

MindFIT Podcast – Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path Transcript

Lauren Brown:

Hi, and welcome to the University of Toronto's MindFIT Lecture Series. On this podcast, we discuss the Buddhist roots of mindfulness along with current issues in mindfulness and yoga. My name is Lauren Brown and I'm the Mindfulness Meditation and Yoga Program Coordinator for the Division of Student Life. Thank you for listening.

Chloe:

Okay, welcome everyone to today's session. Before we begin, I'd like to begin with a land acknowledgement. I'd like to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and Mississauga of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still home to many indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Dr. Henry Shu is a professor in the Chinese Buddhist studies at Emmanuel College of Victoria University, University of Toronto. His area of research specialization lies in Buddha nature and he has focused his studies on Buddhism in India, China, and Tibet. Other research interests include contemporary engaged Buddhist movements and Buddhism in Canada and Western classical music. In this short lecture, we will explore how mindfulness is understood in the Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist approach to mindfulness practice and the spiritual goals of the spiritual contemplation. As we begin the lecture today, I ask that you wait until the question period at the end of the lecture, and now I'll pass the microphone over to Dr. Shu. So thank you so much for being here, everyone, I hope you enjoy today's talk.

Dr. Henry Shu:

Thank you Chloe, and hello everyone. Thank you for joining us today. The topic that I was invited to present today is on the Vulnerable Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. I tend to see that it is mostly about the Vulnerable Truths because I'm seeing that the Noble Eightfold Path is part of the Vulnerable Truths, so it is embedded within the Vulnerable Truths. I'll also touch upon the Noble Eightfold Path, but I think mainly I'll be introducing the Vulnerable Truths this evening. I hope that in some ways we can also relate our understanding of the Vulnerable Truths to mindfulness practice in the West, whether or not you are practicing Buddhism.

Okay, so well the Vulnerable Truths is... I found it a bit difficult for me to prepare for this lecture because the Vulnerable Truths are considered to be something very, very basic to Buddhism. So basic that I began to wonder if I am underestimating the significance of the Vulnerable Truths to our understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. On the other hand, are we over relying on the Vulnerable Truths as the schema to understand the teachings of the Buddha?

So the reason that I'm saying this is that the Vulnerable Truths have been understood as the most foundational teachings of the Buddha. Open up any scholarly works that introduce us to the Buddhist philosophy or the Buddhist traditions, you'll find that they usually begin with the life stories of the Buddha. Then probably the second chapter of the book is on the Vulnerable Truths. I will guarantee you that 100% of the time, if you read any scholarly works on Buddhism, you'll find something like that. Even if we are reading a single chapter on Buddhism in the world religions books, you'll also find the same introduction with what that begins with the life stories of the Buddha, telling us who the Buddha was and the next thing that we know will be the Vulnerable Truths.

It is not just within the Western academia that we find this kind of treatment. In some Buddhist traditions, especially in the Theravada tradition in Southeast Asia, there is also a very widespread belief that the Vulnerable Truths were the very first teaching that Buddha ever gave. It was part of the first sermon that the Buddha gave to his disciples. All these tell us about the importance of the Vulnerable Truths and how the Vulnerable Truths form the foundation of our understanding. I'm including here the Pali and the Sanskrit wordings of the Vulnerable Truths, Cattāri ariyasaccāni in Pali or in Sanskrit, Catvāri āryasatyāni

And I'm not here to scare you with these foreign terms, but I'm going to examine different parts of the terms here in Pali or probably in Sanskrit too, to help us understand what are the Vulnerable Truths and how they could be understood probably under a different light. As I mentioned earlier, traditionally, the Vulnerable Truths are believed to be the first teachings ever given by the Buddha. Whether or not this is truly the case, you can tell that to the Buddhist practitioners, they form the very essence of the Buddha's teachings. Some scholars in the modern times have questioned these traditional claim that the vulnerable truth formed this very first sermon that the Buddha gave, by way of examining the language used in this part of the sutra of the scripture that I'm going to read with you very soon. They are detecting different ways of language used that led them to believe that this part of the teaching on the Vulnerable Truths were very likely introduced much later on, so likely in a fifth century or so.

But we are not sure, of course, whether these were actually the first teachings of the Buddha. The reason that I'm saying this is to caution us to be critical about claims that the Vulnerable Truths are truly the most important or the most foundational teachings of the Buddha, in such a way that we don't want to generalize the Vulnerable Truths as a philosophical outlook on life. There are many ways that we could be misled by that kind of philosophical understandings about the Vulnerable Truths, and I'll also talk about them. So as you can see here, Noble Truth in Pali is ariya-sacca. Okay? Ariya means noble or the noble ones, the noble persons. Sacca means either truth or reality. The same goes for the Sanskrit in ariya and sacca. Noble Truth is not a bad translation, and indeed it has become somewhat like a standard to translate this as the Noble Truth in English.

There are also other ways that we can play around with these words in their original Pali or Sanskrit and come up with a slightly different way of understanding. The following point is about ariya sacca. Okay, can you click one more time? Yes. So it could be understood as the Noble Truth, but here as you can also see, sacca is not just about the truth but also reality. And Ariya refers not only to the adjective noble, but it could also be used as a noun referring to the noble ones. Who are the noble ones? Well, supposedly those who have realized enlightenment, those who have awakened to the reality. Noble

Truth here can therefore be also understood as the true reality for the spiritually and nobled. How is it different from understanding this as the Noble Truth? Well, it is different in a way that we don't need to limit ourselves to understand that these four teachings as a philosophical statement about the truth of our existence or about the world. We can instead also understand it as a reality as experienced by those who have awakened to enlightenment.

True reality for the noble ones, true reality for the spiritually and nobled. That also means that the Vulnerable Truths are not just theories about our existence, they are actually experiences that we can attain, experiences that we can all personally realized and see. That would make the Vulnerable Truths more meaningful for all of us here, instead of just seeing the Vulnerable Truths as a dogma, as a general description about how the world is and seeing this Buddhist philosophy in a pessimistic way. It can sound very pessimistic as we go on to talk about the Vulnerable Truths one by one, but if we open ourselves to the possibilities that it could actually be understood as a reality seen by the spiritually and nobled, that's a really different story.

The following slide please, so this Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta which means the scripture, that the discourse, I should say, the discourse of setting in motion the will of the dharma is believed by the Theravada tradition as the very first sermon, the very first discourse that the Buddha gave. Okay, so what you are seeing here is a list of the topics covered in this discourse. It begins with the avoidance of the two extremes of indulgence in central desire and self modification. The Buddhist idea of the middle way not to go into extremes of permanence and annihilation, not to indulge ourselves in either central desire or to lead a very extreme form of aesthetic spiritual life to the extreme of self modification. It is the middle way that the Buddha claims to have found the path to enlightenment.

Then after that, the Vulnerable Truths were introduced and after the Vulnerable Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, which is actually from my understanding what comprises the fourth Noble Truth. Then there were further insights about the Vulnerable Truths. It goes on to talk about the state of liberation, which is Nirvana released from samsara, opening the dharma eye in a sense that one begins to truly see the reality through these teachings, through the practice of these teachings. At the very end, there is a very Indian way of expecting how the teachings will be transmitted and spread and be available to everyone down the generations. The way that they talk about this is to set the wheel of dharma in motion. That's the basic content of this discourse. The following slides, we will read the section on the Vulnerable Truths as stated in this sutta. Next slide please.

This is a translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi from the discourse that I just introduced to you. It is this section that you'll find the Vulnerable Truths. It reads like this. "Now this Bhikkus, which means monks, now this is the Noble Truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. Union with what is displeasing is suffering. Separation from what is pleasing is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering." In brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. This is the first Noble Truth. The second truth, now this is the Noble Truth of the origin of suffering. It is craving, which leads to rebecoming, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there that is craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, craving for this becoming. Okay, I'll read the rest and then I'll talk about our ways of understanding this.

The third truth, now this is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it. The last truth is a Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. It is this Noble Eightfold Path that is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. So if you take a look at the next slide, you'll find that in brief. What we are seeing here forms around the concept of dukkha, which is usually translated into English as suffering.

So in brief, the first truth, it's about the encompassing the various forms of dukkha or suffering, grows a subtle physical or mental that we are all subject to. The second truth is about the origination of dukkha, the cause of our suffering, which is craving. The third truth promises that there could be the cessation of the dukkha. There is a state which we can all reach where there is no more dukkha by what? By the cessation of craving. And lastly, it is about the way or the path that leads to this cessation.

So one more slide please. The next slide. So to generalize all these points that we come across, it means that the dukkha suffering is to be understood. Your origination of dukkha is to be abandoned. The cessation of dukkha is something that we should realize. And the path to the realization of the cessation of dukkha is to be cultivated or developed. So it's not too difficult to understand at all. But what may be tricky around the understanding is how do we understand suffering? What exactly is suffering or dukkha?

And the other tricky thing is that if you look at this schema of the teaching here, you cannot help but wonder if this is a form of pessimism. Does this suggest that we should not have any desire or craving whatsoever so that we can minimize any potential suffering that we can generate for ourselves? But if that were the case, if we generalize and philosophies the teachings in this direction, I think what it implicitly suggests is that we should try not to do anything, not to have any hope, not to have any craving and desire so that we can minimize our suffering.

It's pessimistic in a way that it is also very individualistic. It is all about our concern for our own potential sufferings in the future, to the point that we are not really asking about our contribution to the society, what we could do to contribute to others sufferings or to contribute to the alleviation of the suffering of others. It is all about this concern over one's own suffering, so that we better not to have any craving and desire whatsoever.

And then if you go a step even further, you may also critically ask, is your or our desire to attain this cessation of suffering itself a form of craving? You can imagine that there were Buddhist monks and nuns who renounced their families and joined the Buddhist community, the monastic community, and dedicated the rest of their lives in the pursuit of liberation. Is that a form of craving or desire? And would that lead them to suffering or dukkha? So I'm throwing all these questions to you as a way to probably caution us that the Vulnerable Truths should not be understood in such a philosophical way because we can end up creating other philosophical issues that the Vulnerable Truths may suggest. So the following slide, please.

So let's go back to the first Noble Truth and have a better understanding about the term dukkha or suffering. So even though it is a standard way of the translation of the word dukkha, and it is also a very correct literal way of translation, but when we talk about suffering in English, we have a rather different idea about suffering than the Indian, especially 2,500 years ago when they refer to their word dukkha. I think if we go back to the scriptures, we can safely assume that the Buddha might have something very different in mind when he talked about dukkha. So linguistically, when we analyze different parts of this word dukkha in Sanskrit, we can come up with an image somewhat like the image that you are seeing here. It is a wheel with a hole, the axle that goes through it. So the term dukkha would suggest the image of an axle not fitting properly into the hole so that as the wheel turn, it causes all kinds of difficulties and disharmony, friction, damages and so on.

So it therefore suggests a sense of uneasiness and being uncomfortable. That would be what the term would mean to the Buddha when he talked about this. So what kind of axle that is not fitting properly into his whole. I think what is being suggested here is that the way the world appears to us is not the same as how the world really is. So we have all kinds of mental projections around ourselves. We see the world and ourselves in a very specific way. We are accustomed to believing in the phenomena or in ourselves in a very specific way, but that way of seeing the world may not exactly be how the world actually is. So there is the disharmony between the version of the world in our mind and how the world actually is. So how things appear to us is one thing and how it actually is, is quite another.

So when the two are not in sync, we are subject to all kinds of disappointments. Sufferings will be the result of this disappointment. So we are subject to that kind of unsatisfactoriness, disillusionment, anxiety, pain and so on and so on as suggested here. Okay, so the next slide. So what the Buddha intended may not be the kind of suffering that we have in mind, but rather it could relate ourselves to all kinds of emotional states being anguish, stressful, afflicted, sorrow, despair, discomfort, and so on. And why do we have these state of mind? Well, simply because of the misalignment between what we expect and how things truly are.

And I think from a more Buddhist religious way of speaking, what is really problematic is that this dukkha or suffering is not limited within this life. It will go on. It will following our consciousness to our next life. So there is the belief of rebirth within Buddhism. So that means until we attain liberation from Samsara, we are bound by that kind of suffering, no matter how many lifetime we are undergoing this cycle of living and dying. So this is according to the life stories of the Buddha. This is the motivation for the Buddha to renounce his life as a prince in the palace and to search for the path to be liberated from this endless cycles of suffering. I'm including this line in a way to compare the understanding of suffering in the West. So from a medical perspective, suffering can be defined as a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person.

It can occur in relation to any aspect of the person in the realm of his social role, his group identification, his relation with self or body or in relation to a family or relation with a personal or transcendental source of meaning. Suffering never affects only one part of a person, but if it affects the whole being, physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social aspects. So it's a western definition of a term. I think there may be similarities that we can see here that suffering impacts us in our understanding of the intactness of ourself. And that is also one of the reasons why we suffer. The moment when we realize

that our intactness is damaged, the image of ourself is under threat. That would be one of the ways that we feel we are suffering.

My wife gave my teenage son a haircut last night. It was a rather bad haircut, I have to say, and he wasn't happy about that. And you can imagine that our outlook as a teenager, as you can imagine, his age around 15, 16, image is very important. It is part of how he imagines himself. It is his intactness of his own image under threat. So he wasn't happy about that, he was "suffering", not happy about that. But that's only one of the many examples that we can suffer throughout different times of our life. Different times of the day we can find ourselves suffering as well. And again, it is because of the misalignment between what we expect and how things turn out to be. Next slide please.

Pain. I'm pointing out something that may be related to a management around our suffering. Pain is unavoidable, whether it is physical pain or psychological pain, it is unavoidable. It makes us human that way. If you step on a nail and you don't feel the physical pain, if you put your hand into the fire and if you don't feel that pain, if someone you love so much, pass away, and if you don't feel that psychological emotional pain, you are not human. You are a very dangerous person. It is a medical condition if you don't interpret that sensation as pain when you are harmed, when you are hurt. So pain in that sense is unavoidable. Even the Buddha experienced extreme back pain in his late years. So it is not something avoidable, but suffering is optional. How you take that pain would transform your experience around that. So I'm making a distinction between pain and suffering. The practice of Buddhism is not a way to avoid pain, but to minimize the unnecessary imaginative suffering. I'm using the word imaginative because it is our reaction to pain that conjures up all kinds of suffering that we experience.

So the following slide please. There is the arrow Sutta, a discourse on the arrow that would illustrate this point very well. So let me read that through and then we can have a discussion around this. Miles and uninstructed run-of-the-mill person. So an ordinary person feels feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. A well instructed disciple of the noble ones also feels feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, feelings of neither pleasures nor pain. So what difference, what distinction, what distinguishing factor is there between the well instructed disciple of the noble ones and the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person? So it is very clear that even if you are a well instructed disciple, even if you are the noble person, if you have realized enlightenment, you still have feelings of pleasure, pains and feelings of neither pleasure nor pain.

It makes you human that way. So what's the difference between an ordinary uninstructed person and someone who has spent their lives cultivating in this spiritual pursuit? The Buddha answered, "When touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person sorrows, grieves and laments beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical and mental, just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow. And right afterward, were to shoot him with another one so that he would feel the pains of two arrows." So pain is like the first arrow here, and suffering is the second arrow. So the practice of Buddhism, the whole point about this Vulnerable Truths is not to avoid pain in life. So I'm suggesting that we should not have a very pessimistic, unmotivated way of life just to minimize our pain. That's not the point.

The is to be able to transform our mind so that we have a better way to cope with the pain, to understand the nature of the pain so that we won't be hit by the second arrow, which is all kinds of sufferings we develop around the pain. And the way we develop around the pain, it's somewhat like what we suggested earlier about the axle not fitting into the hole properly. So we are not accepting the facts or the reality about what happened. And then we try to struggle through all these with sorrows, greaves, laments, beat our breast, becoming distraught. So that will be the suffering dukkha, the first Noble Truth talks out. Next slide please.

The second Noble Truth is about the causes of suffering, the origin or the origination of our suffering. Why we suffer. So for those of you who may be coming from a monotheistic background, Buddhism is not a religion that believes in any higher deity of any sort. There is no one punishing us that makes us suffer. So the understanding here is that we suffer because of our own mistakes, so to speak. So we lead ourselves into different states of suffering. Okay? And mind you, we are talking about suffering but not pain. Am not saying that if you walk outside and hit by the car and severely injured that you should be responsible for the pain. I'm not saying that. I'm saying that we should be responsible for our dukkha suffering.

And what kind of craving? The second truth states that the cause of suffering is craving. What kind of craving? Well, broadly speaking, craving for sensual pleasures. Craving for being and craving for non-existence. Which means that we crave for the continual existence of something that we like. That's a second point here. Craving for being. And we crave for the disappearance of something or someone we don't like craving, for non-existence. We are often stretched by these two desires. And why would we have that craving? Well, it is because of the views that we hold.

So the second point here, what are views or detailed, drishti in the Indian language? Well, they are believes theories, worldviews, and sometimes are religious teachings or dogmas, so one of the most common views that we have is that we have a self, a distinguished independent self that makes me who I am. That this self is eternal and permanent. The intactness of this self is of primal importance. This is a view that we all share. We may not spell that out, but this is something that we hold so tightly in our mind. And because of this belief in the self, in this ego, in this individual existence, we are investing so much energy to make sure that we can please this sense of self by craving for being, craving for non-existence or craving for sensual pleasures.

So in a way that we are blinded by our sensual pleasures and forget to listen to our mind or to realize what we are truly about. The true nature of the true nature of our being, all of this could be sidetracked because of our craving for sensual pleasures or being or non-existence. In extreme cases, there would also be someone who committed suicide to crave for non-existence, sometimes because suffering or pain has become unbearable. But you can also tell that this craving for non-existence is also built around this intactness of the self that we imagine we possess. What we do not realize from the Buddhist perspective is that self keeps changing. We are not the same me as we were like 10 years ago, 15 years ago, or even two months ago, two seconds ago. We are a dynamic organic being that our physical form and our mentalities are changing all the time.

But we fool ourselves in believing that there is something unchanging and permanent about us and we act in ways to protect this imagined self so that we have those kinds of cravings. Next slide please. I'll speed up a bit so that I can leave some time for questions. There are also teachings within Buddhism that is also very well known in a form of what they call the 12 lengths of dependent origination. So dependent origination is a Buddhist version of causality. How one thing lead to the origination of another. So how this idea of how cause and effect takes place. But in this teaching of the 12 length of dependent origination, I think the concern here is not just about how one physical form leads to the arising of another physical existence.

So much like what we study in chemistry, how different atoms put together would form another molecule. It's not that kind of physical understanding, but more so in a mental or psychological way. The very basis of all this is ignorance, our lack of understanding about the reality. And then it leads to the formation of a way that our unconscious works. So comic formations here, it's somewhat like what western psychology would term as the unconscious. And then this unconscious would shape our ways of perceiving the world and ourselves, which is consciousness and particularly in terms of name and form, how we see our own existence through our own form and our own labels, our own names.

And that would influence the formation of our sense organs, which in turn influenced the way we make connection or contact with the external world. And after that contact we develop feelings or sensations, maybe pleasant feelings or unpleasant feelings and so on. And that leads to craving. We crave for the pleasant feelings. We also crave for the cessation of the unpleasant feelings. And we may develop something more than craving, which is grasping. And so we won't let go of that kind of craving and that leads to becoming. This is the way that we push forward our self-identity. The cravings, the grasping defines who we are in a certain way. We form a habitual tendency to understand the world in a particular light. So that too is something that explains the psychology behind all these second Noble Truth. And then birth and old age, it's something that suggests that we go through this kind of cycle over and over and over until we attain enlightenment.

So this is something that goes along with us. If you believe in rebirth or reincarnation, this is an endless cycle. So next slide please. The vulnerable truth promises that there could be an end to this cycle. The word used here is extinction, *nirodha*, but extension of what. There could be different forms of understanding, but classically speaking, it is the extension of the fuel that allows the fires to continue to burn. So within the Buddhist context, fires usually describe our attachment, hatred and delusion. Our craving is the fuel that provides the fire, what continues to burn. So when the fires burn, the fires of attachment, hatred and delusion burns, we suffer as a result. So it's not a fire that would burn other people, other beings. There may be, what's the term, casualties around what we do. But primarily the fires burn our own mind. It burns us. So extinction or cessation here refers to a stage known as Nirvana.

It is a state when the fires are extinguished, disrupted, when we are no longer defiled by our own attachments. So what is said here is that when one who has destroyed these fires dies, it is believed that the person cannot be reborn. And so it is totally beyond the remaining fires of birth, aging and death. So the idea of liberation from *samsara*, one no longer takes part in the cycle of reincarnation or the *samsara*. And how is this possible? How to attain this cessation of suffering? Next slide please. From the Buddhist perspective, that would comprise the fourth Noble Truth, which is the path.

What kind of path? It lays out this path known as the Noble Eightfold Path in terms of the right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. It covers a wide range of our activities, right view. It is interesting that the word view is used, it is not about right knowledge, it is not about right understanding, but right view. What view means seeing. Right way of seeing how things truly are. So it is believed to be something intuitive that we don't need any analysis. And when we cultivate ourselves in a mature way, what appears to us and how things truly are, would align themselves so they become one. And so that we will not create unnecessary dukkha for ourselves. But the Noble Eightfold Path also lays out a way to lead our life. Right intention, right speech. How do we address one another? How do we engage ourselves in a conversation with one another? Right action. Right intention would actually mean that we minimize our intention to do something unwholesome or bad, and at the same time, we should intend to do something wholesome.

Something that contribute to our state of liberation, something that is good for other people. So that would be the right intention and with right intention, it also means that we should minimize our attachment to the elusory selfhood. So from this on you can see other aspects about right speech, right action, and right livelihood. In our daily lives interacting with other people, how do we act, speak, how do we make a living? All of these would have a consequence on our spiritual cultivation and they also reflect our intention. And that intention reflects how we view ourselves and the world.

The last three items here about effort, mindfulness, and concentration are related to meditation. How to use the right effort in our spiritual cultivation. Right mindfulness. Again, we are using the word mindfulness here, but not the kind of mindfulness that has become commercialized in the West. It is not mindfulness, but right mindfulness. So in this aspect, mindfulness means being able to keep in mind the teachings of the Buddha about the reality. And the last one here, right concentration, is about meditative states, how to remain in a state of concentration so that our mind can be personally experienced in this true nature. A state of mind that is no longer making a distinction between what we expect and how things truly are, but a state of mind that intuitively experiences the reality.

Speaker 4:

Thank you everyone for being her and on behalf of MindFIT, the Multi-Faith Center and the Division of Student Life at U of T, I want to thank Professor Shu and all of you for being here tonight. Our lecture next Monday will be a community conversation on spirituality, mindfulness, and yoga. And one of Henry's colleagues from Emmanuel College will be joined on us, Dr. Jennifer Bright. Hela has popped a little link in the chat. We'd love to hear from you and your feedback and we will follow up with an email for folks who were here this evening and provide some further information. So thank you so much.

Dr. Henry Shu:

Thank you. Lovely to have you all here. Thank you for your time, being here. Thank you.

Lauren Brown:

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On behalf of Mind Fit, the Multi-Faith Center and the Division of Student Life at the University of Toronto. Thank you for listening.