



Welcome. I'm glad you have joined me in this four-week series of talks, *Engaging with the Truths of Suffering*, as we explore how the teachings of the four noble truths are enlivening and can reconnect us to a sense of wholeness, both internally and externally.

Let me introduce myself first. My name is Reverend Liên Shutt. While I am ordained in the convert Soto Zen lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, I was raised as a heritage Buddhist when I was young, like many Asians in the diaspora. In Vietnam, I remember my mother going to the temple and offering sticks of incense. However, due to various causes and conditions, I came to the US. In my early 20s, wanting to find a way to know calmness, I started learning meditation, first in the Vietnamese tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh and then much more in the Insight tradition of North America, with an emphasis on the Thai Forest Tradition. I was one of the founding members of the Buddhists of Color, one of the very few people of color affinity meditation groups in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 1990s. We were an ecumenical group, very much peer-led. Through various causes and conditions, I eventually ended up at Tassajara, a Soto Zen monastery in the Ventana Wilderness of California.

After three-plus years, I wanted to know the Asian roots of Buddhism, so I went for a year overseas and practiced in monasteries in Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Now, as the guiding teacher of Access to Zen in Oakland and San Francisco, California, I teach a combination of both Soto Zen and Insight, as I find that they complement each other, especially for those of us living and working in the world.

So yes, I now live and work in the world! I left the monastery and temple living about 15 years ago to go back to my profession as a social worker, working with chronically unhoused seniors. I did this for about ten years. During that time, my dharma practice was put through the fire, you could say, as it was very difficult work to witness deep and intense suffering with this very complex issue that's growing throughout our nation, and even the world, I would say.

With these experiences as my drive, I've been developing a framing of the four noble truths which focuses on how they can be supportive, how they can be wisdom or truths more to live by than just to be memorized, to be used to actively address the suffering and injustices in our contemporary, everyday lives.

As you may know, the classical framing of the four noble truths is: 1. in life, there is suffering; 2. There are causes and conditions or there are roots for the arising of suffering; 3. the end of suffering as possible; and 4. The eightfold path is the way to end suffering. To me, and to many people I know, while this is the fundamental understanding that is held throughout all the sects of Buddhism, for many of us, they've just been truths to be memorized, right, to reel off like I just



did to you. So while these classic framings of truths are values that are memorized, it is supportive. However, my work focuses much more on how these truths, when framed in broader systemic lenses, can be practiced for restoration and healing.

I've reframed them and I'm calling them the engaged four noble truths. 1., Harm and harming has happened or is part of conditioned existence. 2., There are causes and conditions for this harm or harming. How are we taught to be with them and experience the harm and harming? What familiar cultural or systemic structure promote, reinforce, or perpetuate this? The third truth, then, is where is it possible to have agency in the midst of harm or difficulty? Conditions can change, and we can be a part of that. So how can we be agents of change? The fourth engaged noble truth is that the eightfold path supports and empowers us. How do we practice actively engaging with these eight aspects as a way to restore?

Today we're going to talk about the first engaged noble truth, and I'm going to frame it as the net of wholeness. I'll repeat the first engaged noble truth: Harm, hurt, or harming has happened in life. Investigation is the practice of the first noble truth. Therefore, we're asked to identify and be aware of the what and how of *dukkha*, a Pali word that's often translated as suffering, disease, dissatisfaction, or discontent. The perspective we are viewing this from is important. This is not to get all bogged down and overwhelmed with our own suffering or the suffering around us.

Audre Lorde, a great poet, in this poem of hers called "Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices," says,

How much of this truth can I bear to see
and still live
unblinded?
How much of this pain
can I use?

To me, this is a great poem to point towards the question, how do we not turn away? When are we not overwhelmed with suffering and the pain we see in the world? How can we practice in a way that we don't feel overwhelmed when we realize that it's about wanting a sense of wholeness versus that something is wrong?

Hurt and harm point to where and how wholeness has been broken, disrupted, or torn. In fact, in the commentaries describing *dukkha*, it is talked about with the metaphor of an axle that doesn't fully fit into the spokes of a wheel, so the wheel doesn't turn smoothly. So, *dukkha* is when things are not flowing smoothly. Hence the representation of Buddhism as the wheel. How can things



turn smoothly? So to me this reflects this sense of when are things back in balance and flowing easily. So when we're seeking a wheel that turns smoothly, you could say flow or balance, we're actually wanting to return to wholeness.

There's a teaching on wholeness as an innate sense, you could say. It's a story about the Buddha when he was young. One spring day his father, the king, went to one of the farms of his kingdom to help with the spring planting. It was very busy and the Buddha had attendants. The story goes that then towards the afternoon, there was a moment in which the attendants had gone off to be with the farmers and the Buddha, as a young child, found himself sitting under a rose apple tree. There, seated in the shade on a hot day, he realized that he had a sense of completeness, a sense of wholeness, and that everything was well and okay. In some teachings it said that this is one of the things he remembered as he sat in his enlightenment.

So I want to take a moment to ask you to have a sense of stillness and subtleness as if you were sitting under a rose apple tree, or whatever it is for yourself. Perhaps it's under a tree you remember from your childhood, or by a lake. Wherever it is for you that brings up this sense of subtleness, of wholeness, of completeness. Take a few deep breaths there. And I invite you to actually know that feeling. See if you can center it in the spot within your actual physical body or posture or the breath. Somewhere that's very visceral. Perhaps at the end of an inhale. Just let yourself rest there and know it. Now open your eyes or come back to what I'm saying at your own pace. So this is a place that we can return to, at any point to know our innate sense of wholeness.

So if we start from this knowledge of wholeness as already possible, returning to wholeness, just like coming back to that point in the body or breath that we just went through, is a supportive way to frame how we can aim our practice, this investigation of harm and harming, hurt and suffering. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "We are here to awaken from our illusion of separateness."

So thank you for joining me today as we begin our investigation of the engaged four noble truths with understanding that being aware of, pointing towards, or being with *dukkha*—suffering and dis-ease—is really a quest for knowing, for returning to, and for practicing to gain confidence in wholeness.

Next week, we'll look at the second noble truth, the causes and conditions of *dukkha*, and see how, by focusing more on the systemic causes and conditions, we are guided towards more skillful ways to work with tendencies that have been habitually brought about to bring up hurt and pain and how to deal with that. And in doing so, this gives us confidence to transform through unlearning and relearning. Then in the succeeding weeks, we also touch on how to know

Rev. Keiryu Liên Shutt
Engaging with the Truths of Suffering
Part 1: “The Net of Wholeness”
April 3, 2021



agency, how that's also inherent in any moment of suffering. And lastly, how the four noble truths gives us clear practices to enact individual and collective agency skillfully.

This week, before you join me again, I want to invite you to return to a visceral body or breath point, just like we did in that meditation, the brief reflection, as a sense of returning to wholeness, whenever you remember it, and whenever you're mindful of this, or whenever you need it. When things feel full and overwhelming just return to that, know that it's with you and you can access it anytime. So thank you for your attention. I look forward to connecting with you and wholeness again next week.