

~ *Buddhism for Beginners* ~

Mingyur Rinpoche

This video is about Buddhism for beginners, maybe people who have no background, learning, or knowledge about Buddhism, or maybe just an idea, or maybe another spiritual practice.

Normally, what Buddha said is that all his teaching has some kind of a framework. The framework is what we call the “four noble truths.”

The first of the four noble truths is what we call “suffering.” It is kind of like beginning with a little bit of bad news. When you first hear that, the impression is kind of depressing.

I always share that I have one friend, and that person always felt, when he was young, a knot or some kind of tightness around his stomach. That tightness became painful sometimes — a feeling of not enough, hollowness, incompleteness, something missing, unhappiness, or sadness. And he always thought, “Oh, it is because I am not 18 years old yet. If I turn 18 years old, I will be happy.”

Then one day that person had a birthday celebration when they became 18 years old. He called all his friends, had a big party, and after the party, he came back home. He was very happy during the party, but coming back home, he had a little bit of that feeling of incompleteness. A few days later, it was still the same thing — a feeling of dissatisfaction or incompleteness.

Then he thought, “Maybe it’s because I do not have a job.” Then he got a job, and again, the first few weeks he felt happy. Then again, not happy. Then he thought, “I need a promotion,” a certain position. Then he got the position, got very rich, and became a CEO on Wall Street. He turned 60 some years old, but the question was still the same: “Why am I not happy?”

One day he was in the office, and he closed the door. Normally when he closed the door, nobody was allowed to come to his office. But suddenly somebody knocked on the door. He thought, *Who dares? Who dares to come to my office while my door is closed?* He opened the door, and it was the board of directors. The board of directors said, "Thank you so much for serving our company for all these years. Now it is time for you to retire." And he said, "Wait! I still have not found the answer yet."

Then he thought, *Okay, what should I do now? I should look for this answer from a different perspective — maybe from the spiritual perspective.* He went to the bookshop, grabbed a book, and that book was about the four noble truths, the Buddha's teaching. He opened the first page, and in the book it said, "Life is suffering."

He thought, *Wow, no wonder! All these years, I have been looking for the answer, and it is right here. Life is suffering.* He felt relieved. Then, by hearing that, he felt a little bit warm — he felt like "not okay" is okay. He was okay with "not okay." Okay with not being satisfied. Life is suffering.

Therefore, the Buddha said to be okay with "not okay" and to let go — but letting go is not giving up. The first noble truth is to engage while accepting life is up and down. Life is like the waves of the ocean. Life is like the stock market. The stock market goes up and down, but because it goes up and down, you make business, right? If the stock market goes flat, nobody makes business.

From ups, we feel happy and inspired. But from downs, actually we learn more, we transform more.

I always share about my panic attacks — they really helped me. In my life, there were many obstacles and big sad moments, like my father passing away. And I almost died at the beginning of my wandering retreat. Then there was a big earthquake in Nepal. Then the pandemic. There were so many obstacles, but I did not give up. I accepted them and let go. Things change. Things are impermanent. That is suffering.

But then also, Buddha mentioned that the nature of suffering, when you really look at a deeper level, is what we call "emptiness." It is

suffering, it is impermanent, it is non-self, and it is emptiness. Of course it is impermanent. It is suffering and then it changes, but its nature is non-self and emptiness.

Especially in his last teaching, the Buddha emphasized basic innate goodness. We all have this wonderful nature, wonderful potential. Everybody equally, by nature, is wonderful, perfect. Suffering is only on the surface level, but our nature is beyondness. Our true nature is the unity of awareness, love and compassion, and wisdom. That is who we are. That is what we call the “ultimate truth.” It is emptiness, beyondness, yet not nothing. It has all the great qualities. But the relative level is suffering. The surface level is suffering. This is the first noble truth.

The second noble truth. The Buddha said there is a way out. Although we feel this suffering, how can we become free from that? The way out is by [abandoning] the causes of suffering. How is this suffering caused? Three things: ignorance, aversion, and craving.

Let’s look at aversion. For example, when you tell yourself, “Do not think about oranges, do not think about oranges,” what happens? You think about oranges. As soon as you try to push something away, that thing becomes a little bit unpleasant, a little bit like a lost sense of sweetness. That thing becomes disturbing. That is aversion.

Second is craving. For example, in the nighttime, we really want to go to sleep. And if we tell ourselves, “I need sleep, I need sleep,” what happens? Sleep disappears. That is craving.

Craving makes what we want disappear. It feels like it disappears. And aversion makes what we do not want come to us. So what we wish for feels like it disappears. What we do not want kind of insists on coming to us. Those are two of the causes of suffering. And the fundamental base of these two things is ignorance — “ignorance” meaning holding on to everything as permanent, independent, and singular. It is the grasping fixation of the mind that really holds on.

When I was young, I had panic attacks. I felt like this panic would never go away — that is the fixation of permanence. Then I felt like the panic was also me, as if me and the panic were one. That reifying or

making one is the fixation of singularity. Then I felt like the panic had a self-entity — the fixation of independence. When we perceive things that way, it develops aversion and craving, and then it becomes a cause of suffering.

So how do we become free of that? We need to transform. Aversion becomes loving-kindness and compassion, ignorance transforms into wisdom, and craving transforms into awareness. That comes through practice on the path.

When we are free of the causes, what happens? The third noble truth, as Buddha said, is about nirvana. “Nirvana” means freedom, happiness — lasting happiness that is free from suffering. There are different stages of nirvana.

Especially in the last teaching of Buddha, Buddha talked about how nirvana is not somewhere we should go, and there is not some place for it. Actually, samsara is nirvana when we recognize that. *Samsara* means the “cycle of suffering.” What we perceive in this universe is samsara. Being under the control of ignorance, aversion, and craving is samsara. That includes our perception, our experience, and everything. It is like a round circle, and we go round and round in samsara. But that samsara is also nirvana, if we recognize that.

Normally I talk about this watch. What if I asked you, what is the most important quality of the watch? Everybody says, “It tells time,” right? But even if you have the best watch — maybe a Rolex with a combination of gold and diamonds — but you do not know your own watch, the watch cannot tell you the time. Then maybe you lose your job. Then you lose your home and become homeless. And one day you meet your friend, and your friend asks you, “What are you doing here on the street?” You reply to your friend, “I do not have a watch, so I lost everything.” Your friend says, “This is a watch,” and you do not believe it at the beginning. But your friend teaches you how to read the watch, and slowly you are able read the watch, and then the watch can tell you the time, right? You look for a new job, and you get a good job. You are on time, you get a promotion, and you buy a house. Now your life looks wonderful.

So if someone asks you, “The watch when you were homeless or the watch with the luxury life — which one is better?” Actually, they are the same. The quality of the watch is the same. But what makes a difference is the recognition.

Therefore, samsara is nirvana, meaning when we do not recognize the watch, it is like samsara — we are lost. But when we recognize the watch as a watch, it becomes nirvana. Because then the quality of the watch manifests.

We all have nirvana in our true nature — that freedom — but we need to recognize it to achieve that nirvana.

How do we achieve it? Now, the fourth noble truth is what we call the “path.” The fourth noble truth is the path.

So how do we start the path? When elaborated, there are eight branches of the noble path, but maybe I will summarize it as three. We begin with awareness, love and compassion, and wisdom. Let us say maybe the first beginning is to be aware of your own breathing — breathing in, breathing out. That is awareness, being with the breathing.

Then at the same time, you might have a lot of thought, emotion — “blah blah, yada yada” — so many things come. That is aversion and craving. Now, let thoughts come and go. All this “blah blah, yada yada” — let it come and go.

With that, you are learning to be okay with not okay. At the same time, you are learning and experiencing compassion, forgiveness, and especially self-compassion. When we develop self-compassion, we can help others more easily.

Then you are not totally lost. When we are lost with craving, fixation, and attachment, we are out of control. But you are not totally lost — you come back to the breathing again and again, right? That coming back is awareness.

But at the same time, you let all this “blah blah, yada yada” come. Apples can come, oranges can come, the past can come, the future can

come. Yes is okay; right is okay; wrong is okay; everything is okay. But then, at the same time, you are just being with the breathing as it is — seeing the breath as it is. You do not need to create some special imagination. No need to get rid of anything. No need to change anything. Be with what is natural. That is wisdom, the beginning of wisdom.

So, you are engaging through the breathing with awareness, with love and compassion, and with wisdom, and slowly we come back to the body, then sensation, then mind, and then phenomena. These are the path. Then, you engage more with loving-kindness and compassion. Then you go more deeply into wisdom, and awareness is always there. In the end, you will achieve nirvana, total liberation. You will recognize your own watch fully, your true nature fully.

That is the journey of the path. That is the essence of Buddhist practice as related to the four noble truths.