "Knowing these truths is not enough. But if you fully engage them appropriately, you too will fully awaken."

With this, he fell silent. The talk was complete. But the sutta continues to explain the effect.

Kondañña Awakens

> *This is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the group of five monks delighted at his words. And while the discourse was being given, there arose in the Venerable Kondañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation."*

Kondañña was one of the five listening to the Buddha's talk. Spiritually, most people are relatively blind. But Kondañña had "little dust in his eyes": he could almost see perfectly. During the Buddha's talk he came to deeply see how everything is caused by something else. When the cause is removed, it ceases. In coming years, the Buddha would explain this in more detail in describing Dependent Origination. But for Kondañña, it was enough to see that everything arises and passes and that everything has a cause and will cease. His vision was "dust-free" and "stainless." He woke up.

The other four ascetics were a little slower. They needed to explore the Buddha's teaching for a few days. But soon they too became arahants.

Getting the Ball Rolling

The Buddha's talk and Kondañña's awakening mark the entry of Buddha's teaching into the world. It "set the wheel of dhamma in motion."

As this discourse was passed along, others commented on the momentousness of the occasion. They enthusiastically exclaimed the far-reaching effect:

> *When the Wheel of Truth had thus been set rolling by the Blessed One, the earthgods raised the cry: "At Varanasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, the Blessed One has set rolling the unsurpassed Wheel of truth. It cannot be stopped by renunciant or brahman or māra or brahmā or by anyone in the cosmos." On hearing the earthgods' cry, all the gods in turn in the six paradises of the sensual sphere took up the cry till it reached beyond the Retinue of High Divinity in the sphere of pure form. And so indeed in that hour, at that moment, the cry soared up to the World of High Divinity, and this ten-thousandfold world-element shook and rocked and quaked, and a great measureless radiance surpassing the very nature of the divine was displayed in the world.*

The beings depicted in this heavenly realm are different from the Bible. But the mood is similar to ten thousand angels swooping down from the divine realms playing their trumpets, celebrating, and

singing, "Hallelujah!, Hallelujah!" A good time was had by all.

Meanwhile, back in the park, the Buddha recognized Kondañña's attainment. The sutta concludes:

> *Then the Blessed One exclaimed: Kondañña knows! Kondañña knows! And that is how that venerable one acquired the name Añña-Kondañña: he who knows.*

Twenty-five hundred years later as we hear his teachings and put them into practice, they can touch our lives deeply. We become part of this continuing turning of the wheel of Dhamma. The Buddha got the ball rolling and it continues to move through us.

Reflection

Let's pause for a moment to see how this teaching moves through our lives.

There is a sweet, kind, spacious, quivering aliveness that imbues every moment of our existence. It is so serene and quiet that it draws no attention to itself. We can go for hours, days, months, years, or an entire lifetime and never realize it. Yet, like the invisible air we breathe, it flows through us. Without it, we would not be alive.

The Buddha called it "awakening" or "the end of suffering" and taught people how to recognize it.

The agitated mind and the tension of taṇhā are dust in our eyes. Even the tiniest amount can distort our sight. We can't clear our vision by fighting reality – by trying to change what's around us. All we can do is turn toward reality, including turning toward those unpleasant waves. We open our eyes and relax into the waters. We surrender to life as it is rather than struggle to get away from it or improve it.

Yet surrender is tricky. If we just give up, we might fall back into habitual patterns. If those habits could free us, we'd be awake already. So the Buddha's path is not about fighting against our patterns or stupidly letting ourselves be tossed around by old fears and longings. It is a middle way. We quiet ourselves and open our eyes to see clearly and opening what's underneath all the conditioning of the world and the conditioning of our psychophysical being.

We "relax into" as it were: we recognize our experience, release it, and relax until the last vestiges of taṇhā fade and the neural static goes off line while we remain conscious and aware. Identification with phenomena fades. We see the causes and conditions operating mechanically. They are not what we are. If we are anything, we are an impersonal awareness watching the show.

By cultivating this wise, relaxed, impersonal clarity, we develop a way of engaging life: not turning away, not grabbing ahold, not doing anything but seeing clearly and openly. We "turn toward" and "relax into."

As the old conditioning fades, all the stuff that we've hidden away deep inside comes to the surface to be recognized and released. At times this is not pretty. But by relaxing into spacious awareness with lighter hearts and minds, we find ultimate release and realization.

In his first full teaching, the Buddha describes this as *fully understanding* the nature of suffering, *abandoning* the tension that causes it to arise, *realizing* the experience of the fading of tension, and *cultivating* a wise understanding of how all this works, cultivating ways of living in the world that are harmonious, and cultivating qualities of mind and heart that allow us to see with less and less dust in our eyes.

As we do this, the dhamma the Buddha got rolling moves through us until we become dust-less and stainless.