

Zen Seminar Reading 3

Buddha's First Sermon

The First Sermon at Deer Park The Buddha said, "Then please listen, my friends. I have found the Great Way, and I will show it to you. You will be the first to hear my Teaching. This Dharma is not the result of thinking. It is the fruit of direct experience. Listen serenely with all your awareness." The Buddha's voice was filled with such spiritual authority that his five friends joined their palms and looked up at him. Kondanna spoke for them all, "Please, friend Gautama, show us compassion and teach us the Way."

The Buddha began serenely, "My brothers, there are two extremes that a person on the path should avoid. One is to plunge oneself into sensual pleasures, and the other is to practice austerities which deprive the body of its needs. Both of these extremes lead to failure. The path I have discovered is the Middle Way, which avoids both extremes and has the capacity to lead one to understanding, liberation, and peace. It is the Noble Eightfold Path of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. I have followed this Noble Eightfold Path and have realized understanding, liberation, and peace.

"Brothers, why do I call this path the Right Path? I call it the Right Path because it does not avoid or deny suffering, but allows for a direct confrontation with suffering as the means to overcome it. The Noble Eightfold Path is the path of living in awareness. Mindfulness is the foundation. By practicing mindfulness, you can develop concentration which enables you to attain Understanding. Thanks to right concentration, you realize right awareness, thoughts, speech, action, livelihood, and effort. The Understanding which develops can liberate you from every shackle of suffering and give birth to true peace and joy.

"Brothers, there are four truths: the existence of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path which leads to the cessation of suffering. I call these the Four Noble Truths. The first is the existence of suffering. Birth, old age, sickness, and death are suffering. Sadness, anger, jealousy, worry, anxiety, fear, and despair are suffering. Separation from loved ones is suffering. Association with those you hate is suffering. Desire, attachment, and clinging to the five aggregates are suffering.

"Brothers, the second truth is the cause of suffering. Because of ignorance, people cannot see the truth about life, and they become caught in the flames of desire, anger, jealousy, grief, worry, fear, and despair.

"Brothers, the third truth is the cessation of suffering. Understanding the truth of life brings about the cessation of every grief and sorrow and gives rise to peace and joy.

"Brothers, the fourth truth is the path which leads to the cessation of suffering. It is the Noble Eightfold Path, which I have just explained. The Noble Eightfold Path is nourished by living mindfully. Mindfulness leads to concentration and understanding which liberates you from every pain and sorrow and leads to peace and joy. I will guide you along this path of realization."

While Siddhartha was explaining the Four Noble Truths, Kondanna suddenly felt a great light shining within his own heart. He could taste the liberation he had sought for so long. His face beamed with joy. The Buddha pointed at him and cried, "Kondanna! You've got it! You've got it!"

Kondanna joined his palms and bowed before the Buddha. With deepest respect, he spoke, "Venerable Gautama, please accept me as your disciple. I know that under your guidance, I will attain the Great Awakening."

The other four monks also bowed at the Buddha's feet, joined their palms, and asked to be received as disciples.

The Buddha motioned his friends to rise. After they took their places again, he said, "Brothers! The children of Uruvela village gave me the name 'the Buddha.' You, too, may call me by that name if you like."

Kondanna asked, "Doesn't 'Buddha' mean 'one who is awakened'?"

"That is correct. And they call the path I have discovered 'the Way of Awakening.' What do you think of this name?"

"'One who is awakened'! 'The Way of Awakening'! Wonderful! Wonderful! These names are true, yet simple. We will happily call you the Buddha and the path you have discovered the Way of Awakening. As you just said, living each day mindfully is the very basis of spiritual practice." The five monks were of one mind to accept Gautama as their teacher and to call him the Buddha.

The Buddha smiled at them. "Please, brothers, practice with an open and intelligent spirit, and in three months you will have attained the fruit of liberation."

(This handout is from Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha* [Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991], pages 146–148. Copyright © 1991 by Thich Nhat Hanh. Used with permission of Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, www.parallax.org.)

Three Marks of Existence (<https://www.thoughtco.com/the-marks-of-existence-449744>)

Suffering (Dukkha)

The Pali word *dukkha* is most often translated as "suffering," but it also means "unsatisfactory" or "imperfect." Everything material and mental that begins and ends, is composed of the five [skandhas](#), and has not been liberated to [Nirvana](#), is dukkha. Thus, even beautiful things and pleasant experiences are dukkha.

Buddha taught that there are three main categories of dukkha. The first is suffering or pain, dukkha-dukkha. It includes physical, emotional and mental pain. Then there is viparinama-dukkha, which is impermanence or change. Everything is transitory, including happiness, and so we should enjoy it while it is there and not cling to it. The third is samkhara-dukkha, conditioned states, meaning we are affected by and dependent on something else.

Impermanence (Anicca)

Impermanence is the fundamental property of everything that is conditioned. All conditioned things are impermanent and are in a constant state of flux. Because all conditioned things are constantly in flux, liberation is possible.

We go through life attaching ourselves to things, ideas, emotional states. We become angry, envious, and sad when things change, die, or cannot be replicated. We see ourselves as permanent things and other things and people as likewise permanent. We cling to them without deeply understanding that all things, including ourselves, are impermanent.

By renunciation, you can be liberated from clinging to things you desire and the negative effects of those things changing. Because of impermanence, we ourselves can change. You can let go of fears, disappointments, and regrets. You can be liberated from them and enlightenment is possible.

By nourishing your insight into impermanence each day, [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) writes that you will live more deeply, suffer less, and enjoy life more. Live in the moment and appreciate the here and now. When you encounter pain and suffering, know that it, too, shall pass.

Egolessness (Anatta)

Anatta (*anatman* in Sanskrit) is also translated as non-self or non-essentiality. This is the teaching that "you" are not an integral, autonomous entity. The individual self, or what we might call the ego, is more correctly thought of as a by-product of the [skandhas](#).

The five skandhas are form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. These aggregates or heaps give us the illusion of being a self, separate from all others. But the skandhas are constantly changing and impermanent. You are not the same for two consecutive moments. Realizing this truth can be a long and difficult journey, and some traditions think it is only possible for monks. We cling to who we think we are, but we are never the same from moment to moment.

The Four Great Vows

In [Zen](#), [Nichiren](#), Tendai, and other Mahayana schools of Buddhism, there are four Bodhisattva vows. Here is a common translation:

Beings are numberless, I vow to save them
Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to end them
Dharma gates are boundless, I vow to enter them
Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it.