The Four Noble Truths Part 1

A Talk by Gelek Rimpoche

Adapted from The Four Noble Truths*, a Jewel Heart Publication*

We are here to talk about the Four Noble Truths:

1. Suffering
2. The Cause of Suffering
3. The Cessation of Suffering (Nirvana)
4. The Path

The Four Noble Truths are the basis of Buddha's teaching. Maitreya Buddha, the future Buddha of Love, talks about the purpose of the Four Noble Truths. The purpose of the First Noble Truth is to recognize our suffering. The purpose of the second is to learn not to entertain, develop, or grow the causes of suffering. The third and fourth truths are the positive aspects. The purpose of the Third Noble Truth is to attain cessation of suffering. The purpose of the fourth is to show you how to practice.
The first and second truths are the negative aspect of the Four Noble Truths. One brings the other as a negative consequence. The cause of suffering brings about suffering itself—pain, a life in *samsara* [the world of suffering or cyclic existence]. Maitreya gives the example of helping someone who is sick: First, you need to diagnose what is wrong, and second, you have to treat or get rid of the cause of that particular misery. Recognizing suffering and then looking at where it comes from, seeing its cause, are the first two noble truths.

The First Noble Truth

We actually don't need much introduction to the First Noble Truth, suffering. We are all experts in that! The First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, is the absolute reality of our lives. We have mental suffering, physical suffering, and lots of emotional pains,

plenty of them. The truth of suffering really means four things:

1. Whatever we have accumulated, in the end that accumulation will be exhausted, finished, nothing left. We keep on collecting money, money, money, and in the end it all goes, honestly!

2. The end of life, the end of birth, is death. No matter how much we run around trying to look handsome, beautiful, young, whatever we do by losing weight and so on, the end is death, nothing but death.

3. We enjoy our companions, yet the end of company or togetherness is separation.

4. When you go higher, you can become great and be well known, but at the end of that, you have to come down. If you climb a tree, how high can you climb? In the end you have to come down. You can't climb and sit up there all the time: one day you will fall down. That is the truth of reality that Buddha discovered, which is totally and absolutely true.

That's why one of the basic Buddhist principles is: *Everything accumulated or created is impermanent*.

Suffering is the truth. It is funny and interesting. Suffering was the truth 2,600 years ago and is still true today. No matter what we do today, no matter how wonderful we try to make our life, at the end of the best, or at the deep bottom-line of the best, there is suffering.

We have so much dissatisfaction in our lives. We are dissatisfied with our achievements and with everything else. This dissatisfaction really brings pain into our lives, in addition to the usual pain and misery of sickness and aging. Every single person, even those in their twenties, always thinks, "I am getting too old, too chubby," and so forth. Then later it increases into worrying about getting wrinkles, gray hair, and so on. We build that pain within us. The true reality of aging will catch up with you when you are in your sixties, at my age, but the suffering begins even in our twenties. That is why we always put on make-up!

We have tremendous mental and emotional pains. We are very emotional, extremely emotional. Likes and dislikes affect us tremendously, and we show it very clearly. We are completely deprived of joy. That is why we pray for *the joy that has never known suffering.* We have never had such joy. That is the First Noble Truth of Buddha.

Why think about suffering?

The purpose of pointing out the truth of suffering is *not* to threaten us or to develop fear within us, but to recognize what is happening to us. Recognizing the situation doesn't give any additional suffering at all; you are just not fooling your self any longer. Often, when we experience a change of feelings, we consider that as joy, but in reality, it is suffering. That is how we fool ourselves. Recognizing suffering as suffering prevents us from getting fooled.

Further, by recognizing it, we begin to see how it happens. Where do these sufferings come from? Think about it. People will give you all kinds of answers. Some will say, "I can do nothing. It is God's will." I don't think people will actually say that God has given them suffering, but when you pin that argument down, it almost comes to that point. Some other people, when faced with suffering, will say, "Oh, it is my karma."

The Key to Our Spiritual Practice

If someone tells you, "You are born with suffering, and you have to die with suffering," it is total B.S. There is no bigger B.S than that. Why do you have to die with suffering? The very purpose of the great life that we have today is to make sure that we do not have to die with suffering. That is the first challenge in our spiritual path: what can I do for myself? Then, what can I do for my fellow human beings? It is almost what President Kennedy said, "Don't ask what your fellow human beings can do for you; ask what you can do for your fellow human beings."

This is the challenge and also the key to our spiritual practice. Whether we are going to have a genuine spiritual practice or not depends completely on this. If this doesn't move us, everything else will be just showbiz. Within the showbiz you may think it is very deep and serious, but you can fool yourself with the whole thing. I am not saying that that is what we are doing, but I am warning you. It is possible that you may be fooling yourself.

The fundamental basis for spiritual development is recognizing suffering and

knowing that there is something you can do about it. That will be the basis for the individual's spiritual path. The spiritual path is very individualized. We have groups, religious traditions, centers, and monasteries, but the development is very much up to each individual.

The First Step on the Path

The individual process begins right here: what can I do to get out of my own suffering? What can I do for my family? We talk a lot about compassion and great compassion, about the special mind called *bodhimind*, but the bottom-line question is: what can I do for myself? Until the individual raises this question seriously, everything else is flying in the air, not grounded. It doesn't matter whether you consider yourself a practicing spiritual person for twenty years, thirty years, or one hundred years—your whole life! You are just flying. You are not grounded. Even if by name your practice is called Vajrayana or Mahayana, everything becomes superficial, because the individual person is not grounded. Take it from me. To borrow the senior Bush's words: "Read my lips." Honestly, that's the reality.

Why? This is funny. In one way, we haven't suffered enough. That's why we aren't grounded properly. Human life is such that although we have suffering all the time, we always have something else to balance the suffering. Because we created positive and negative karma all mixed together, we get mixed results. What does that do? It prolongs the life of our suffering, because we don't get fed up enough, don't recognize enough, and don't come to the proper decision to renounce suffering. We do get pain and recognize that, but then we also get into the so-called picnic spots, which we often find in samsara. At every corner we turn, there is suffering and then there are picnic spots. We get that mixed message all the time. This is samsara's trick to prolong its own life. It is actually our own trick to keep tripping our selves up. If suffering were constant, we wouldn't like it. We would do anything to get rid of it. We would leave no stone unturned! But then there is always another picnic spot, and we enjoy ourselves a little bit there.

Actually, this pattern itself brings us more suffering and pain, since these very

picnic spots always turn out to be less comfortable and enjoyable than we expected. Something is always wrong, and it is never fully satisfying. At first it is great, the second time is not that good, and the third time it is even worse. But we fall for samsara's trick again and again and again. We don't put enough efforts into getting out of samsara entirely. We are not convinced enough that it is so bad. Whenever we suffer, there is also a picnic spot in sight somewhere.

Now, look again at the purpose of Buddha saying, "Know suffering." If we don't know, we won't have enough enthusiasm, enough encouragement. We know there is something called pain and suffering, but we are not completely convinced that it is so bad. We just hope that there will be another picnic spot near by, not realizing that the picnic spot itself will change into suffering. We only realize something when dissatisfaction hits us, and then we think something went wrong. "What happened? That's not what I remember! It has turned into something else!" Therefore the point is to know suffering.

Right now we have suffering, but we don't really know it. When we actually know it, we will be convinced enough to do something to become free of it. That is the purpose of the First Noble Truth: knowing suffering. Once you begin to know it, you apply wisdom and that is what cuts the root of suffering.

The fundamental basis for building the spiritual path within us really lies here. The purpose of learning about the truth of suffering, the First Noble Truth, is not to suffer more, but to understand suffering, to know it. Doing so will make you dislike the situation as it is and look for a solution. That dislike has to be solid, not just an emotional experience. When you have that, you are building a solid spiritual foundation. That is the purpose of the First Noble Truth.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION/MEDITATION

1. How have I experienced "samsara's trick to prolong its own life"?
2. What is *the joy that has never known suffering*?