

Yesterday I told you about Ājñāta-Kaundinya, one of the five earliest disciples¹ of Buddha. As I told you, when Buddha gave up the practice of asceticism, they continued practicing asceticism at the Deer Park. After Buddha attained enlightenment, he came to the Deer Park. At that time he told them about the four noble truths, *dāna-prajñā-pāramitā*, and *shīla-prajñā-pāramitā*. Instead of saying you will attain enlightenment if you practice *shīla-pāramitā*, he said you will have a good future life. This means that, at that time, he applied some religious understanding of the common people of India when he taught his own teaching. According to Buddhism, you practice precepts, not to have a good future life, but because we attain enlightenment in this life. This is actually Buddha's teaching.

I think it is better for us to study more about what Buddha taught here about the four noble truths and eight holy paths. The four noble truths are suffering, the cause of suffering, the way to attain liberation from suffering, and nirvāna. According to Buddha's teaching, this world is full of suffering. But in the Mahāyāna teaching which developed from these four noble truths and eight holy paths, this world is the world where we find realization or nirvana within each self. According to the Mahāyāna, this world is not the world of suffering, but according to the Hinayāna, or according to the teaching which Buddha told for the first time to the five disciples, this world is full of suffering.

Actually, this world is full of suffering. Suffering and our life coexist. Where there's life, there's suffering. Suffering and life are synonymous. This teaching is very important, because when you think you have no problem, that is the biggest problem. You know, at first you will have a stomachache, but when your stomach is worse, you have no ache. So having suffering is good, but having no suffering is more serious. As long as you have problems, you have a pretty good stomach, a promising stomach. If you have no suffering, you are hopeless. You say you have no suffering, but that is suffering which is the great problem. In this way, Buddha started his teachings.

Student A: Excuse me, Rōshi, what do you mean by suffering?

Suzuki-rōshi: Suffering is various problems. He explains more about it: When you came to this world for the first time, that was suffering; when you came out from the narrow place, you had great suffering. That is one type. And you will become older and older, like me—that

¹ Ājñāta-Kaundinya, Ashvajit (Assaji), Bhadrīka, Mahānāma, and Vāspa.

is suffering too. And you will have sickness—that is suffering. And you die—that is suffering. When you came to this world, you already had a very good future opportunity to die, to be sick, and to become old. So he said human life is a life of suffering.

Student B: Rōshi, if we have suffering and problems and are able to feel some confidence that we can take it, is that still hopeless? Then it doesn't seem to be quite so much of a problem anymore. When it seems that I can't take it, then it seems like an insurmountable problem.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. That was the four sufferings, and there are four more: [1] You will meet someone or have to live with someone who you do not like. [2] You will be separated from someone who you like very much, who you love. It looks like this is very true. You cannot leave someone who you love the most, or you will have to live with someone who you do not like. [3] That you have the five *skandhas* is already suffering. That you have eyes, nose, mouth, and ears, that you can think, feel, and have some idea, that you can know who Buddha is, is already suffering. What do you think? And [4] you cannot get what you want. This is also true. This is, maybe, a more developed, or advanced, or conclusive understanding, but, in short, we prefer substantial, concrete things rather than for everything to be changing. Everything is changing, but we do not like everything to be changing; we want things to be more substantial and concrete. That is the cause of suffering. So suffering is coexistent with our human life.

That is the first teaching he told the five disciples. It could be a strong teaching. And you cannot deny it, it is very true. And no one can help you, as long as we care for something concrete, something substantial, something more materialistic, when in reality everything is changing, including ourselves. So in this sense we cannot rely on even ourselves. But still he says the only thing you can rely on is you. You exist right now—this is a more advanced way of explaining it. But Buddha says you should rely on yourself because that is the only thing you can rely on. Anyway, the first teaching is that this world is full of suffering.

The next teaching is the cause of suffering. What is the cause of suffering? The cause of suffering is self-centered ideas, the self which thinks everything is constant, including ourselves, and everything is enjoyable, and everything has self-nature, and everything is substantial. Because of this kind of understanding, which has those four elements, we suffer. The way to get out of suffering is the way to attain realization, which is the third truth.

The relationship between the teaching of the cause of suffering and the teaching that we have suffering is that one is cause and the other

is effect. That we have suffering here is the effect, and the cause, or reason, we suffer is that we have in our minds the four elements of eternity, enjoyment, self, and substantiality. So here Buddha has given the teaching of cause and effect.

And what is nirvāna? Nirvāna is well attained when we know this cause and effect. When we know what the reason for suffering is, then we will be free from suffering. That is the Buddha's teaching of the four noble truths.

Student ___: Rōshi, which one of these is the eight-fold path?

Suzuki-rōshi: The eight-fold noble path is the way to attain nirvāna. The first truth is suffering, then the cause of suffering, the way to attain renunciation, and nirvāna. So the eight holy paths is the third truth.

The first of the eight holy paths is right view. Right view is to know cause and effect, to have perfect understanding of cause and effect—how suffering is caused. That is right view—to see "things as it is." When we see things as it is, we will know how we create suffering for ourselves. If you see things as it is, nothing is constant, everything is changing, so everything has no self-nature. So you cannot enjoy your life as you expected. You expected your life to be very enjoyable. But actually, everything's changing. "Oh my, that was not true," you may say.

So when you see things as it is, you have to change your understanding of this life completely. When you change your understanding of life completely, that is nirvāna. There's no problem. The way to attain nirvana is by the eight holy paths, starting from right view, right understanding of our life. To have right understanding is to know cause and effect—what is the cause of suffering, and what is suffering. So starting from right view, we should see things as it is.

In Mahāyāna dharma practice, bodhisattvas have six practices. One is *dāna-prajñā-pāramitā*, to give things, material things and teaching, or to help people. The second is precepts, *[shīla]-prajñā-pāramitā*. The third is to be patient *[kshānti-pāramitā]*, to wait, not limiting ourselves, but extending our practice in two directions, past and future. That is why we say sentient beings are in us (endless?), and our desires are inexhaustible. When we extend our practice, that is the practice of patience. Fourth is the practice of constant effort *[vīrya-pāramitā]*. This practice should [also] be extended in two ways. The fifth is to have good meditation *[dhyāna-pāramitā]*, and the sixth is to have wisdom *[prajñā-pāramitā]*. Those are the bodhisattva's six practices.

In Buddha's first teaching, the first of the eight holy paths, right view, is equivalent to right giving. If you want to help people by giving some teaching or material, you should know whether they want it or not, and you should know what is the most appropriate thing to give and what is the right time to give. This is also right view. If you want to give something, you should not just give as you give some candy to a dog. Even a dog will not take it if he does not want it.

This teaching looks more negative, but what Buddha really meant was more difficult. The other side is the Mahāyāna-like side. And when Mahāyāna teachers become proud of their way of understanding, discriminating it from the Hinayāna, saying, "That is Hinayāna," that attitude is not, according to the great teachers, true Buddhism either. True Buddhism should understand in two ways: right view, which was taught by Buddha or understood by the direct disciples of Buddha, and the Mahāyāna practice of giving and helping others. They have the same quality, they are not different teachings at all. When we understand Buddha's teaching as Buddha's disciples understood, and as Mahāyāna teachers understood, that is the true teaching of Buddha. If Mahāyāna is the very best teaching, it should be that kind of teaching, not the kind which discriminates Hinayāna and Mahāyāna. So actually, those teachings are not only Hinayāna, but also Mahāyāna.

In other scriptures which describe when Buddha told his teaching for the first time to the five disciples, the one called Ashvajit here in the *Lotus Sūtra* is usually called Assaji.

Yesterday I told you that Shāriputra was born near Rājagrha—Ōshajō in Japanese. When Buddha came to Rājagrha with his disciples. Perhaps he had more than five disciples. His son, wife, mother-in-law, and his aunt were all converted to become Buddha's disciples. And some famous teachers converted and joined his order. When Shāriputra saw him, he thought he was a quite different person, not a usual one. And Shāriputra was wise enough to see that he must have a good teacher if he behaved like that while quite a young man. So he asked him, "Who is your teacher?" And the disciple answered, "My teacher is Shākyamuni Buddha." Shāriputra asked, "What, in short, is his teaching?" One version of it is, "Every being comes from its own cause, and when the cause is empty, every being is empty." When the cause is understood to be empty, that is Tao, that is the way. (That is another of the eight holy paths.) My teacher told it to us this way: "Although I am not quite young and I haven't studied Sōtō, in short, his teaching is like this" This is one version.

Another version is cause and effect, or causality, is the source of

various beings. Therefore everything has no self-nature and is empty. So everything comes from its proper cause, and Buddha told us how to destroy the cause of suffering. This version is very similar to the four noble truths and to Mahāyāna teaching, which is the teaching of emptiness. Shāriputra understood Buddha's teaching in a more philosophical and profound way. So this rendering is something like the four noble truths, and at the same time something like the formal teaching of form is emptiness, emptiness is form. It should be like this. Hinayāna and Mahāyāna should not be two different teachings. Some people think, "This is Hinayāna teaching, and this is Mahāyāna teaching," but that is a great mistake. Anyway, he told Ājñāta-Kauṇḍinya and Ashvajit and the other three disciples this kind of teaching.

Q: Maybe this is a problem, maybe not, but if one of the causes of suffering is seeking permanence, not changing, and not accepting the changing world and our changing self, yet isn't there an element of this in the teaching of the way out also, in saying, "Look, here are the four noble truths, unchanging, true, permanent. This is the way it is, you must accept these"?

Suzuki-rōshi: When you discover that kind of teaching which cannot be changed, which is always true, your desires will be at peace by finding something which is true, universal, and eternal. In this sense we say Buddha's teaching is eternal teaching. But it does not mean that something which was said is eternal in the sense that the way he understands things is always true. Buddha himself did not say, "What I said is always true." The other day, Claude [Dalenberg] said that Buddha said, "If you go to the mountain and find some good place to build a building, like Church Creek or the Horse Pasture, after you come back to your monastery, you will tell your teacher, 'Here is a good place to practice our way. Let's build a monastery there.' Then many people will go. That is my way. I didn't provide any land or holy place like that. It was there, I just found it accidentally. People are very interested in that place, and that is why I have so many students." He understood in that way. He did not do anything; the teaching was there before he taught it or before he discovered it. That is his understanding of the teaching. So he didn't stick to his teaching or his being. If he died, he said, there is no need to have a big ceremony. That is why Buddha had eternal life. He didn't stick to anything, but he stuck to one eternal teaching which gave birth to Buddha. Buddha's disciples understood him in this way. That is why Buddhism has perpetual life. So what you mean is very true.

Q: Although the paths to this place are changing and are different, to use that metaphor, the place is unchanging.

Suzuki-rōshi: The metaphor is that he is not the one who provided the place.

Q: But then there is still this element of satisfying our need or desire for something, some "thing," not a concrete material thing, but something.

Suzuki-rōshi : Something, yes, that is our nature, which is not good or bad. You cannot even say it is good. If you say, "It is good," it is almost dying already because you may stick to it. If it is not good or bad, you may not stick to it. This is Buddhist understanding.

Q: After you spoke about the four noble truths, you said that there were four other kinds of suffering: when you are separated from someone you loved, and when you had to live with someone you didn't like. Where did those teachings come from?

Suzuki-rōshi: From what sūtra?

Q: Yeah.

Suzuki-rōshi: These are stock words, you may say. The teaching is repeated in this form in various sūtras.

Q: It says here, talking about the four noble truths, that, "When the creatures in this world delight in low and contemptible pleasure, then the Buddha who always speaks the truth indicates pain is the first truth, and desire is the origin of pain, and the third truth is the path, to always try, unattached, to suppress desire." Do you think that is a good teaching for us at this time, "always try, unattached, to suppress desires?"

Suzuki-rōshi: That may not be possible. When they encourage us to control our desires, and to have a good understanding of our nature, or suffering, they put it in that way. We call it to "suppress" or "annihilate." When you are completely annihilated, that is empty, but that emptiness is not empty. Because everything is changing and has no self-nature, we call it "empty." Desires are here, but they are not dead, they are working. So as long as a desire has some past and future and is always acting, it doesn't exist in the same way. If you see things as it is, as it goes, the desires you have will not exist in the same way. Because you think, "What shall I do with my desire?"—that is desire which is not empty, which is not changing. But even though you pass before it like this, it is changing. So in one or two years, it will disappear. If you understand in that way, that is the true meaning of emptiness. Without getting rid of it, to have proper understanding of it is the way to attain emptiness. That is the teaching of emptiness. To completely cut out, or to annihilate, is a more substantial, or

narrative, way of expressing emptiness, and a more objective, calm understanding is called "to see things as it is."

So if you read this sūtra literally, you will not understand it properly. This sūtra is told in various ways, back and forth; it's sometimes this way and sometimes the other way. That is why this sūtra is valuable. It is not a simple sūtra. So after all, this sūtra could be very artistic or poetic. Some parts are not so, but it ends in a big, artistic work.

This transcript is a retyping of the existing City Center transcript. It is not verbatim. The City Center transcript was entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. It was reformatted by Bill Redican (7/17/01).