



OPEN EYE

Meditation Group

See for Yourself

Living The 4 Noble Tasks | Part One

BEING COMPLETELY HUMAN

-Stephen Batchelor on the Four Noble Tasks

1. general dissatisfaction is experienced
2. caused by ignorance & clinging
3. release can be realized
4. by following a harmonious 8 fold path

Now when you actually read the text itself, the first sermon, you find that it concludes, not with an affirmation of the Four Noble Truths, but the Buddha states, and I'm quoting from memory: "It was not until my knowledge and vision was entirely clear about the twelve aspects of these Four, that I could consider myself to have achieved a peerless awakening in this world." And when he explains what the twelve aspects of these Four are, it turns out that each of these points—*dukkha*, *samudaya*, *nirodha*; *magga*—are tasks to be recognized, to be performed, and to be accomplished. So, rather than Four Noble Truths, we have Four Noble Tasks. And that makes all the difference.

As soon as you make that paradigmatic shift from Truth to Task everything changes. You're no longer in the business of persuading people that life is suffering. It's curious that Christians and Buddhists share a similar problem here, in a totally different way. Buddhists believe that everything is suffering, Christians believe that God is Good, and both then have to or have spilled gallons of ink trying to show how that's true. Buddhists have to explain why people are sometimes terribly happy—they experience great joy without meditating or anything. And, of course, the answer will be well, they're not really happy. No, no, no—real happiness is really something quite different and we happen to have the way to attain it. And then Christians have to somehow explain how an all-good and loving God can create a world in which there is so much misery. It's called the theological discipline of theodicy, justifying God's creating a world that is obviously imperfect. In both cases, Buddhists and Christians then get stuck in trying to prove themselves to be right. And, I think,

in doing so, they both totally miss the point. I can't comment on Christianity—let's stick with Buddhism.

Whereas if you think of *dukkha*, suffering, not as an element within a proposition, "Life is suffering," but as a task to be performed and the task in this case, as the Buddha says quite clearly... *dukkha* is to be fully understood, *dukkha* is to be embraced, *dukkha* is to be accepted in a deep, calm, insightful way. Craving is not something that has to be proven to be the origin of *dukkha*, which again is theologically, a very difficult one to understand what that means. But rather, craving is to be let go of. It becomes a task: when craving arises, grasping, fear, attachment, when these things arise, the task is somehow to let that go. When you experience moments in which that movement of attachment and grasping and so forth has come to a stop—and again, this is not some remote experience that we'll only achieve after years or lifetimes of meditation. When you experience the stopping of grasping within your own heart and mind, that is to be experienced fully. And when the path, when a way of life, begins to open up that's not premised on craving or attachment or fear or wanting, then that path is to be cultivated. That's the task that is suggested by the Buddha.

So you have, in other words, Four Tasks, and we don't have time this evening, but each of these tasks, I feel, leads to the next one. They're all interlinked. And, although this is slightly tongue-in-cheek, I think they can be reduced to the acronym ELSA, E.-L.-S.-A., ELSA: Embrace *dukkha*, Let Go of grasping, Stop grasping, and Act. Do something, in other words: think, speak, physically act; get on with your work. If we think of the Four [Noble Truths, in brackets] in this way, we have a framework for living in this world, here and now.

ELSA can operate in any moment of our life. Every situation gives us the opportunity to embrace it with clarity, with understanding, to let go of our habitual reactivity, our dogmatic beliefs, our desires, our fears, to open up to a still, quiet, transparent space in which

we somehow come to rest, even for a moment, and from that space, which is not conditioned by grasping, we can respond. We can say something, do something that comes from the depths of ourselves rather than from our habitual beliefs and opinions and our ego, basically. And that, I feel, captures the essential movement of the Dhamma. Again, we see here the contrast between a truth and believing in it as something essentially static, as opposed to a task, which is a constant embrace and response—an embrace of and a response to the condition of life as it presents itself to us right now. Whether that's going on within us, whether it's in a social environment, whether it's in a political environment, this offers us a framework or a template for living.

A Bright Mind

-Ajaan Suwat Suvaco

As for the mind, we cleanse it by meditating. We use mindfulness to look after the heart, to make sure it doesn't get involved in grasping or aversion. We keep it uplifted, blooming and bright in its meditation, in investigating the Dhamma, knowing the Dhamma, seeing the Dhamma, until it settles down in the stillness that we've developed and kept composed. We keep it blooming and bright. Wherever you go, this is how you should practice. Make your composure continuous. The mind will then gain strength, so that it can let go of its obsessive thoughts and stay focused: at peace and at ease, bright and clear, staying right here.
