

The Core Teachings

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Published by Buddha's Light Publishing, Hacienda Heights



Chapter Four: THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

When Sakyamuni Buddha became enlightened, he saw that the entire phenomenal universe functions in accordance with the truth of dependent origination. When he decided to teach others what he had realized, the Buddha knew that if he explained dependent origination directly to them, it would be difficult for them to understand, and it might even cause them to become afraid. For this reason, in his first teachings, the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths instead of the truth of dependent origination. The first time the Buddha taught is called the "First Turning of the Dharma Wheel."

The Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the Three Dharma Seals are the most basic principles of Buddhist doctrine. Although they go by different names, their meanings are all interrelated. The Four Noble Truths simply turn the focus of dependent origination directly onto human life. For this reason, they seem more relevant to human beings and easier to understand.

The Four Noble Truths are: the truth of suffering, the truth of the causes of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The word "suffering" in this instance is a standard English translation of the Pali word

dukkha, which literally means "unsatisfactory."

The word "noble" means "righteousness." According to the sutras, "The noble are also righteous, and they apply righteousness in all matters. This is what is called 'noble.'" The meaning of the word "truth" in the Four Noble Truths is explained in the *Commentary on the Stages of Yogacara Practitioners*: "From the truth of suffering to the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering, it is all true, not upside down. Thus, it is called 'truth.'" It also says, "Only those who are noble can understand these truths and contemplate them. Those who are ignorant can neither understand them nor contemplate them. Thus, these truths are called 'noble truths.'" When we can fully understand the Four Noble Truths, we are noble. The *Commentary on the Treatise of the Middle Way* says, "The Four Noble Truths are the root of ignorance and enlightenment. In the state of ignorance, you will be trapped within the chaos of the six realms. In the state of awakening, you will become a sage of the three vehicles."

The *Sutra of the Teachings Bequeathed by the Buddha* says, "The moon may become hot and the sun may grow cold, but the Four Noble Truths will never change."

The Four Noble Truths stand at the core of all life. They explain all phenomena in the universe, and they teach us how to achieve liberation from all delusions.

Understanding the Four Noble Truths depends on wisdom. The first truth is: life is full of suffering. The second truth says that suffering is caused by our attachments. The third truth says that enlightenment or complete liberation from all suffering is possible. The fourth truth teaches us how to become enlightened.

The first two of the Four Noble Truths have a cause and effect relationship with each other. The First Noble Truth is

the effect and the second is its cause. The Third and Fourth Noble Truths also have a cause and effect relationship with each other. The Third Noble Truth is an effect that is caused by the Fourth Noble Truth.

At first glance, you might wonder why the Buddha placed the Four Noble Truths in the order he did. It seems more logical to place the second and fourth truths, which are both causes, before the first and the third truths, which are both effects. The Buddha chose to use a different order because he wanted to teach them in the most effective way possible. Since it is easier for most people to grasp the effect and then come to understand its causes, the Buddha placed the truth of suffering first. Then he explained the causes of suffering. Once people understand the first two Noble Truths, they naturally want to liberate themselves from their suffering. To help us understand how to achieve liberation, the Buddha taught the Third Noble Truth, which is the cessation of suffering. Then he taught the Fourth Noble Truth, which is the Way that leads to the cessation of suffering.

Central to all of the Buddha's teachings is the immense compassion he showed in crafting explanations that are designed to be understandable to everyone. Dependent origination and the Four Noble Truths are very profound truths. Anyone who fully studies these doctrines will eventually realize how compassionate and wise the Buddha was in being able to teach them so clearly.

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH

Suffering is the state in which the body and mind are driven by afflictions. The truth of suffering describes how the reality of life is full of suffering. The Buddha saw with

perfect clarity that each one of us cannot escape from this reality, and that it is not possible for a human being to achieve complete satisfaction in this world. Buddhist sutras show suffering in many different ways. In the following sections, I will discuss the three most basic classifications of suffering as described in the sutras.

The Two Kinds of Suffering

These are internal suffering and external suffering. This is the most basic classification of suffering mentioned in the Buddhist sutras. It is the most basic way to understand suffering. Internal suffering is suffering that we usually think of as being part of ourselves. These include physical pain, anxiety, fear, jealousy, suspicion, anger, and so forth. External suffering is suffering that seems to come from the outside. These include wind, rain, cold, heat, drought, wild animals, natural disasters, wars, criminals, etc. None of us can avoid either of these kinds of suffering.

The Three Kinds of Suffering

These focus more on the quality of suffering rather than on its origin or type. The first of the three is suffering within suffering, the suffering that comes from just being alive as well as the conditions of hunger, disease, wind and rain, labor, hot and cold, and casualties of war. The second is the suffering of deterioration. The suffering of deterioration refers to the breakdown of the state of happiness. This is caused by the passage of time, or is broken down by external conditions leading to the suffering of the body and mind. For example, objects break, people die, and everything ages and declines. Even the best of times must all come to an end. The third

suffering is the suffering of process. The suffering of process is that which comes from living in a world where phenomena are constantly changing. In our world, we have little or no control over our lives. We experience anxiety, fear, and helplessness as we watch everything change from day to day.

The Eight Kinds of Suffering

These are a more detailed description of the suffering that all sentient beings must endure. They are grouped according to their content.

The first is the suffering of birth. Following many dangerous months in our mother's womb, we at last experience the pain and fear of birth. After that, anything can happen. We are like prisoners in our bodies and of the worlds into which we are born.

The second is the suffering of aging. If we are fortunate enough not to die when we are still young, we will have to face the suffering of growing old and of watching our bodies and minds decline.

The third is the suffering of illness. When we are sick, we might suffer from aches and pains, cuts and bruises, poor digestion, organ failure, paralysis, or respiratory problems. All of us at some time must suffer from the pain of illness.

The fourth is the suffering of death. Even if our lives are somehow perfect, we still will die. If death is not sudden and frightening, then it is too often slow and painful. Especially at the moment of death, when the body and mind begin to decompose, there is extreme suffering. This is what is meant by the suffering of death.

The fifth is the suffering of separation from loved ones. It stems from our strong attachments. Sometimes we lose the ones we love, and sometimes they do not love us in

return. We suffer because we cannot always be with the people we love.

The sixth is the suffering of encountering objects of hate. When we have to deal with people we really dislike, we suffer. For example, at work we might dislike our boss, or we cannot tolerate a particular coworker. However, when we are forced to interact with them, we suffer.

The seventh is the suffering of not getting what we want. As human beings, we have attachments. When we encounter objects of our desire and we doggedly pursue them, but we still cannot obtain them, we suffer.

The eighth is the suffering of the fire of the five aggregates, which are the five components of existence: form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. They are the "building blocks" of a sentient being, and the means through which all suffering occurs. When the five aggregates come together, they become the unlimited fuel source that produces pain and suffering life after life after life.

The Basic Causes of Suffering

In the above sections, we have discussed some of the basic ways Buddhists understand human life as being mired in suffering. In the following sections, we will look more deeply into the subject of suffering as we delineate some of its most basic causes.

The self is not in harmony with the material world. We are constantly struggling to find comfort in this world. When our houses are too small and there are too many people, we will feel uncomfortable. When our desk is too high or too low, the lamp is too bright or too dim, we may find it difficult to study with ease. The material world does not revolve around us in just the way we would like, so we suffer.

The self is not in harmony with other people. All too often we cannot be with the people we want to be with, but are forced to spend time with people who are difficult for us to get along with. Sometimes, we are even forced to spend time with people who openly dislike us.

The self is not in harmony with the body. The body is born, grows old, gets sick, and dies. The self has little or no control over this process.

The self and the mind are not in harmony. Our mind is often beyond our control. It races from one idea to the next like a wild horse in the wind. Delusive mental activity is the source of all of our suffering. Although we may know this, we still find it very hard to control our minds.

The self and its desires are not in harmony. There are good desires and bad desires. Good desires can improve the self, and even benefit others. However, if we poorly manage these desires, they may become burdens. Bad desires, such as coveting material things and being attached to physical desire, create even more suffering than when we mismanage our good desires. We may understand that desire produces karma and suffering, but that does not mean the mind will be able to control itself easily. Self-control is difficult precisely because what we know to be best for us is not always what we most want. If we do not even bother to control our desires, but instead give them free rein, then the self will suffer even more.

The self and its views are not in good harmony. This basically means that we have wrong views or false perceptions. When what we believe is not in accordance with the truth, we cause ourselves endless trouble because we will be prone to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

The self is not in harmony with nature. Rain, flood, droughts, storms, waves, and all of the other forces of nature are beyond our control and often can cause us to suffer.

The Buddha taught the truth of suffering not to make us despair but to help us clearly recognize the realities of life. When we understand the extent of our suffering and the impossibility of avoiding it, we should feel inspired to overcome it.

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH

The Second Noble Truth is the truth of the causes of suffering. The origin of the causes of all suffering is greed, anger, and ignorance, also known as the three poisons. Sentient beings chain themselves to the painful and delusive phenomenal world through their strong attachments to these three poisons.

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH

The Third Noble Truth is the truth of the cessation of suffering. "Cessation of suffering" is another term for nirvana, a state that cannot be described by language. It is beyond greed, anger, ignorance, and suffering, and it is beyond all duality and all distinctions between right and wrong, self and other, good and bad, and birth and death.

THE FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH

The Fourth Noble Truth is the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The Way to the cessation of

suffering is the path that shows us how to overcome the causes of suffering and leads to nirvana. The most basic way to overcome the causes of suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths were the first teachings of the Buddha, and they were among his last teachings. When he neared his death, the Buddha told his disciples that if any of them had any doubt about the validity of the Four Truths, they should speak up and have their questions answered before it was too late. The close attention that the Buddha paid to the Four Noble Truths throughout his forty-five years of teaching shows the importance he placed on them.

When the Buddha was teaching the Four Noble Truths, he explained it three times from three different angles in order to help us better understand his message. These three explanations are called the "Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel of the Four Noble Truths."

The first time the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths is called the "First Turning of the Dharma Wheel" or "Turning the Dharma Wheel for Recognition." During this "turning," the Buddha explained the content and meaning of the Four Noble Truths to his disciples so that they might understand their importance. He said, "Thus is suffering, which is oppressive. Thus is the cause of suffering, which is 'accumulating.' Thus is the cessation of suffering, which is attainable. This is the path, that can be cultivated."

The "Second Turning of the Dharma Wheel" is also called "Turning the Dharma Wheel for Encouragement."

In this assembly, the Buddha taught the methods for cultivating the Four Noble Truths and encouraged his disciples to practice these methods in order to sever their afflictions and attain liberation. The Buddha said, "Thus is suffering; you should understand. Thus is the cause of suffering; you should end. Thus is the cessation of suffering; you should attain. Thus is the path; you should practice."

The "Third Turning of the Dharma Wheel" is also called "Turning the Dharma Wheel for Realization." Here, the Buddha showed his disciples that he had already realized the Four Noble Truths, and encouraged them to diligently practice so that they too could realize these truths. He said, "Thus is suffering; I have known. Thus is the cause of suffering; I have eradicated. Thus is the cessation of suffering; I have realized. Thus is the path; I have practiced."

The Buddha is sometimes called the "Great Doctor" because his teachings can cure us of our diseased attachments. The best way to end suffering is to understand the Four Noble Truths. If the Four Noble Truths are properly understood, then the rest of the Buddha's teachings will be much easier to understand. If the Buddha's teachings are understood and practiced, they can lead to liberation from all suffering and pain. The Buddha is the doctor and he has the medicine. All we must do is take that medicine. The Four Noble Truths constitute the Buddha's most basic cure for human suffering.