

The 2nd Noble Truth

Based on a talk given by Rev. angel kyodo williams on February 9, 2006 at the Center for Urban Peace/New Dharma Meditation Center in Oakland, California.

Tao Te Ching, Chapter 35

*She who is centered in the Way
can go where she wishes, without danger.
She perceives the universal harmony,
even amid great pain,
because she has found peace in her heart.*

*Music and the smell of good cooking
may make people stop and enjoy.*

*But words that point to the Way
seem monotonous and without flavor.
When you look for it, there is nothing to see.
When you listen for it, there is nothing to hear.
When you use it, it is inexhaustible.*

--translated by Stephen Mitchell

Last week we began to talk about *catvari aryasatyani*, the Four Noble Truths. That's the Sanskrit word for them. And so...this is like watching a television show that's a series: Last week at New Dharma we talked about the fact that the Four Noble Truths were the first teaching that the historic Buddha, Gautama, expounded.

We talked a little bit about his potential "daddy issues" that made him leave home and go out into the world with the recognition that you cannot keep people from the truth of the world and the suffering of the world. We eventually have to face the truth for ourselves, so Gautama's father's efforts, Shuddhodana's efforts to shield his son, knowing that there was the potential for him to become a great spiritual teacher rather than a warrior king, were for naught. Buddha went anyway.

And after all of his trials and tribulations and after figuring out starving himself wasn't quite the answer and of course, neither, as he had already experienced, was simply living in the lap of luxury in a kind of dullness and inattention to the truth of the world, he began to find the Middle Way. He began to teach this Middle Way throughout the rest of his years, another 45 or so years of teaching.

The first teaching he expounded was about four truths. What is critical about these four truths is that first you must know that the notion of Buddhism is essentially a Western construct. What people did was to follow—in the same ways that Christianity is a construct—so what people did, originally, was to simply follow in the footsteps of

the Buddha, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to do as this person, human being with all their flaws and foibles did so they might find a way for themselves that didn't exclude them because of their humanity. So, it's very important.

The Buddha himself said repeatedly that the only reason that there was any usefulness whatsoever to sit and listen to these teachings was to seek out the potential to cease suffering, to seek the end of suffering, but other than that there was no reason. You could use these teachings to seek the end of suffering and act accordingly. He didn't say it was so you could become a nice person. He didn't say it was so you could get along with everybody in the kind of, you know, "can't we all just get along" way. He didn't say it was for any of that. It was to *seek the end of suffering*. But before we can seek the end of suffering, we have to understand a little bit about the cause of suffering. That's the second noble truth, the cause of suffering.

Sanskrit and Pali are both very rich languages, and if you have heard any Buddhist teachings, or even Advaita- or Hindu-based teachings, you've probably heard a lot of conflicting information such as when someone says, Well, this is what this means and Well, that's what this means. It gets kind of confusing. That's because the language itself is so rich and full of meaning we just don't have individual words in English that correspond directly to those words in Sanskrit.

So the Buddha actually spoke Prakrit, which is a less refined form of Sanskrit. Sanskrit in fact means, "refined." So the Buddha spoke, you know, he spoke a little street. He had a little flavor going on. But when all of the priests and monks got a hold of his teachings, they had to refine them and offer the teachings in Sanskrit. Of course, they were first translated into Pali, because that was the language of the masses, and that's what the Buddha wanted. He wanted the masses to be offered his teaching. Things got a little high flautin' and they began to present the teachings in Sanskrit. It's a very fascinating language, and when you spend a little time with it, which I think is really important, which I think is the only reason that I keep talking about Sanskrit terms and the root words here, because it might peak our interest to like look at those words for ourselves rather than to simply rely on the translations that have come down through the sensibilities, filters, and needs of those that have been holding the access to this information, which has for the last forty years in America have been upper middle class to wealthy—actually it began with wealthy, upper middle class to wealthy white Americans. And so, we have translations that are filtered by those needs.

This is not a bad thing in and of itself, because people pull meaning and ascribe meaning for their own needs, of course they do, so it's not like this was a bad thing and someone set out to do something wrong and give us bad translations. But many of the translations early on actually had so much correlation to Christianity that folks had some sense that maybe there's a little bit of filtering going on here. So it's very important when you can, when you have the opportunity as an aspect of deepening your practice in relationship, to go back to mother tongue. You don't have to go and

take a whole course on Sanskrit or Pali, but just, you know, dig in a little bit—I mean, now we have Google. Who needs a class? So you can just go to Wikipedia and find out what the words meant at their root, and you can begin to pull something out.

So *dukkha samudaya* is the cause of suffering. The root of the word *samudaya* means something like “what’s up with a particular thing.” So *samudaya* gets translated into “what’s up with suffering?” It’s the thing that comes up with suffering. And the thing that arises with suffering, which is kind of like living wholly with suffering, is what they call *tanha*. *Tanha* is a word which is often translated as—much to our American Western sensibilities chagrin—desire. So, a lot of us might think, Oh, Buddhism, I’m not trying to do that ‘cause they’re all against desire. And we’re a culture of satiating our desires. That’s what we want to do; all we’re trying to figure out is how can we make something work for us. I want this, I want that, I want this—I don’t want that, I don’t want that. We are all about fulfilling our desires, both desire in the positive sense and desire in its negative expression, meaning, “I don’t want that.” So there’s both I want, I want, I want and I don’t want this.

There’s also craving, right? So craving is one of the words that *tanha* means. *Tanha* is like desire, craving, attachment, but I think most viscerally, thirst, thirst. It’s not just the mere wanting that it defines. I think that’s important for people to understand. It’s not simply that want appears and therefore you have already created all this kind of suffering. It’s the other word that often gets expressed, **attachment** to that desire. So it’s not the mere arising of desire. It’s our over identification with that desire; it’s our over identification with the thirst; the over identification with the craving. So want everything that you want to want, just don’t expect it to be so. And you actually can still have peace.

When people get a notion in their head that it’s about not having any desire whatsoever, they feel like, Okay, count me out. Enlightenment’s not for me; Awakening’s not going to happen here, because I have a whole lot of desires and whole lot of thirst and a whole lot of cravings. But this nuance of attachment to those things is key for understanding how this still hangs out as something we can work with in the human realm. We’re talking about something that’s very, very workable. It’s not impossible. Buddhism gets a bad wrap and for good reason—here it is: the First Noble Truth, *suffering!* The Second Noble Truth, *you got desires!* I mean, we’re just starting out on a bad foot here. They needed a good publicist to work this situation out a little bit better. Somebody that’s going to say, That’s not going to fly in certain places.

But the nuances give it more color. It’s like the *Tao Te Ching* was saying, “words that point to the way are monotonous and without flavor.” That’s just suffering. And suffering because you have desires is pretty monotonous and without flavor, don’t you think? And life is juicy. We want it to remain juicy. I think a lot of us teetered somewhere on the edge of not being quite sure if we really wanted to go down this spiritual path, whatever path it might be, because it means we’re going to be stripped of our humanity; it means we’re going to be stripped of juiciness. It means

we're not going to be able to make a raunchy joke. And everyone who knows me knows that that's not true. We want to be juicy. We want our chi to still flow. We want our vibrancy. We want our life. We want zest. We just don't want them to be the things that drag us down into the mud.

So it was no secret here tonight that there was lots of fluttering in the midst of the second sit, lots of moving around. And if you noticed, the beginning movements were, you know, little. Oh, I've got a little bit of dis-ease here. Let me try to work it out. And then it passed on to someone else. Well, they're working their dis-ease out, so let me work mine out. It just becomes like a wave, like we're in the stadium. And then everyone's trying to work it out—and it's not pain. I know the difference. It's not pain. It's, My toe is caught under my knee. Let me move that. My ear is itching. It becomes all of those things, right?

Dukkha as a word covers all of that. We talked about it last week; it covers all of that. *Dukkha* covers all of that dis-ease. All of that. It's the pain of pain, the pain of impermanence, the pain of change, and the pain of being aware of the truth of suffering—the pain of being aware that pain is out there. So it covers the whole thing. And this thirst, craving, desire, attachment is the same in its richness in that it covers *all of it*. The desire to not only have my knee stop feeling like its going to bleed right here on the cushion, but also to have that little hair that's touching my ear move out of the way. And we just start getting into all of them indiscriminately, right? I'm not saying folks, sit there, suffer, DIE. You're not going to die. You might faint, but you're not going to die on the cushion. I'm going to tell you that. I almost said it during the sit, but I thought I'd wait for the talk, much more dramatic. I promise you, you will not die. Faint, yes. Die, no.

But who is moving anyway? That's really what we're here to figure out. Not, is it Evan? Is it thuy? Is it Marie? Not that kind of **who** is moving? Who is it that's moving? Who is it that needs to seek after, not just freedom from a little bit of excruciating pain, but you know, the soft-wisp-of-my-hair-on-my-face kind of discomfort. Where does that come from? And really, how solid is it if you really look into it? Can you even make your desire hold still? Can you even make the wanting, the craving after that little bit of extra comfort, can you even get that to remain solid? We're even distracted from our own misery. Isn't that a little crazy?

There we are thinking we're in the worst miserable place in life possible, and we get a little itch and it disappears. All our suffering, all our misery, all our impossible situations disappear. It's fleeting, but it disappears as if it were never there. I want to know who is it that chooses to go back to the place of misery instead of choosing the moment where it's all gone. What's happening in there? What is that about? I have no idea, but we should wonder. It's really true. This is what happens.

A lot of translators don't like this but I think our best modern phrasing for *tanha* is addiction. I don't mean medical addiction. I mean the latent potential for addiction that lies in each of us, the need to fill something that is unstoppable. The need to

distract ourselves with unbelievable, unwavering effort, to distract ourselves away from what's right in front of us. The need to distract ourselves away from the truth of our hair being *right here* or the truth of, "I have a body and it's subject to pain." The truth of, Okay, it's cold. It's not the worst thing that's ever happened. The truth of, Okay, it's warm. It will pass.

And everything does pass. All of it. It's almost debilitating the ways in which it passes, because sometimes we're really actively trying to hold on to some of that suffering. And it just slips between our fingers; it's kind of annoying. It's like you want to kind of work it, you know—like we didn't get enough out of that moment. I want to channel some of my mom's stuff and dad's stuff through this moment because of the way that person looked at me. What?! Then somebody says something and you're distracted. Then we tell ourselves, Damn, I was trying to be really pissed off. Through this miraculous practice of just being willing to see the truth, do you know what happens? You increasingly lose this ability to hold onto your own suffering. You just lose it. It's a little scary. You witness your own ego trying very hard to find it.

Our friend Choyam says this: It's like being at the airport; you lose your baggage. And what's more intense than losing your baggage is how badly you want it sometimes. You really do. You tell yourself, I want my baggage back. And it doesn't have your best pair of shoes in those bags; there's no camera. It's old stuff that needs to go. And so I want to scare the life out of you, and tell you continue to sit with that sweet balance of effort and letting go and you'll begin to lose your baggage. It will be a shock and you will try to hold on, and it's all a good sign that there is a path, a way to end suffering, to have it—there's a cessation of suffering, the truth of cessation is actually a reality.

When you think about this, if you do, later or tomorrow or next week, and you're tempted to think about desire or craving or attachment and to think about some big, looming kind of way just remember how expansive it is and how pervasive it is, and look for all of the ways in which you are moment by moment grasping, craving, pulling or pushing, avoiding, averting the truth of the moment that's in front of you. First, see it and then we can talk about how to end it.

We can take a few questions.

Speaker One: I have a question about the expanse that you're speaking of where you're letting the baggage go. I think a lot of times the baggage is more comfortable because the expanse is so expansive. Can you speak on the expanse?

aKw: You know, we have bad habits of doing things like this as teachers. We basically leave you all little breadcrumbs to be sniffing after way before you need to bother with that. I mean, work out the suffering piece, the truth of suffering before you worry about the expanse. It's out there; it's there, it's real. And teachers exist to keep hinting at you, to kept going pssst... while you trek down this rocky, rocky road with no shoes on—rocky, thorny, rough! I mean, I love the paths that talk about how

easy and blissful it is; I don't think those speakers lived in Oakland. I don't think they lived in New York. You know what I'm saying? I mean, I've been to all kind of places. I haven't found a place yet where the path is just easy and blissful so I just like to acknowledge the truth of like, it's rough.

You know, we have some ugly, ugly stuff to be looking at, to be checking out. It's scary. It's like woow...whoa! When you first start you think, I know I have some issues to work out; I'm going to work them out. And you work through some things, little things and you say to yourself, Oh, this is great. You get to the little bliss stage, This is fabulous and I'm a *meditaaator*. And then the world falls out from underneath you. And you get to see the real deal and this time without your glasses, without your rose-colored glasses, which were keeping you in the dark to the truth of how *deep* we are. You know, we're deep. We are deep. The things that we can get ourselves into, the things that we can take on, the things that we can manage to carry around are *deep*!

I love it when people say, I'm not strong enough. I tell them, Well, you have carried an awful lot of stuff for somebody who's not strong. Don't sell yourself short. You carried all that baggage. Once you let some of that go you can carry the world.

That's what this path is about. Release some of your burden and you can carry things as warriors are meant to do. You could begin to help carry the burden of the world. You can do it seeing clearly and not mistaking *your* stuff for *their* stuff and *their* stuff for *your* stuff and kind of mixing it all into one big mess. As a warrior you're clear about it and it's very clean. You're doing it out of a place of willingness and a place of intention and a place of showing up and, yeah, there's expanse, there's contraction. If it just stays expansive, you have either like slipped over the edge into la-la land or you're just fooling yourself.

It expands or contracts for all of us up until the moment we are beyond any caring, concern, or any discrimination whatsoever about the phenomenal world. And then we're of no use. You know what I'm saying—we're of no use. It's great. Somebody has gone and ascended they're no damn use because they're just up there going, Hhmm. Uhm. Wow. Um. Wow.... And that's beautiful if that's the idea of enlightenment you're holding, but what good is that? You know **this** is where the action is at; **this** is where it matters.

And there may be many other lives; I believe there are many other lives. I'm sure. My mother always says, You were Japanese in another life. But *this* is the one that I have to work with. *This* is the one I most remember for the time being. And *this* is the place where I'm alive and can touch and can love and can fail and can fall and can get up again. And *this* is the place I can experience joy and experience pain and can mix it all around and juggle it a little bit. And get in there again.

Some days it's really big and expansive and I love everybody and sometimes I feel like, Go away, go away! I contract into being this big. And that's good, right? That's the way that it should be. And wanting to be expansive all the time—you expand out

to here and then—you know, it's like getting a bad facelift. You're just stuck in one position and again there's no juice. It's brittle; it isn't supple. It isn't flexible.

I could walk around and smile and be like, Groovy baby. But sometimes folks need a little bit of *get off your ass!* That's what they need to hear. And if I was walking around just being like Groovy baby. Oh, yeah, that's good. Yeah, no problem. Folks would wonder, Okay, what can I get from her? She doesn't understand what's happening in my life because it's rough.

So we need folks that are willing to be here and willing to be warriors with all of the mess and the mud, the expansion and the contraction. The waxing and the waning. The ebbing and the flowing, all of it. And we have to love all of it. It's all the same, there's no difference. We only create the difference in our mind; we only create the effort after the expanse in our mind as yet another form of delusion, as another way of being distracted from just what is.

Flowers have to pull in, drop down to the ground, disappear, and seed a new birth. If we just wanted them to hang out smiling at us all the time, their potency, their vibrancy, their life is gone and we have Monsanto—genetically modified whatever they are—seeds and everything.

And that's not what we want; that's not what we want for the foods that we eat, the people that we love, the life that we live. So we take it all, and we learn to receive it all as just the truth of what is—and that's the peace. That's where the peace comes from. It doesn't come from—see this word cessation, which is part of the Third Noble Truth—it doesn't come from making it stop. Right? It's not about making it stop because when it stops, it's all over. Game over. We're done. The truth, the coming into the truth of this, is what it is. That's why the First Noble Truth is the most important by far. If you had to drop all of them, keep the First Noble Truth—the truth of suffering. That's the one that has every other teaching bound into it. That's the one from which Buddha himself extracted the rest of them, and he's no different than any of us. He wasn't gifted; he wasn't special. He was persistent. **He was brought the intention of warriorship to really looking deeply.** And each and every one of us can do that. He suffered in the same way that we suffer. And each of us have that capacity, don't we? So we can keep the First Noble Truth and through that find everything else that we need.

So we don't need to go too far; we can just stay with what's true for us right now. You may not be able to articulate whole books worth of information about the wherefores and the whys, but in the place that it matters most you will truly know; you will have the wisdom that comes from your own direct experience of the truth. I don't know what's really useful beyond that. Buddha himself said just the same thing.