

The First Noble Truth -

A Meditation

Neng Si – Mississauga Meditation Class

What a troubled world we live in today. Everywhere we look we see suffering: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle East, India, Sri Lanka, and New Orleans – disasters, both natural and man-made abound. But we need not look too far to understand suffering; we need only look inside ourselves. Here, in our own minds and our own hearts lies the cause of all suffering and, most importantly, the deliverance from suffering.

The pali word “Dukkha” is sometimes translated as “suffering”, but Francis Story writes, in “Suffering”, Volume II of “The Three Basic Facts of Existence” that Dukkha is:

Disturbance, irritation, dejection, worry, despair, fear, dread, anguish, anxiety; vulnerability, injury, inability, inferiority; sickness, aging, decay of body and faculties, senility; pain/pleasure; excitement/ boredom; deprivation/excess; desire/frustration, suppression; longing/aimlessness; hope /hopeless-ness; effort, activity, striving/repression; loss, want, insufficiency/satiety; love/lovelessness, friendless-ness; dislike, aversion/attraction; parenthood/ childlessness; submission/rebellion; decision/ indecisiveness, vacillation, uncertainty.

Suffering is the central fact of human existence. Shakespeare put it more prosaically, if not more profoundly, when he had Hamlet ask, “To be, or not to be, that is the question...” The Buddha, before his enlightenment, was confronted with the three essentials of human existence: old age, sickness and death. Daily we encounter our own personal “Dukkha”: We are too old, too fat or undesirable, we suffer pain, we are worried, we are bored, we are unhappy... What causes us to think and feel this way? What is the nature of our discontent?

According to that great physician, the Buddha, the root of our unhappy existence is craving or attachment. In short, we want pleasure (and we want it to last indefinitely) or we don't want unpleasantness (at all). Unfortunately the nature of reality is that everything

changes, nothing lasts, we get sick, our friends and family pass away, we grow old – no matter how much stuff we accumulate, how much pleasure we seek, or how much unpleasantness we seek to avoid, we are not satisfied. Like the protagonist in Saul Bellow's comic novel, “Henderson the Rain King”, we are consumed by the voice inside us that cries, “I want, I want, I want”. We want money or status or love and yet no matter how much we have, the voice refuses to be silent; we still want more.

Tragically, this malaise is not confined to ourselves alone. We are not satisfied to be singularly unhappy. We must inflict our pain on others. I must have what you have. You are to blame for my misfortune. You have caused me to suffer. And so the circle of suffering is multiplied and magnified and perpetuated: anger, conflict, war, greed, consumption, destruction, and on and on.

If suffering is the symptom and attachment is the disease, then what is the cure? I believe there are three major components. The first is awareness. The Buddha recognized that there is only one antidote for sleep and that is to wake up. The name Buddha literally means “awakened one” – one who has become aware of the true nature of things. We must seek to look deeper into our reality to discover for ourselves the truth of the Buddha's teaching – “One thing do I teach: Suffering (Dukkha) and the end of suffering”. This truth is the Dharma, but it must be realized personally.

The second component is acceptance. We must, no matter how difficult, accept ourselves exactly as we are at the present moment. That means we must stop lying to ourselves and pretending we are free of greed, of anger and of delusion. Only in so doing, can we understand the suffering of others and exercise compassion and loving-kindness. True love begins with loving ourselves.

Finally, we need to act. We need to put into practice our understanding, we need to shake off the illusion of separateness and embrace our interdependence. We need to take seriously the Buddha's final admonition: “Be a lamp unto yourself. Seek salvation alone in the truth.” And in so doing, let us light up the world. According to that great Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna: “Nirvana is Samsara, Samsara is Nirvana.” The journey and the destination are one.

May we all find happiness in our
Huayen Garden.

