

Hi, I'm Nawang Gelek. Some people call me Gelek Rimpoche. I'm very happy to be able to talk to you about the Buddha's teachings. I'd like to thank Tricycle for giving me this opportunity.

When I say 'the Buddha's teachings', they really truly are the Buddha's experiences, his personal experience of dealing with his difficulties and overcoming these difficulties and then his own experience of how he had overcome these difficulties. When I say difficulties, some of you may be thinking they are only mental-level difficulties, but Buddha really was not only experiencing mental level but very much physical level difficulties. He was looking to overcome those difficulties and he did.

So the first teaching, what he gave, based on his personal experience is very well known as The Four Noble Truths. I will be talking to you on the basis of the first teaching of the Buddha. As I said earlier, if you look at the Buddha's life story, previously speaking, Buddha was born as one of the most important princes in one of the very big Indian principalities at that time.

In those days these Indian kingdoms were really looking for whose was going to be the biggest kingdom to overcome and overpower all the other kingdoms. So they were looking what they Indians called the "The Universal King." So every family—a royal family whenever they were expecting a new prince—they were looking for this "Universal King". When they Buddha was born, his country "Shakya" had consulted soothsayers and all of them said he would be an extraordinary kid. However, if they could maintain keeping him in the house then he'll will the able to become the Universal King.

So they tried to keep him in the house because the parents, the king and queen, were thinking, "what will make him not stay home?" So they realized, this will happen if the kid is unhappy—seeing that unhappiness comes out when you are suffering. So they wanted the little prince to avoid suffering. So they built a sort of special palace and a selected retinue. All the young ones, the beautiful ones, and the music throughout the day and the night, a beautiful river running through all this. I don't have to talk to you about how Indians build palaces! You look at the Taj Mahal, you look at the Red Fort, and you can see how wonderful they build things.

So they made an artificial life for the little prince and tried to make it so he did not have any encounters with suffering. So the consequence of that was that the prince was always wondering what was behind the walls where he was not allowed to go. So he decided one day, while sitting on a horsecart to tell the driver to drive, so the driver drove up to the door and said, "You cannot go beyond here, this is out of bounds for you." So the little king says "Ha! Are you the king or am I am the king?" So naturally the driver gave up and took him out.

What he encountered out there was a tremendous amount of suffering; the suffering of death, the suffering of aging, the suffering of illnesses, and he also saw a meditator. He asked the driver what was going on and the driver explained to him and finally he says, "Am I immune to all these miserable things because I am the prince?" The driver bowed down and said "You're not". He said "What about my parents?" "They are also not." And then he said, "What about my subjects that I am supposed to protect?"

So the Buddha at this time was not Buddha but prince Gotama. Gotama was very upset because the subjects he was supposed to be protecting were suffering like this, his family are not immune, he was definitely looking for some way to handle this. So he realized the meditator was meditating to overcome these difficulties. So definitely he wanted to leave the palace and he did. He meditated for six years in middle of the woods, in the swamp even. He meditated for a long time and finally became the Buddha, as many of you know. So his experience really is encountering suffering, looking for how to solve the problem, and what is the fastest way to achieve this, and how does one get there.

That basically, in a normal traditional way we say: the truth of suffering, truth of cause of suffering, truth cessation of suffering, and the truth of the way and how one gets there, we say the path. He was basically counting The Four Noble Truths.

And then, as one of the early Indian masters Nagarjuna said: it is like a medicine doctor and a patient, and the patient is not well, so what the patient needs to know is what is wrong with them, because if you don't know what is wrong with you, you will not be able to treat it or get better, prevent illness or anything, because you do not know. So the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering is such that it is the reality of our lives. It is true. It was true twenty-six hundred years ago when the Buddha was alive and it is true today in 2010, the twenty first century. It is always the same truth. We have a tremendous amount of suffering; mental, physical, and emotional suffering, almost countless. Then of course we have environmental, and everywhere we look there is a tremendous amount of suffering. Buddhism did talk about suffering.

Something interesting: one time I was traveling from Amsterdam to Detroit. In the plane over the night the guy next to me asked me "What are you?" Then I presumed "what are you?" meant "what religion do you follow?" So I told him "I am a Tibetan Buddhist." He says "Oh Buddhist! I know that! That's the religion of suffering isn't it?" So I said, "Well, it isn't the religion of suffering, it's the religion that solves the problem of suffering."

So, sometimes people think Buddhism is the religion of suffering but that's not true. The truth is that suffering is the problem, it is very important to recognize what is wrong with us. The reason the Buddha spoke about suffering first is that he was trying to tell us to acknowledge the truth so we can handle it. If you deny it then nothing will happen.

We try to deny. If you are not well and you deny it when your family urges you to see a doctor you will say "I'm ok, I'm ok". We do that all the time. It is denial. Denial gives shelter for problem to grow. Addicted people will deny and will not take care of themselves and say "So what I've had a few drink, I'm not addicted" or "I've had a few cigarettes, I'm not addicted". "How many cigarettes do you have a day?" "Three packs a day, something like that."

We deny a lot. We always say "I'm not angry BUT blah blah blah". We say that right? So, that is denial. The denial will block all ways and means of helping. Everything that you can correct, you are depriving. Opportunities to help yourself, that is deprived by denial. That's why Buddha said first "I want you to recognize that this suffering is here." The purpose of introducing this suffering first is for you

to acknowledge and recognize this so you can handle whatever the way you want to do. That is the very basis of which the Buddha gave such wonderful teachings. This is why even though it was twenty six hundred years ago when it was given by Buddha but it is still absolutely relevant in our lives today in the most developed nation like the United States or in a place experiencing great suffering like Haiti. It is completely relevant and true. It was true when the Buddha saw it twenty-six hundred years ago and it is true today. So for us the first step, The First Noble Truth is to recognize that we do have a problem, suffering.

The traditional Buddhist way of teachings also says there are a number of different sufferings but basically they will say there are 3 different types of suffering. (1) The suffering of suffering, what do we call that? Inconvenience-physical, mental, and emotional. Then, changing suffering, and then pervasive suffering. These are the three types of suffering. [With] Changing suffering [it] is also very difficult for us to know that it is suffering because sometimes it is a little cool and a little nice. Like if you are really hot and walk into a nice air-conditioned room. It is nice but if you stay too long it will be too cold and you will be looking for a blanket. Vice versa, if it's very cold out there and you go into a nice warm room it is very nice and you can take off your overcoat and it is nice but if you sit in the heat too long you have to take everything off. There are a lot of examples, if you are drinking for example and you have half a beer it feels good but if you drink too much you get into trouble. These are the examples of changing suffering, what the Buddha was teaching us how to handle these problems and solve these problems and hopefully they will be of help to you. Thank you