

PATH GOING NOW-HERE

"Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" -- The Red Queen to Alice, in THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, by Lewis Carroll

"I, too, use concepts, but I am not fooled thereby." -- Namgyal Rinpoche

I take refuge in the vast intelligence of Universe.

I take refuge in the order and chaos of universal law.

I take refuge in the interconnectedness of all manifestation.

At a small gathering with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Victoria nearly 20 years ago, he was asked to give a talk on Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, the Three Refuges, in some traditions referred to as The Three Jewels. He arrived late by helicopter from Vancouver, was visibly tired (and dare to say it, stressed) after speaking to a large crowd in BC Place Stadium that morning, and he had a very short time with us before he had to helicopter back to Vancouver for an evening reception in his honour.

He picked up a red apple on the table in front of him and took a big bite. He chewed it, swallowed, looked out at us and smiled. A big, open, happy smile. "First of all," he said, "forget about Buddha. You have no chance of understanding Buddha. For you, there is only Dharma. Study and practice of Dharma. Then, after many years you may begin to understand Sangha. When you have spent many more years exploring what is Sangha, then, maybe Buddha! Any questions?"

Study and practice of Dharma. What does that mean? First, let's examine the word "study." Just hearing that word is usually enough to make anyone who went to school here break out in spots! But it's always interesting to go past assumptions about what we think we know. "Study" is not a hard word, but it comes with so many projections that perhaps heading to the dictionary might be interesting.

Webster's says: "the acquiring of knowledge, especially from books; a close and prolonged process of observation, inquiry and thought; to pay careful attention to." The first definition is very specific to our culture. At the time of the Buddha, it would have said ". . . by listening to the teachings."

Twenty years from now, it might say ". . . by google-ing." Nevertheless, there is the idea of study having to do with conceptual learning, through

words. Yes? The second definition seems to imply a different sort of process. "Close and prolonged process of observation," followed by "inquiry" (which is another word for question) and only then, "thought." It sounds like a good recipe for preventing premature conclusions, doesn't it? The final definition speaks of "careful attention," which sounds a little more subtle and refined than the word "observation" does, and also, in the curious way my mind works, implies something a little more personal, less abstract. When we are careful, there is a quality of the heart involved, n'est-ce pas?

In two of the traditional schools of the Tibetan-flavoured Buddhadharma, this process is outlined as: read (or listen to) the teachings, ponder and ask questions until you are at ease with the concepts, then meditate -- which is to say, go beyond words and concepts.

So to initiate this approach tonight, let's examine the first teachings given by the historical Buddha. These are called the First Turning of the Wheel (of Dharma.) Does anyone know what this refers to?

The Four Noble Truths. Four, because in an oral tradition, most of the teaching was organized and given as a list, to help people remember. Noble in this context doesn't mean "having to do with the aristocracy," but rather is a translation of the Pali word *ariya*, which the Buddha used as a synonym for enlightened, or liberated. So we have four concepts that are true from an awakened point of view. There are four words in Pali which summarize them. Does anyone remember (or want to guess) the first?

Dukkha is the first, and the full statement translates as "all compounded things are in a state of struggle." Older translations use the English word "suffering" for *dukkha*, and certainly what we mean by "suffering" is definitely included. But that definition can allow us to squirm away from the fact that even when we are not actively suffering (not like those others in the war zone, those whose children are starving, those who have incurable illnesses,) even when we consider our lives to be going very well, and we feel happy and fulfilled, the struggle is still there.

We worry that good things can't last; we constantly manipulate and negotiate to maintain the happiness; we have to overcome the boredom that sets in when we get used to one kind of good life, and start hankering after something else. No doubt you know how this goes, from your own experience. Observing this truth at work in the world isn't hard, if we are honest, as we look at our own situation and that of most others, the constant struggle is pretty obvious. Trouble is, we also carry a big cultural load of denial around this obvious fact of life, and this leads us into

distraction after distraction as we try to convince ourselves that we can manufacture a state of permanent happiness in a changing world.

The most basic *dukkha* is the most terrifying: your body is alive, and it is not going to stay that way. Shakymuni's quest for liberation began with inquiry into the inevitability of old age, sickness and death. As everyone's must sooner or later.

Which brings us to the second Noble Truth, that struggle has a cause. Do you know the Pali word for this? *Tanha*, that's right. It literally means "thirst," but is usually translated as craving, or clinging, or grasping. Go and listen to K. D. Lang's song "Constant Craving." She nails it, perfectly!

The third Noble Truth is logical. Anything that is caused will stop if the cause is removed. The word *nirodha* means "cessation" -- of the *tanha*. Conceptually, we've now reached a dead end. Even if we **agree** with all of this, we are really no further ahead. We may try our best to force ourselves to stop clinging, but most of it is built in; it is in our bodies, our minds, it colours our emotional life, affects what we choose to eat, read, listen to, watch, fall in love with.

When we don't get what we want, we struggle. When we have too much of what we don't want, we struggle. When we're confused about which is which, we struggle. We don't want to obsess about this or that, but we can't help ourselves. We know it's unhealthy to devour a litre of ice cream, but we do it in spite of ourselves. If it wasn't so bloody painful, it would be hilarious. Not.

When we come to the fourth Noble Truth, called *Magga*, which means "path" -- to the cessation of struggle -- we must enter the realm of practice. Study alone, in whatever sense we understand the word, is not enough to bring about the end of the struggle. Only by putting the principles of this truth, called by the Buddha The Eightfold Noble Path, into daily experiment can we discover for ourselves that the process works. This is a map, if you will, a guide for navigating safely and surely through our own landscape of blind and not-so-blind preferences.

We'll talk about this list of eight next week. Tonight, all there is time for is consideration of one word. It is a most important word, however, and it prefixes each of the principles. The word *samma*. Our English word "sum" comes from this root and indicates the correct meaning of "total," or "complete." Most translations use the word "right," which doesn't convey the sense of all-inclusiveness and integration. "Right," because of the

conditioning most of us have had, also seems to imply a kind of moral absolute, opposed by some equal-and-opposite "wrong." Nothing could be further from the sense of "samma." In totality, there are no opposites, an all-encompassing whole.

Here's your homework: see how successful you can be spending the week having a "samma" life. Not just your point of view, but everyone else's too. Not just your happiness, but the happiness of all beings. Just being willing to try this initiates change, helps us to begin to see through the lens of awakened mind.