

The Four Noble Truths

DEFINITION

What does the expression “Noble Truth” mean? The adjective noble suggests an intimate union of beauty, perfection, and wonder. The noun truth refers to true reality, clearly established reality, eternal reality.

The Four Noble Truths describe the true reality of the human condition. They are wondrous because, while revealing the tragic aspects of that condition, they also indicate ways of escaping them. They constitute the basic principles of Buddhist philosophy. They even represent the sole foundation of the doctrine of the Lesser Vehicle, Theravāda.

Set forth simply and clearly by the Tathāgata, they are easy to understand, even for those least intellectually gifted, since physical or mental suffering is familiar to every human being, and it is perfectly natural to avoid suffering and seek happiness and joy.

THE FOUR WONDROUS TRUTHS

The Truth of Suffering.

The Truth of the Causes of Suffering.

The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering.

The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering.

a. Suffering

This is the most readily observed, most frequent, and most familiar of human states. A striking formula sums up the unhappy condition of human existence: “Birth is suffering; growing old is suffering.” Throughout life, suffering continually manifests in every form; at the slightest opportunity it appears through a human action or feeling.

Thus, love is suffering when we lose a loved one or are separated from that person. Hatred is suffering when we think of harming an enemy. Desire is suffering when we fail to obtain what we long for or lose what we value most.

b. The causes of suffering

The Second Truth concerns the origin of suffering, or, more precisely, the causes that constitute pain.

It is, in a sense, the physician’s diagnosis, identifying the seeds of illness and anticipating how they will operate.

c. The cessation of suffering

In contrast to the First Truth, the cessation of suffering offers a restful picture of the patient's condition once permanently cured. In a sense, it reveals the true nature of the human mind after it has freed itself of all the veils of illusion that hamper it and cause needless suffering.

d. The path to the cessation of suffering

This Fourth Truth contains all the means of destroying the very causes of suffering before they manifest. It is the wondrous therapy that allows the definitive healing of all illnesses of body and mind.

It is the radiant path leading to nirvāṇa, a path running alongside precipices and abysses, but fortunately bordered by strong ropes: the Eight Means of Self-Cultivation for practitioners, the Eight Branches of the Wheel of Dharma.

HOW DO THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS FIT TOGETHER

When we read the Sermon on the Four Noble Truths attentively, we are struck by the remarkable form of the discourse, the connection between its various parts, and the progression of its reasoning. First come the facts of the problem: suffering and its causes. Then comes the solution: the cessation of those causes. Finally comes the means of bringing about that solution: the Path.

The language is simple, clear, and direct. It makes the problem easy to grasp immediately.

First, we witness the tragic spectacle of suffering in all its forms: a realistic description of human misery in every age and society, but perhaps also haunting memories of Prince Gautama's four outings beyond the royal palace. The First Truth is self-evident: suffering is inseparable from human existence. To live is to suffer.

Then we follow the Perfectly Awakened One in the search for the causes of suffering. To cure an affliction, we must trace it to its origins in order to understand the entire mechanism through which it manifests.

The third stage dismantles this mechanism of suffering so as to stop it functioning. What sensation, what feeling will a human being experience on the day when all suffering has ceased for them? This is a vision of absolute happiness to which we are all receptive. Each of us can recognize that this happiness is real, that it is possible, and that everyone can attain it, since suffering and happiness, suffering and joy, form inseparable pairs: the first state exists only in relation to the second, and vice versa.

What matters is knowing how to remove suffering so as instantly to rediscover supreme and lasting joy.

Finally, the fourth stage concerns the means of obtaining this permanent and infinite happiness, the definitive liberation from saṃsāra, the whirlpool of rebirths.

The Sermon on the Four Truths is comparable to a harmonious, well-balanced architectural composition, first attracting the eye and then winning us over through its simplicity and rational arrangement. Merely hearing it is enough to grasp the full meaning of human existence, made up of small, fleeting joys and endless suffering. Once we understand the causes of our unhappiness, the Tathāgata shows us how to rid ourselves of them through our own efforts.

If the Four Noble Truths were represented in pictures, they would form a painting in two parts:

Below lies an immense, storm-tossed sea in which multitudes of boats carrying human beings are buffeted, overturned, and engulfed by the waves, while survivors struggle to escape the waves and sea monsters. The storm is caused by whirlwinds coming from all four horizons, darkening the sky and sweeping away everything in their path. These whirlwinds are called lust, Kāma; ambition, Rāga; anger, Dveṣa; and ignorance, Avidyā.

Above, overlooking the sea of suffering, is another world, radiant with light and green with vegetation, where all human beings look serene and happy and live in an eternal spring among flowers and birds.

To reach this plateau, the men and women in the lower part of the picture climb various paths. Along their edges stand signposts giving the names of each path and its destination, such as the Four Meditations, the Four Efforts, the Four Contentments, the Eight Right Paths, and so on.

According to their age, strength, or perseverance, human beings follow paths of varying difficulty. All, however, can pause at the different stages to prepare themselves to reach the highest level, the supreme reward called nirvāṇa.

The lower part of the painting bears a faint inscription: the human world, with its two components, the sea of suffering, Dukkha Sacca, and the whirlwinds that generate suffering, Samudaya Sacca.

The upper part bears the inscription: beyond the human world. The green plateau represents the cessation of suffering, Nirodha Sacca, and the paths leading there represent the Path to the Cessation of Suffering, Mārga Sacca.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS IN BUDDHIST DOCTRINE

As emphasized above, the Four Noble Truths constitute the basic knowledge of Buddhism, both Theravāda, called the Lesser Vehicle, and Mahāyāna.

They are the practitioner's first steps along the path of gradual teaching. Through determination, faith, and perseverance, the practitioner then progressively reaches the Four Levels of Attainment of the Lesser Vehicle.

Afterward, they may turn toward the path of the Six Perfections of the Bodhisattva to reach the final stage of the Perfectly Awakened One in the Great Vehicle.

As we can see, the Four Truths are accessible to every human being, regardless of intellectual level, social environment, or historical period. For this reason, they have been translated into every language and adopted as the basic teaching of Buddhism in almost every country in the world.

HOW SHOULD WE STUDY AND PRACTICE THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

We begin by clearly understanding the First Truth and recognizing the reality of suffering. We recognize it through what we see around us and through our own experience, not simply because our teachers have told us so. Next, we must analyze our own suffering and identify the causes that give rise to each instance of it.

Once these causes have been established, let us ask how to eliminate them. Through the same process of inquiry, we will arrive at the same findings as the Tathāgata: our happiness and liberation depend on ourselves alone. This Third Truth constitutes the most important chapter of the entire Buddhist teaching, because it calls upon human will and self-confidence. For this reason alone, Buddhism, far from being a doctrine of pessimism and despair, is instead a philosophy of hope and joy.

The Fourth Truth becomes self-evident: once we have recognized the true nature of the human condition, we will turn to the means that the Tathāgata has shown us as wondrous and as the only means of freeing ourselves.

In this way, the Perfectly Awakened One has fulfilled his mission as humanity's eternal guide.

All that remains is for us to embark on the path he has laid out, with resolve and confidence.