

Index:

- [Two types of happiness: temporal happiness and genuine happiness](#)
  - [First Noble Truth: \*duhkha\* \(3 levels of \*duhkha\*: suffering, change and all pervasive\)](#)
  - [Second Noble Truth: causes of \*duhkha\* \(3 mental afflictions: ignorance, attachment and aversion\)](#)
  - [Third Noble Truth: cessation of \*duhkha\*](#)
  - [Fourth Noble Truth: path to the cessation of \*duhkha\* \(3 higher trainings: ethics, concentration and wisdom \(impermanence, \*duhkha\* and no self\)\)](#)
  - [Prajnaparamita \(Perfection of Wisdom\): a deeper level of ignorance regarding reality \(Emptiness & interdependence, self, attachment and aversion, flow, dream-like reality, wisdom & compassion\)](#)
  - [Q&A](#)
- 

Good evening everyone, and welcome to this talk which is called "*What The Buddha Taught*".

**We all want to be happy and we all want to be free of problems and suffering.** And often to us, it seems as if the source of our happiness and the source of our suffering is '*out there*', in the world. Because of that, one of the main methods we use to try to find happiness and to try to overcome our problems and suffering, is that we try to manipulate things around us, we try to attract people, places and things, that *seem* to be the source of our happiness, and we try to push away or avoid people, places and things that *seem* to be the source of our suffering. But no matter how hard we try to do that, we still encounter unpleasant situations and suffering, and we're still chasing after that elusive happiness.

**If we use this approach, all we are really doing is trapping ourselves in the '*hope - fear cycle*':** hoping for pleasant experiences, and fearing and worrying about unpleasant experiences. And of course, if we don't get the things we want, we often become very frustrated. And even if we do get the things we want, they never really fully satisfy us and we simply end up craving for more and more... And then often we have a lot disappointment and dissatisfaction, when things don't live up to our expectations.

**Why is this approach not an effective way to overcome suffering and finding happiness?** Because we don't have a lot of control of the things around us, particularly if the things around us are other people. And even if we get the things we want, then the happiness that we receive is only transient or temporary - it will finish, when the stimulus finishes.

**From a Buddhist perspective, these external things are not the underlying source of our suffering and happiness to begin with.** From a Buddhist perspective, we're looking in the wrong place, for the source of happiness and the source of suffering.

**So what did the Buddha teach?**

**The Buddha taught what are the real underlying sources of our suffering and what are the real underlying sources of our happiness.** He also taught how to overcome the sources of suffering, and therefore overcome suffering, and he also taught how to cultivate the causes of happiness and thereby, find happiness. And of course, the happiness that the Buddha was talking about was genuine happiness.

---

*Two types of happiness: temporal happiness and genuine happiness*

---

**Because we can talk about two types of happiness: (1) temporal happiness** (this is what we normally think about, when we think about happiness, meaning pleasure, pleasant pleasurable experiences). This is called temporal happiness, because as the name suggests, it's temporal: while there's a pleasant stimulus, we get some pleasant happiness, when the stimulus finishes, the happiness finishes. Whereas about the Buddha was talking about, is called **(2) lasting or genuine happiness**. Genuine happiness is not a stimulus-based happiness. It's a state of happiness, regardless of what's going around us. And it's a lasting state, a genuine happiness.

The Buddha taught this as his very first teaching, after he achieved enlightenment. And the very first teaching he gave, after he achieved enlightenment, was called the **Four Noble Truths**. In the Four Noble Truths, which are the foundation of all Buddhist traditions, the Buddha is being like our doctor: he is first diagnosing what our current condition is, and part of that diagnosis, is the first noble truth.

*FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: **DUHKHA**  
3 levels of dukkha: suffering, change and all pervasive*

---

And the **(1) First Noble Truth, in Sanskrit, is the truth of *dukkha***, most commonly translated into English as *suffering*, but this can be very misleading, because here he is talking about what is our basic human condition, in what condition do we find ourselves in. So often when people explain this, they say: "*Oh, according to Buddhism all life is suffering.*" But then when we hear that, we go: "*Oh, that doesn't sound right, because sometimes I have a lot of pleasure in my life, a lot of happiness, so the Buddha must have got it wrong.*" But the problem here is a translation problem. The word *dukkha* has a much broader meaning than merely *suffering*, because when we see the word suffering, for us, that means some sort of painful unpleasant experience. But did the Buddha say: "*All of our life is painful unpleasant experiences?*" No, he said that our human condition is *dukkha*.

What does that really mean? It means we can talk about **three types, or three levels, of *dukkha***:

**1. *dukkha* of suffering**, meaning sometimes in the human condition, we have **unpleasant painful physical and mental experiences**. We all know this very well. And certainly this isn't something satisfactory for us, so this is very obvious to us.

**2. *dukkha* of change**, and here the Buddha was describing our **pleasant experiences**. They're part of the human condition, and sometimes we have pleasant, happy experiences. But he used the word *change* to talk about this. Why did he use the word change? To really show to us that our pleasant experiences *change*, meaning they come to an end, they're only transient, temporary experiences, to help us to understand that. Because if we don't, what we tend to do is, when we have a pleasant experience, we try to hold onto to it. We try to make it last. But of course, we can't do that and that trying to hold on to that pleasant experience just creates a lot of agitation and frustration, when it finishes. So we are to not cling to our pleasant experiences, because if we do, we are just going to induce a lot of unnecessary suffering.

But also our pleasant experiences are not in the nature of happiness, because if they were, it would mean that the more we engage in that pleasant experience, the happier we should become. Example? If we like chocolate cake, and we have a nice pleasant experience eating chocolate cake, if that experience was in the nature of happiness, it would mean that the more chocolate cake we ate, the happier we should become. But we know from our own experience that if we eat too much chocolate cake, we don't become happier... We might even get a bit sick in our stomach, so it turns into suffering.

We are to understand our pleasant experiences for what they are: simple temporary pleasant experiences. Otherwise, if we grasp on to them or overindulge in them, they will turn into suffering.

So part of the human condition then is that sometimes we have unpleasant experiences, sometimes we have pleasant experiences. But underlying both these types of experiences, we have what's called

**3. All pervasive *duhkha***, which means that it is everywhere. This means that what the Buddha was saying, at the deepest level of the human condition, was that we can't go anywhere or be anywhere, and be completely free of the potential for some sort of suffering. There's always the potential for suffering to arise in our lives. This is what all pervasive means.

**This is *duhkha*, this is the human condition that the Buddha described in his diagnosis.** Sometimes we have unpleasant experiences, sometimes we have pleasant experiences, but underneath both of these, there's always the potential for some sort of suffering to arise in our life. That's the human condition. That's part of the Buddha's diagnosis for us.

*SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: CAUSES OF DUHKHA*  
*3 mental afflictions: ignorance, attachment and aversion*

---

**And why are we stuck in this state of *duhkha*? Where does that come from?**

**The second part of the Buddha's diagnosis was the Second Noble Truth: the cause or origin of *duhkha*, or suffering.** Why are we stuck in this state? And here, in the underlying cause, the Buddha said that the cause of *duhkha* was not something out there, but it was within ourselves, in our own mind.

**And what is that source? It's our mental afflictions.** Examples of these are things like anger, jealousy, craving, resentment, anxiety, depression. These mental afflictions disturb our mind, and as long as these things are in our mind, there's always the potential for some sort of suffering to arise in our lives. When we look into these mental afflictions, generally we focus on three, the three main ones, which often are called the **three poisons, because they poison our mind.**

**The 3 main mental afflictions are: ignorance, attachment and aversion.**

**- Ignorance means we have a mistaken way of seeing ourselves as a person.** We overinflate the sense of me. We believe that we are more solid than what we really are. So this overinflated sense of me, in Buddhism, is called *self*. So we believe that the me is this very solid me, which we call *self*. We have the idea, the sense, that somewhere here, is me. A solid me. And this me, that seems to be here, seems to be something more than simply the body and the mind. There seems to be a third thing, this *me*, that has a body, that has a mind. We even say that in our language, when we say: "*I have a body. I have a mind.*", as if there's a third thing, this me, that has the body and has the mind. But if we search here, there's a body, there's a mind, but is there something more than that here? I think we can't find anything more than a body and a mind here. But instinctively we have this sense that there is something more than the body and the mind. There's this *me* here, the me that has a body and the mind. This sense of me, is *self*. We over-inflate the sense of me. And because we believe in this *self*, then of course this solid me that seems to be here says, *I want to be happy, I want to be free of suffering.* And it seems as though my happiness and suffering is

coming from out there. Therefore of course, we have attachment to pleasant things, and we have aversion to unpleasant things.

**From this ignorance, we have attachment and aversion**, to pleasant and unpleasant things, and then from these two, all the other mental afflictions come: jealousy, craving, resentment, depression, anxiety, fear, all of these come from one of these, or from a combination of these. So if we can deal with these, then we can deal with all mental afflictions.

**This is the Buddha's diagnosis for us. He said we are stuck in this state of *dukkha*, and why are we stuck? It's because we have these mental afflictions, particularly ignorance, attachment and aversion, which are poisoning our mind.** And as long as we have these in our mind, we're stuck, because there's always the potential for some sort of suffering to arise in our life. No matter how much we manipulate things around us, we're never going to overcome suffering and find genuine happiness.

**But of course the good news is that the Buddha's prognosis is that we can cure ourselves of this, and that we can overcome *dukkha*, by overcoming the cause. So that's the third noble truth.**

---

THIRD NOBLE TRUTH: *CESSATION OF DUHKHA*

**The third noble truth is the truth of cessation, the ending of suffering and its causes.** So we can achieve this healthy state, a state being completely free of suffering and its causes. So that's the Buddha's prognosis for us. We can achieve this healthy state.

**We can go completely beyond all suffering and its causes. But how do we do that? What's the remedy? What's the medicine that the Buddha prescribed? It's the fourth noble truth.**

---

FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH: *PATH TO THE CESSATION OF DUHKHA*  
*3 higher trainings: ethics, concentration and wisdom (impermanence, dukkha and no self)*

**Fourth Noble Truth: the truth of the path, of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.** So what is the Buddha's remedy? What is the medicine we need to take?

**Three things comprise the path to the cessation of *dukkha*:**

**1) First, ETHICS, an ethical life style.** We need to stop harming others and help others as much as we can. So the basis of any meaningful life is an ethical life style. On that basis, the second thing we need to do:

**2) CONCENTRATION. We need to train our mind, develop concentration.** Because the solution is not manipulating and changing things outside, but to get rid of these 3 poisons in our mind. We have to transform our mind. And in order to be able to do that, we need an effective tool - and that's a calm, clear, focused mind. We have to develop the ability to focus our mind, so that we can transform it. It's the same in everything we do: at work, at play, in sport, everything we do - if we don't have a calm, clear, focused mind, we're not effective in anything we do. The same here, if we want to try to transform our mind and get rid of these things, if we don't have a clear focused mind, we're not going to be able to do that. So we need to develop this very calm, clear, focused mind, we need to be able to focus the mind. Then, on that basis, the third thing is:

**3) We need to develop wisdom, because the cause of suffering is these mental afflictions, and the underlying mental affliction is ignorance, this false sense of me, an overinflated sense of me.** We need to overcome this ignorance, by developing wisdom, the wisdom understanding, and realizing how we exist as a person. This wisdom practice, in Pali, is called *vipassana*. Probably many of you have heard this term before, it seems very popular these days, *vipassana* practice. So what is *vipassana* practice? The 'vi' means higher, 'passana' means to see, so *vipassana* means 'to see higher', or 'see beyond'. In English, this word is normally translated as *insight* or *special insight*. **What insight do we need to develop?** Generally, here, in the truth of the path, the wisdom practice, the *vipassana* practice we need to develop, is that we need to develop **three types of insight, or wisdom**, and these are often called the **three marks of existence**.

**1) The first thing we need to come to realize is IMPERMANENCE.** Impermanence means that things are changing from moment to moment, which I think is something we all understand and accept. Science has proven it, we learn it at school and I think none of us has any problem accepting impermanence, that these objects in front of us, even they look very static and stable, they're not, and if we look at the atomic level, there's constant change happening all the time. Scientists have proven this, we accept that. **But is our intellectual understanding of impermanence, is that helping us in our daily life? Is that benefitting us in any way? Not really. Why?**

**Because our behavior is not driven by our intellectual understanding. Our behavior is driven by our instinctive habit, which is telling us that this cup is more or less the same cup that was here yesterday, and it will be the same cup tomorrow**, even though intellectually we know this is not the case. Intellectually, we know that that cup is changing moment by moment, but experientially, that's not how we see the cup. That's why when we see pleasant things, we grab them, we try to hold on to them, trying to make them last, whereas intellectually we know that in fact they're changing every moment. So if we can bring about our intellectual understanding of impermanence, if we can bring that into experience, through meditation, if we can taste impermanence in meditation, it means that in daily life we will experientially see things as constantly changing, which means that in daily life, there's nothing to grab – so we will reduce a lot of our attachment and aversion. If we can do just this, that we all understand intellectually, if we can realize this, and see things experientially like this, our lives will dramatically improve. Dramatically. A lot of our problems would go away. But we need to do more than this.

**2) We need to come to realize DUHKHA, we need to realize the situation we're in.** Because if we can realize this, we will stop looking for happiness and suffering *out there*. We will know that the source of the problem is inside ourselves, which means that we won't waste our life chasing after sense pleasures, and we will turn our attention inwards, to look at developing our own mind.

**3) Then of course, what we need to come to realize is NO SELF.** There is no solid me here. If we can realize this no self, we can overcome all mental afflictions and all suffering. We can achieve a healthy state completely free of all suffering and its causes. Of course we're not saying here that there's no me. **No Buddhist school says that there's no me or no person. All Buddhist schools are asking the question: how do I exist?** How does the me, the person, exist? We do not exist in a solid, overinflated way, this is what we need to come to realize. If we can realize this, we can overcome all of our mental afflictions, we can overcome all attachment, aversion, anger, anxiety, depression, all of these things we can eliminate, and therefore, all the suffering that they produce.

**This was the *vipassana* or wisdom practice we need to engage in, in the fourth noble truth, to cure ourselves from this state we find ourselves in.**

**This was the very first thing that the Buddha taught, in a place called Sarnath, near Varanasi, and this is the foundation of all Buddhist traditions.** So in these teachings the Buddha said that the underlying problem is how we see ourselves as a person: we over-inflate the sense of me. How we see the world? Not a problem. There is an objective world there, independent of us. No problem. The problem is only how we see ourselves as a person, we over-inflate the sense of me. That's the problem. That's what he taught in the Four Noble Truths.

---

*PRAJNAPARAMITA (PERFECTION OF WISDOM): A DEEPER LEVEL OF IGNORANCE REGARDING REALITY  
Emptiness & interdependence, self, attachment and aversion, flow, dream-like reality, wisdom & compassion*

---

**Then, later, in particularly a place called Rajgir (a bit south of Sarnath, in modern day Bihar, very close to Bodhgaya, where the Buddha achieved enlightenment), there he said: In fact, there is a deeper level of ignorance. That yes, we over-inflate the sense of me, and yes, if we get rid of that a lot of things will be improved, but there's a deeper problem, which is the fact that things are not as they appear.** That the world of appearances is deceptive, things are not existing in the way that they appear to us. Even though there appears to be an independent objective world out there, that's not how it exists. This is what he taught at Rajgir, which is a deeper level of teachings than the four noble truths.

**There appears to be an independent objective world out there. There appears to be a world made up of many separate discrete things, just waiting there for us to experience it. But is that how things really exist?** In this teaching the Buddha said that these appearances are deceiving us. Things do not exist in the way that they appear to us. Even though things appear to be independent of us, even though there appears to be an independent objective world out there, things are not existing in this way. **And so this is what's called the teaching on emptiness, or in Sanskrit, *shunyata*.** Often when we hear about these teachings on emptiness, when people hear this word, *emptiness*, that things are empty, or that everything is emptiness, people think "*Oh that sounds like nothing really exists*", and so people think that Buddhism is nihilistic, that the Buddha said that nothing really exists.

But he never said that. **Emptiness is the fact that things are empty of being independent, meaning they're not independent.** So emptiness means things are not independently existing, emptiness does not mean that *nothing really exists*. **If emptiness means that nothing is independent, but things exist, then of course they must be dependent.** The Buddha said that things exist dependently, that they are what's called *dependent-arisings*. The word *arising* here, means coming into existence. That things come into existence dependently.

**How are things existing dependently? Depending on what? Things exist depending on causes and conditions.** This clock here, for this to exist, it depends on causes and conditions.

**One of the first conditions necessary of course, was someone thinking about designing this clock.** Then all the raw materials needed to be gathered, all the various

components needed to be manufactured, all of these components needed to be assembled, and all the factories, people and everything else involved in the process are also necessary. Without all of those causes and conditions, we would not have this clock here now. I think this is fairly easy to understand.

**But things also exist depending on their parts.** Again, for this clock to exist, we need the plastic frame, we need the buttons, we need the screen, the electronic components, we need the battery in the back, because without all of these parts, there's no clock. Again, easy to understand. But what we're saying here is that because things are dependent, they can't be independent. I think it's safe to say that all of us here can easily accept that this clock exists depending on causes and conditions, and depending on its parts. But at the same time, I think we're all happy to accept that when we walk in the door, there's already a clock existing here on the table. True or not? I think so. But that should be impossible, because dependent-arising should be overturning the idea that when we walk in the door, there's already a clock sitting on the table. But it doesn't seem to have that effect. Why?

**Because we don't understand dependent arising at the deepest level.** We only understand these ideas fairly superficially. To understand these at the deepest level **we have to go to the third way in which things are dependent: and that is that things exist depending on labelling or conception.** We look at that and we think: *"I know what that means, there's a single thing here, that I'm calling a clock."*

Again, that's a fairly superficial understanding, because what's really going on when we look out on the world? **We receive a mass of sense data, particularly through our eyes, and to make sense of all of this data, to be able to function in the world, we have to create meaningful objects. So what we do with all of this data is that we draw lines around various collections of data and we create objects.** We divide up all of this data into objects. We have to do that, otherwise we couldn't function, there would be no meaning in our lives. And not only do we need to do that, but to be able to communicate with other people, we have to give names to these things we create, otherwise we can't communicate. This is what labelling or conception means.

We divide up all this data, we draw lines around various collections and we give it a name. We create objects and give them a name. That's what this means. **What that really means of course, is that there is no objective world made up of many separate things already out there, we create those objects by drawing the lines and giving names.** We have to do that, if we didn't we couldn't function, there would be no meaning.

But how we divide up the world? Is not fixed, it's completely arbitrary, depending on the meaning that we want to get out of what we see. For example, if you're all looking in this direction here, and all this data is coming to you, you may just draw one line around all of this data, and say that there's one shelf here. Or you may draw three lines and say that there are three shelves here. Or you may draw about twenty lines, and say that there's twenty pieces of wood here. So how many objects are here? Depends on us, depends on where we draw the line, in terms of what meaning we want, so we determine, we bring these objects into existence, through our line drawing and giving names. What that means of course, is that there is no fixed independent objective world out there.

Let's briefly look at what this means, with regards to these two things we looked at already.

This is a timeline, this is a seed and this is the plant that it produces. We said that the plant exists depending on causes and conditions, what's the cause of the plant? It's the seed. But the conditions of course, are the soil, sunlight and water. Without the causes and conditions

there would be no plant. But we believe in an independent and objective world. We believe in an independent seed and an independent plant, independent of our conception. **If that's the case, at what point does the seed become the plant? At what point does the seed stop and the plant start?** Because if these things exist independent of us, it should be a fixed obvious point. So who can tell me where the seed becomes the plant? At what point? Here? Here? Somewhere else?

If we look at this, we can understand that we bring the plant into existence, because the point at which the seed becomes the plant is the point at which this configuration of data stops looking like our concept of seed and starts looking like our concept of plant. That's when the seed becomes the plant, so we determine that. And we all have different concepts of seeds and plants, so for some of us this is already a plant, for some us is at another point, and so on. We bring the plant into existence.

**Similarly with the idea: we said that the pen exists depending on its parts, but is there a pen to be found here? Amongst the parts? Can you find a pen here, from its own side? Independent of our conception?**

Is that a pen? (*Glen holding a part of the pen*) No.

Is that a pen? (*holding a different part*) No.

Is this plastic tube a pen? No.

Is the ink inside a pen? No.

Is the little round ball at the end a pen? No.

Is this metal piece a pen? No.

So where's the pen? And you say: *the pen is the collection of all those elements. (Glen holds all the pieces randomly put together, and asks)*

Is that the pen? *Oh no, it has to be in a certain order and shape.*

When does the pen come into existence? Tell me when the pen comes into existence.

(...)

What we can understand again is that **we bring the pen into existence**. When this configuration of data closely enough resembles our concept of pen, and concepts usually have two parts, appearance and functionality, when this configuration appears to be closely enough similar to our own concept of pen, and it seems to function according to our concept of pen, then... there's a pen.

We bring that into existence.

If this pen exists here, independent of us, it would mean that everyone who saw this, would see a pen. But I think that if a caveman came through the door, he would not see pen, he would probably see some sort of weapon. And if a dog came in the door, they would definitely not see pen, they would probably see some sort of chewing stick. And if an ant came there, they may see a home, somewhere to live. So is this a pen, a weapon, a chewing stick or a home? It's all or none of them, it depends on us. We bring that into existence.

**This is what this third level means, that things are labelled or exist within a conceptual framework, we bring things into existence, they don't exist there independently of us.** We do that through drawing these lines and giving names. We create these objects, they're not there already from their own side.

**Then the problem is that we don't realize that this is what we're doing.** We don't realize that we are creating this world, through our line drawing and giving names. It seems that the world is already divided into many separate things. Then the question is: what's the big problem with that? What's the problem with seeing the world already divided up into all these things?



The problem is that, let's take for example, this cup. Let's say we look at this cup. Every time we experience something, we experience it as either being pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (neither pleasant nor unpleasant). Let's say we look at this cup and we have a pleasant experience. That pleasant experience, together with the belief that that cup is existing there independent of us, will naturally lead us to assume that there must be some attractive quality there that's causing my pleasant feeling. So we will see this as inherently attractive. Or, if I'm having an unpleasant feeling, together with the belief that that cup is existing independently of me we will naturally assume that there must be some unattractive quality there that is causing my unpleasant feeling. We will see it as inherently unattractive.

**Again, let's say I'm having a pleasant feeling, and that I'm seeing this as inherently attractive.** I like pleasant feelings. I want pleasant feelings. That cup seems to be causing my pleasant feelings, so I want that cup. **Attachment.**

**Or if I'm having an unpleasant feeling, that cup seems to be causing that unpleasant feeling.** I don't like unpleasant feelings. That cup seems to be causing my unpleasant feelings, so get it out of here. **Aversion.**

With this belief that this cup is existing independently of us, from our pleasant and unpleasant experiences we end up with attachment and aversion, and all of the other mental afflictions. A big mess.

**But we can ask a simple question: if I'm having a pleasant feeling, where is the attractiveness? Is the attractiveness or beauty in the object?** Because if the beauty is in the object, it would mean that everyone that would see that cup would have to see it as beautiful, because the beauty is there. Is the beauty in the object? Don't we even say, in the English language, that *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*? We may even intellectually understand that and accept that, but is that how we behave? Do we behave as if beauty is in the eye of the beholder? I think not.

**If we did, we would never have craving and attachment for anything, because there is no beauty there to grab. It's only in our mind.** So again, if we can realize this, instead of merely intellectually understanding that we create the beauty, and that the beauty is in the eye of the beholder, if we can bring that into experience, through meditation, if we can taste that, if we can experientially see things in this way, our lives will dramatically improve. We would really overcome our attachments and aversions and all our mental afflictions.

When we look out on the world, we have to draw these lines and give names, and actually we have to learn to do that. I think a newborn baby can't do that at all, it takes some time for them to even begin to draw some rough lines. And we are constantly improving our line drawing ability, for example, when we go into a new place where we've never been before, and see something we've never seen before, we go *What's that?* We don't even know if it's one thing or a collection of things, we don't have a clue. We don't know how to draw the lines and what labels to give. We have to learn to do that. So again, we need to do this. **The problem is that we don't realize this is what we're doing, that we turned our 'line drawing' into 'boundaries'.** We believe that the world is already divided up into these many separate things, so we see a world of boundaries. And generally in most of our experiences, the very first line we draw is around us, and we give the label: me.

Again, we have to do that, if we don't, we couldn't function. Because in single experience, there are two aspects: there's the experiencer and the experienced. We have to draw the line between experiencer and experienced. That's not a problem.

**The problem is that we don't realize we're doing that. We believe that there's already a separate independent me here. There's an independent me here and an independent objective world there. So we've turned our line, the label 'me', into a boundary. There's an independent me here. We're contracting around the me part of the experience, we're splitting ourselves off from the world, and we're seeing ourselves as independent of the world.**

**This is called self-grasping, grasping to the self, grasping to the belief that there's an independent me here to begin with.** And that's where the attachments and aversions and the all mess begins. And, very often, in our experiences, we have this self-grasping very strong, meaning we tend to, in most of our experiences, have the perspective of me going there, me saying this, me doing that, it's always me, me, me... and this me, me, me is this self-grasping. This belief that there's an independent me here, who's going there, saying this, doing that.

**This self-grasping is very strong. When we have that self-grasping, we're completely out of sync with reality because the me is a dependent me.**

**To really understand that, we can use a simple example. Is this big?** (*Glen points to an object*)

Big can only exist depending on small. Small can only exist depending on big. You can't have big without having small. It does not make any sense. They only exist relatively, dependently.

**Just like you can only have big with small, you can only have up if there's down, in if there's out, like that, you can only have me, if there's not me. You can only have subject if there's object.** You can only have experiencer, if there's experienced. **But we grasp on to the me, as if the me is independent.** So that self-grasping that we do all the time is exactly like saying this is big. **It's just illogical. And that's the basis of our behavior.**

**We're behaving as if there's an independent me here. But the subject depends on object, what you label as the object** (*it can be me and you, or me and the world, or subject/object, experiencer/experienced*) **only exists interdependently. But when we grasp on to the me, and believe that there is an independent me here, we're completely out of sync with reality, the interdependent reality. We're fighting against reality. If we fight against reality, we will struggle, we will lose, we will suffer, and the people around us will suffer.**

**We also know that sometimes in our behavior, we don't have this strong self-grasping. Sometimes we're more focused on the activity, rather the me that's doing the activity.** Particularly with high level focus. And we have this many times in our life. For example, when we are absorbed in reading a good book, absorbed in watching something on TV, absorbed in fixing a problem at work, in those occasions we're more focused on the action, rather than the me who's doing the action, so self-grasping is less.

**And we know from our own experience that in those situations, things seem to flow quite well. Time seems to go very quickly. Why? Because we're more in sync with reality, we're not fighting against reality so much.** And this is very much emphasized in people who've developed a high level of focus in their activities. People such as professional musicians and athletes, that have spent thousands and thousands of hours training in their activity, and who've developed a high level of focus in their activity. These people, often when they do their activity, they often report that they're in *the zone* or the *flow state*. And that there's no sense of me. There's was just the music playing, just the activity happening.

**And what's happening, of course, is that because of their high level of focus in their activity, the self-grasping is very much reduced.** And not only do they often say that there was no sense of a separate me, they often say that in this state they have peak performance, optimum performance. **Why? Because they're more in sync with reality, they're not fighting against reality so much anymore. But this is just through our concentration.**

**Here, what we're saying is that we need to not only just reduce self-grasping through concentration, but we need to get rid of it, by developing wisdom, this wisdom of emptiness, realizing that there is no independent me, no independent objective world.** Of course we're not saying that there's no me and no world, just as we're not saying that there's no big and no small, but we're saying that big and small are dependent, interdependent. Likewise, what we're realizing is that there's no independent big and no independent small, that doesn't mean that there's no big and no small, there is big and small, dependently. Likewise, there's no independent me, no independent world. That doesn't mean that there's no me and no world. There's a dependent me and a dependent world.

**There's all that we need to realize, if we want to overcome this ignorance, if we want to overcome all these mental afflictions and all of our suffering.**

**This is what the Buddha taught, at the deepest level. If we want to overcome suffering, we need to get rid of this ignorance. This ignorance, grasping onto an independent me and an independent objective world.** In other words, to realize this is to realize that there's not one single boundary in the entire universe. Certainly there's no boundary between me and the world, or me and them. Because as long as we believe that there's a me here and a them there, independent, it's very difficult to fully develop loving-kindness and compassion for others. Because there seems to be this gap or distance between us and everyone else, this separation. But there is no separation.

**But of course, no separation doesn't mean we all become one blob. Realizing that there's no independent me, no independent big and small, doesn't mean that big and small become one blob, they're still big and small, but they're dependent, interdependent.** Likewise realizing that there's no independent me, independent world, doesn't mean we all become one blob. There's still me and you, this interdependence, we realize that there's no boundary between us and anyone else.

**If you can realize this, we will realize spontaneously, boundless love and compassion for everyone. Because there is no separation between us and anyone else.**

**This is what we need to realize. This wisdom of emptiness, realizing that there's no independent me, no independent objective world.** Now this idea is not easy to really appreciate. Often in the texts, there is often some simple analogies that are given, to help better understand what we mean by this emptiness. **And the analogy that is often given, that I think can be quite helpful, is the analogy of a dream.**

Now if we're dreaming, in the dream, there appears to be a dream-me here and there appears to be an independent objective dream-world out there. And in the dream, that's what we believe. Which means that in the dream, if we see something pleasant or unpleasant, we often develop attachment and craving for the pleasant things and aversion, maybe fear, anxiety for the unpleasant things in our dream. That's how we react, because we believe that that dream world is out there, independent.

But if we become lucid in the dream, if in the dream suddenly we realize: *Hang on, this is a dream* (without waking up, of course), if we become lucid within the dream, then there still will appear to be an independent dream-me here and there will still appear to be an independent dream-world out there, but now because we're lucid, we will realize that this dream-world is deceiving us. That the dream-world is definitely not existing as it appears to me: even though it appears to exist an independent dream-world there, because I'm lucid, I know that this dream-world is a product of my mind. Which means the dream continues, but our perspective of the dream will be completely different, which means that now, if something pleasant or unpleasant appears in our dream, it will become almost impossible to develop attachment for the pleasant things and the aversion, fear or anxiety towards the unpleasant things, and so we will enjoy the dream a lot more.

**Like this, this view that the Buddha taught at Rajgir, he said that our waking world is like a dream.** He didn't say *it was a dream*, he said *it was like a dream*. Meaning that also this waking world does not exist as it appears, that now, we're asleep with ignorance, and there appears to be an independent me here, and an independent an objective world out there. We believe these appearances, which means that if we see something pleasant in our waking life we have attachment, and if we see something unpleasant we have aversion. And we have a big mess in our lives.

But if we become lucid in our waking state, by realizing emptiness, then there still will appear to be an independent me here and an independent objective world there, but because we're lucid, because we've realized the nature of reality, we've realized emptiness, we realize that these appearances are deceiving us, that things are not existing as they appear, which means that when we have pleasant and unpleasant experiences in our waking life, it will become almost impossible to develop attachment or aversion to those. It would become almost impossible to develop mental afflictions, with respect to our experiences and we would enjoy our life a lot more.

This is an analogy that is often used, to help us better understand this idea of emptiness and of things being interdependent.

**One last point is that often in the Buddhist path, it is said that there are two main aspects that we need to develop. Often the analogy given here is that of the two wings of a bird. If a bird wants to fly to someplace it needs two wings.** Likewise, in our practice, we need *two wings of practice*, and the two wings of practice are **WISDOM** and **COMPASSION**. If we don't have both of these, we won't be able to progress in our spiritual path. It would be like a bird trying to fly with just one wing.

**The reason I mention this is that unfortunately many people who enter into some sort of spiritual path tend to focus on one wing and forget about the other one.** Particularly in the Buddhist spiritual path, we've seen here of course a lot of emphasis on the wisdom practice, the *vipassana* practice, that if we want to overcome our suffering, we have to do this wisdom or *vipassana* practice, we have to realize no-self, emptiness, and so people see that and they put a lot of effort in the wisdom practice. But then they sort of forget about the compassion side, and what we find is that people who only do the *vipassana* practice, often become very self-absorbed, become disconnected from the world, and often become very insensitive to the suffering of others, and they end up in a not very good place. And also, sometimes, because they think they're doing some high level wisdom practice, they think that ethics is no longer necessary, that *that's something only for beginners, I'm a high level vipassana practitioner now, so that doesn't apply to me and I can do whatever I want, because I'm beyond ethics*, and then they become completely unethical, so this is a big mess.

That's wisdom without compassion.

But equally well, sometimes people gravitate to the compassionate wing and forget about the wisdom wing. And often, if people put just effort into being a good person, compassionate person, often they end up with a lot of problems. If we forget about the wisdom side of things our compassion can become very biased, meaning *yes, I'll help those people, because they're nice people, they deserve to be helped, but these people, I'm not going to help them, because they're nasty people and in fact, I hope they suffer.* So that's how compassion becomes very biased. But also of course, compassion without wisdom means that even with the best motivation in the world, we try to help out others and sometimes create a big mess, in fact create more suffering than what was there before, because we don't know what we're doing. So that's compassion without wisdom.

Also unfortunately, many people who have a lot of compassion and want to go out and fix and heal the world, we see this in social workers, aid workers, full of enthusiasm, full of compassion, they want to go out and make a big impact in the world, and heal the world and fix the world. But unfortunately, very often, within 3-6 months, they suffer compassion burnout, completely burned-out. Again, this is compassion without wisdom. Here, of course, the wisdom is knowing what you can do to help, and what you can't do to help and definitely the wisdom of knowing when to rest and to look out after yourself. But also there's another case that probably many of us have had before, and that is we try to help someone, and then they simply take advantage of us. Again, this is compassion without wisdom. Of course, if we allow someone to take advantage of us, we're actually encouraging them to behave badly, so this is not very compassionate. So if someone is trying to take advantage of us, the wisdom aspect consists in not allowing that to happen. So that's another example of compassion without wisdom.

**In everything we do, we need to make sure we have both of these aspects of wisdom and compassion together.** That's something I just wanted to mention there at the end, because I know a lot of people who end up in one of these two areas, with a lot of problems. And they know the compassion is the right thing to do, and the result is a mess, or they're trying to do the wisdom thing, and they also have a lot of problems, and they wonder why. And often the reason is we're not having a balanced approach.

**So to summarize "What The Buddha Taught":** often it's said he just taught two things, suffering and the end of suffering. So here we looked at that in two levels, the Four Noble Truths, which is the foundation of all Buddhist traditions. And there he said that the cause of suffering is this overinflated sense of me, so if we want to overcome suffering, we need to get rid of this overinflated sense of me. We need to realize that there's no-self, no solid me.

But then later, in a place called Rajgir, he said there's a deeper problem than that. The deeper problem is this belief in subject-object duality. Independent me, independent objective world. This is the ignorance we need to get rid of, to get rid of mental afflictions and suffering. We need to realize this emptiness; we need to realize that everything is interdependent. If we can realize this, then we can overcome the causes of suffering and thereby, overcome suffering.

That's What the Buddha Taught!

## Q&A:

- [Desire and progress](#)
- [Ethics and the distinction between us and them](#)
- [The role of meditation](#)
- [Buddhism and violence \(Myanmar\)](#)

**Q: Getting rid of desire, I've been thinking about that. And that idea seems good, but what about progress? What about wanting to improve yourself and the world?**

A: There's a couple of points to that I'll mention, because often people have a lot of difficulty with that.

Part of the difficulty is the word, desire. And actually a lot of confusion in Buddhism comes from terminology, because unfortunately for a lot of the original Pali and Sanskrit terms that we used, which were very specific in meaning, there is no word in English that has the same meaning. There are many words like these. So the translators were forced to pick a word in English which is sort of similar, but unfortunately that English word has a lot of other meanings, and so when people see that word, confusion arises. Mass confusion.

And one example is this word: desire. This word is a bit vague, and it can have a lot of different meanings. Often, in the Buddhist texts, people use that word to translate the word that I translate as attachment. And the word attachment is the sort of clinging and grasping to things, trying to hold on to them, believing that they will make us happy. This is what this word, that I've used as attachment, means. Sometimes people translate that as desire. So then, in that case, often you see in Buddhist texts, like you said, 'you need to get rid of all your desires', but what they're actually saying is that you need to get rid of all this clinging and craving and attachment to things. Whereas the word desire, some translators in Buddhism, use that same word to translate the same word you would normally translate as aspiration, to aspire to something, to desire something. Like one term in Buddhism is the aspiration for enlightenment, that we aspire to awaken. And that's something we need to increase! Sometimes people translate that as desire. And in the Buddhist texts, it says we need to increase that! So in some places you see that Buddhism says you need to get rid of desire, and in other places it says we need to increase it! So what's going on? It's that people are using the same word, desire, to translate two completely different things. Then there's confusion.

That's one of the challenges is when we see things like the word desire, we need to go on and ask what is this word meaning here. And it could mean this craving, clinging, wanting that we need to get rid of. But it can also mean this aspiration for something, this aspiration to improve, the aspirations to improve our positive qualities, and these things we need to increase!

So when Buddhism says we need to get rid of desire, we're not talking about getting rid of aspiring to being a better person, or aspiring to overcome our suffering. That we need to increase.

That's one point that creates a lot of confusion.

Secondly, when we talk about contentment, in Buddhism, we're talking about contentment with respect to the external things: material health, possessions, that sort of thing. Similarly, we should never be contented with our inner development. We should never be content with

*that, and we should always be aspiring to improve our inner qualities. The thing there is that, as we saw here in this teaching, is that the real source of happiness is not coming from out there, in fact, the more we believe that, the more we have desire and craving and attachment for status, wealth and pleasure, and the more we're going to suffer. If we realize that our source of suffering and happiness is within, then we need to have this aspiration to develop ourselves, to never be content with our inner development. That we need to have a lot of passion and aspiration to continuously develop in ourselves. So this is what they're saying here.*

*And one other point related to that, that I find a lot of people coming to ask me and that they have a lot of confusion, based on this sort of idea, is they often feel: should I do the career thing or should I do the spiritual thing? I'm not sure which one is more important... This sort of thinking, I think it's mistaken. What we should be doing is this: we should be integrating. Because if we give up our career and we want to do the spiritual thing, what are we going to do with our lives? Are we going to sit in a cave for the rest of our life? How are we going to benefit society? If we have a career, particularly if we're good at it, and we enjoy it, then integrate it with spirituality and make your career more meaningful to you and more beneficial to society. That's what we should do. Therefore we should never be content in terms of our career, in terms of benefiting the world, and we should aspire to use that for a more meaningful, better purpose. Of course if the aspiration to improve our career is I want more money, a bigger house, a better car, then people spend 50, 60, 70 hours a week at work, to pay for houses that they're never in, because they're always at work, and so they're never enjoying this anyway, because they're always having to work for it. I think this is what we need to try to understand, that it has all to do with our motivation. If we have the motivation of developing ourselves, and benefiting society, then we shouldn't be content with our career, we should try to improve it, so that we can be more meaningful and more beneficial for society, rather than having the attitude of, how I want to improve my career so I can make more money and have a bigger house and a better care. Because these things are never really going to satisfy us. Because we earn a bit more money and then the BMW is not good enough, I need a Porsche or a Ferrari, or the house is not big enough, and a I need a bigger, bigger house. And then of course, we'll never be satisfied with our lives. So I think that this maybe can be helpful.*

[\[back to Q&A\]](#)

**Q: You talk a lot about of the difference between us and them, as well as the ethical component of life. Could you explore? And also, how can we break down the barriers between us and them?**

*A: Well the us vs them point implies a boundary, so of course there's a distinction between me and someone which is not me. But I think that the idea of us and them is... well we're all living on this planet, and trying to survive on the same planet. So the whole idea of us vs them is, from a Buddhist perspective illogical and just harmful to us.*

*As for breaking down the barriers between us, that often comes for emphasizing differences, whereas actually what we should be doing is emphasizing similarities. If we do that, the us vs them becomes completely illogical. And so I think that this is something that can be very beneficial, and something that even His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasizes a lot, that we're all in the same planet, we're all humans, we're all trying to be happy, we all have this similar body, we're all similar in so many ways, and this is what we should try to emphasize, and then*

*we can have this feeling of empathy and connectedness because we're all together in the same situation. This is what I think we need to do, emphasizing similarities instead of differences.*

*Regarding ethics, all spiritual traditions emphasize ethics. And if you ask why we should be ethical, then sometimes the answer is because God said so, or It's the right thing to do and many things like that. But from a Buddhist perspective, why to be ethical, at the surface level we can understand that if we're unethical, that leads to a lot of suffering, and if we're ethical, that leads to more happiness. That's at a very simple level. But at the deepest level, why to be ethical is the understanding of interconnectedness. That there is no independent me and independent world, and so if we understand the idea of interconnectedness, experientially, being unethical would not even enter our minds. It would just be... It wouldn't even be a possibility if you experientially understand the whole idea of interconnectedness. Of course, intellectually we may accept this, and see in topics like climate change for example, how little actions can create a very big effect, so intellectually we can start to appreciate how things are not existing in isolation, but that every little thing that happens on the planet, as a big global impact. Intellectually. If we're able to experimentally see things like this, we would not even for one moment think about unethical, because it would just be completely illogical. It would be like your hand saying I don't like the leg so I'll slice it open, because if you slice the leg, it bleeds and then you die, so that would be completely illogical, wouldn't it? So that's sort of the idea. That's at the deepest level from the Buddhist perspective. If we can experientially see things as interconnected, the idea of being unethical would just be completely illogical, you wouldn't even think it.*

*But to get to that point, we need to then use something as restraining us now, because now we're probably not at that point, and we have this habit of getting angry at people, and upset at people, and maybe even harming people, so now, we need something to hold us until we get to that point. Something to hold us now, from a Buddhist perspective, is the understanding that if we do a harmful action, then suffering will result in that way.*

[\[back to Q&A\]](#)

### **Q: Where does meditation fit in, to all you've discussed today?**

*A: As I briefly mentioned in the four noble truths, the medicine was ethics, concentration and wisdom. Because we need to transform our minds, eliminate our mental afflictions and this ignorance. But again, we need to not just have a right understanding intellectually but we need to come to realize how things exist. We need to directly realize that in meditation. Because our intellectual understanding of something is not strong enough to work against the opposite of it. For example, intellectually we all know that this cup is changing moment by moment. But is that how we behave? Is our instinctive behavior to see this cup as changing moment by moment? No. Our instinctive behavior is telling us that this is quite stable, that this is more or less the same cup that was here yesterday, and that will be the same cup here tomorrow. And therefore, if we have a pleasant experience with the cup we tend to have craving for it, because there's something to grab. So if we want to overcome this attachment to pleasant things, we need to bring this intellectual understanding of impermanence into experience. How to do that is through meditation. It is to internalize that intellectual understanding, to meditate on it to come to taste it, in meditation. That's why we need concentration. If we don't have concentration, nothing penetrates. If we can really develop that concentration, this calm, clear and focused mind, and then sit and reflect on impermanence we can bring this intellectual understanding into personal experience, and*



*then this personal understanding will penetrate deeper and deeper into our minds, and will become a habit. Then outside of meditation, we will more instinctively see things as changing moment by moment. This is what we need to do with the meditation. First we need to do the concentration meditation, which is to develop a calm, clear and focused mind, and then we need to apply that to internalize the idea of impermanence, love, compassion, wisdom of no-self, emptiness... If we don't meditate, these things are just going to remain intellectual understandings, and won't help us in our daily lives. We can intellectually understand impermanence 100%, we can intellectually understand emptiness and no-self 100%, it won't really help us much. Because again, our behavior is not driven by our intellectual understanding, it's driven by our instinctive habits. To change those instinctive habits, we need to bring these intellectual understandings into experience through meditation. This is why meditation is critical.*

*But one more point on that, and then we'll all wrap it up. Often two people will be talking and one will say to the other, Oh, when do you do your practice? And the other person will say, Oh, I do it every morning, at 6:30am for half an hour. If this is our idea of practice, we're not going to get anywhere. Because practice has 2 parts: one is meditation, where we internalize, but then the second part of practice is what we do for the rest of the day. Because, for example, let's say that for 30 minutes in the morning, you are reflecting on the fact that things are changing moment by moment. From that 30 minutes you might start to get a little taste of that. And that will affect the mind a little bit after the meditation. But then, if for the rest of the day you run around mindlessly grasping at things, then your old habit is working against that. So whatever little progress you made in the morning meditation, will get squashed. So you can meditate on that every single morning for the rest of your life, and you'll make very little progress. Because the rest of the day you're working against it. If you want to progress, we need to do two things: first meditate in the morning, on impermanence, on no-self, compassion or loving-kindness, to get a little taste, and then bring that into the day, and keep working on that for the rest of the day. If we do both these two things together, then we will progress.*

*This is why meditation is important. Otherwise, if we don't meditate, it will just stay as an intellectual idea and if we try to implement it in daily life it will be too difficult, because we have nothing to start with. It's too difficult to do that, without the meditation. We need to have both of those together. If we do that, we will progress.*

[\[back to Q&A\]](#)

### **Q: What's your view on what's going on in Myanmar / Burma right now?**

*A: Often you ask people what religion are you, and they say I'm Buddhist, or I'm Christian, or I'm Muslim, and if you ask them why, often they will say that it's because my parents are. I don't think that that's what makes a person Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu or other. So what you find in a lot of these countries, like Myanmar, Thailand, etc. is that people call themselves Buddhist, but only because that's what their family were. Then if you ask them what practices are you doing? How are you implementing these Buddhist ideas? Often they can't even explain the basic Buddhist principles.*

### **Q: But these are monks doing this!**

*A: Again if you shave your head and put some robes on, doesn't mean you've transformed into some holy person. I don't about Myanmar, but certainly in places like Tibet, it was a very tough existence. If you become a monk, easy life. You have a roof over your head, your had food, clothing, no problems. Unfortunately, in some of these Asian countries, becoming a monk or nun was an easy way out of a difficult life, and the Dalai Lama has said this as well:*

*he has said that, even now with Tibetan monks in India, the problem is not having enough monks, the problem is quality. He said that himself. Because again, some people just do this because it's an easy life. So again, just because we see someone with a shaved head and robes that doesn't necessarily mean they're actually trying to implement any of these ideas. It could be that they're just looking for an easy life. This is something that we need to be a little bit aware of.*

*I think anyone which is seriously trying to follow the Buddha's spiritual life would not be doing these things... really. And often these people, doing these kinds of things, whether Buddhist, Christians or others, they're not really following their traditions in any meaningful way. They're abusing their traditions... This is what I see.*

*So I'd like to thank you all for coming along this evening, and hopefully you got something out of the talk. Thank you.*

[\[back to Q&A\]](#)