

Four Noble Truths

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The four simple truths the Buddha taught, and which form the core teachings of Buddhism across all denominations, groups, and sanghas, have been variously interpreted and explained over the millennia. For such simple statements, the range of these interpretations is surprising. Here I've gathered several examples to demonstrate this diversity. Which one is correct? You must use the Buddha's own criteria to discern what is most true for you, based on your observations and experiences of living. Further, you should use these as starting points for your own inquiry. Here the Buddha is not attempting to make some description of reality, or some metaphysical or philosophical theory. He offers, rather, a very immediate, intimate, and practical approach for living, both for individuals and societies. David Brazier says that these truths are called "noble" not to exalt them, not because they are some holy doctrine, but because it is noble to face them directly. For each of us, they are a path of discovery and acceptance. The four noble truths are the first teachings given by the Buddha following his enlightenment, and he preceded them with this introduction:

"Monks, these two extremes that should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble and unbeneficial. Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. And what, monks, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata? it is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

Dukkha

From the Pali Canon

Buddha: "Now this, monks, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering...This noble truth of suffering is to be fully understood."

Steve Hagen, *Buddhism Plain and Simple*

Dukkha actually comes from a Sanskrit word that refers to a wheel out of kilter. If we think of this wheel as one that performs some important function, such as a potter's wheel, then the out-of-true wheel creates constant hardship for us every time we try to make a clay vessel. The first truth of the buddha-dharma likens human life to this out-of-kilter wheel. Something basic

and important isn't right. It bothers us, makes us unhappy, time after time. With each turn of the wheel, each passing day, we experience pain.

In fact, we experience three kinds of dukkha....The first kind of dukkha is straightforward pain, both physical and mental...The second form of dukkha is change. All aspects of our experience, both physical and mental, are in constant flux and change....Beyond the dukkha of pain, beyond the dukkha of change is the dukkha of being. This third form of dukkha is much harder to see than the other two. As long as you see yourself as a distinct, separate entity, you must also see yourself as subject to death....This realization carries with it profound pain, distress, or horror.

David Brazier, *The Feeling Buddha*

Buddha taught a noble path—or, we could say, a sublime path. To suffer the suffering which is inherent in our being, without resort to a strategy of undignified flight, whether by worldly or supposedly spiritual means, is real nobility... The Buddha's teaching starts with an assault upon the shame we feel about suffering. He says that *dukkha*—imperfection, suffering—is real and we do not need to be ashamed of it. In fact, facing inevitable affliction is noble. A noble person is one who accepts the reality of adversity and is not investing energy either in avoiding the necessity to deal with it or in exacerbating it. The salvation of humankind will be found in the practice of a noble response to existential reality. That is enlightenment.

Stephen Batchelor, *After Buddhism*

Batchelor characterizes the Buddha's first teaching as a "fourfold task."

Suffering (*dukkha*) is to be comprehended (*pariñña*)

As the first step in moving...to the practice of a fourfold task, Gotama encourages comprehension: *pariñña*—literally "total knowing." Such knowing is not concerned with the acquisition of knowledge about anything specific but with a holistic comprehension of a situation at a given moment. The task of knowing requires considering one's situation from a range of different angles and perspectives....Comprehension of suffering is unsentimental and realistic: it recognizes that we keep meeting what we do not like, losing what we cherish, and failing to get what we desire. And it is all-encompassing: it includes every aspect of the sensory world...as well as our subjective reception of and response to this world: our feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and consciousness—that is, the "five bundles of clinging." If, according to the canonical definition, *dukkha* denotes such an extensive range of experience, then "suffering" is an inadequate and misleading translation. When the puzzled Licchavi nobleman Mahali asked Gotama whether he meant that life was suffering, this was the reply: If, Mahali, forms, feelings, perceptions, inclinations, and consciousness were exclusively suffering (*dukkha*) and pervaded by suffering, but if they were not also pervaded by pleasure (*sukha*), beings would not become enamored of them. But because these things are pleasurable, beings become enamored of them. By being enamored of them, they are captivated by them, and by being captivated by them, they are afflicted.

Comprehension...encompasses the totality of what is happening: it is to embrace a life permeated equally by pain *and* pleasure, suffering *and* joy...To comprehend *dukkha* is to comprehend life intimately and ironically with all its paradoxes and quirks, its horrors and jokes, its sublimity and banality.

On one occasion at Savatthi, Gotama posed the rhetorical question: “And what, bhikkhus, is comprehension (*pariñña*)?” to which he replied: “The ending of greed, the ending of hatred, the ending of confusion. That is called ‘comprehension.’” Such comprehension is neither inflected nor determined by the habitual reactivity of being greedy, full of hate, or confused. In positive terms, we might describe it as an understanding that is openhearted, clearheaded, compassionate, and equanimous.

Samudaya

Pali Canon

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving that leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination....This noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned.”

Hagen

The second truth of the Buddha-dharma is the arising of *dukkha*. *Dukkha* arises from thirst—craving, wanting, trying to get the object of desire into our hands. This craving or wanting appears in three different forms.

First, there is sensual desire. We tend to think that this is purely physical, but it is also mental. Of course, we want comfortable, yet stimulating, physical sensations, but we also want good intellectual stimulation: good conversation, a balanced emotional life, enjoyable art and entertainment, and so on.

Our second form of craving is our thirst for existence itself. We don’t want to die

But even if we could abandon our thirst for existence, there’s still a third form of craving that plagues us: the thirst for non-existence. We want to be released from this world of pain and vexation for once and for all. Virtually all the woes of humankind stem from these three forms of craving. Our greatest pains are thus all self-inflicted.

Brazier

The First Noble Truth is concerned with what happens to us. The Second Noble Truth is about the feelings that arise in us in response. The essential meaning of both of these two Truths is that there is no cause for shame in either of these domains. These two Truths together constitute a charter of freedom for the human spirit.

The Second Noble Truth is *samudaya*. the second half of this word, *udaya*, means “to go up.”

The first part of the word, *sam*, means “with” or “together.” Combining these we get “co-arising” or “coming up along with.” Hence “response.” In the Second Truth, therefore, the Buddha says that something co-arises with *dukkha*. With *dukkha* there is a response in us...

What is it that co-arises with *dukkha*? A longing for things to be otherwise...The Buddha calls it “thirst” (*trishna*). Loosely, this word refers to most of what we call feelings or passions...With the first two Truths he is saying: life inevitably involves affliction and we inevitably have feelings when this happens. This state of affairs is noble: it is OK. There is nothing wrong with us that we have feelings when we are afflicted. He does not say that he himself no longer has such feelings. I think it is very important to clarify the meaning here since there is a common idea that Buddhism implies elimination of feelings. Not at all. The Second Noble Truth tells us that

feelings are facts and as such they are completely natural and acceptable. Problems do not arise from the fact of having feelings. Problems arise from what we do with them or from our attempts to avoid having them.

Batchelor

The arising (*samudaya*) is to be let go of (*pahana*).

...reactions (to experiences) are entirely natural. They are neither good nor bad. They are simply what happens when an organism interacts with its environment. They are *what arises*.

The second facet of the fourfold task is to let go of what arises....How, you might reasonably ask, can I embrace *and* let go of a reaction at the same time? Another verse from the *Dhammapada* provides a clue:

The sage moves through a village
Just as the bee gathers pollen
And flies off without harming
the flower, its color, or fragrance.

The person who lets go of reactivity does not shun involvement with the world but moves nimbly and lightly through it. Here is the definition of *tanha*, which literally means “thirst” or “craving.”

“This is the arising (*samudaya*): it is craving (*tanha*), which is repetitive, wallows in attachment and greed, obsessively indulges in this and that: craving for stimulation, craving for existence, craving for nonexistence.”

Gotama recognized that human beings spend an inordinate amount of time absorbed in the amplifications and proliferations of reactivity. He talks of these responses as the “snares” or “fishhooks” of Mara. Once someone has been trapped or snagged, it is difficult, painful, and fruitless to struggle to wrench free, for that struggle is likely to be another variant of the very reactivity being struggled against.

Letting go of reactivity is a consequence of comprehending reactivity. In many of the dialogues with Mara, the Buddha concludes by saying, “I know you, Mara,” whereupon Mara vanishes. With such comprehension...the practitioner sees the tricksterish wiles of reactivity for what they are: the seductive, infantile play of an organism that is primarily—and for the most part, redundantly—preoccupied with its biological survival.

Nirodha

Pali Canon

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonattachment....This noble truth of the suffering of cessation is to be realized.”

Hagen

The Buddha-dharma’s third truth simply states that whatever is subject to arising is also subject to ceasing. And since dukkha arises, it too is subject to cessation. The cessation of dukkha—the ending of confusion, sorrow, and loss—is nirvana.

The Buddha referred to nirvana as “unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned.” He said:

Were there not the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned, there would be no escape for the born, grown, and conditioned. Since there is the unborn, ungrown, and unconditioned, so there is escape for the born, grown, and conditioned.

The Buddha talked of extinguishing these desires. But how can we do that? Isn't our very intention to do so just another desire? And doesn't one desire lead to another? It would seem that desires are inexhaustible. So what are we to do?

We can stop feeding the flame of desire and let that flame diminish and go out, like a lamp that has burned all its fuel.

The buddha-dharma offers us two ways of doing this. The first is what the Buddha called "less desire." The second is often called "forgetting the self."

How can we deal with this situation? Should we attempt to snuff out our desires? Should we think of our desires as nasty, or wrong, or evil? Of course not. Those approaches simply add more fuel to the same fire.

So what can we do? First we *see*. Then we turn and gently go back.

There's no pressure we need to put on ourselves. Simply by *seeing* how things actually are—what leads to confusion and what leads to clarity—we begin to turn around.

the other way to deal with our desires is to direct the focus of our desires away from ourselves. To forget the self is to remember that we don't exist alone, but in relation to other people, to other creatures, to the planet, and to the universe. It is to focus not on ourselves as a force in charge of the manipulation of others, but on how our lives interpenetrate those of others—and, indeed, all the activities of a dynamic universe.

Brazier

The Third Noble Truth is *Nirodha*. This word means to "confine." *Rodha* originally meant an earth bank. *Ni* means "down." The image is of being down behind a sheltering bank of earth or of putting a bank around something so as to both confine and protect it. Here again we are talking about the art of controlling a fire....Control of fire was, in the early stages of civilization, a major human achievement.

With the Third Noble Truth we notice a change in the tone of the Buddha's statements. He says, "What is the Noble Truth of confinement? It is the complete confinement of that thirst. It is to let go of, be liberated from, and refuse to dwell in the object of that thirst." The difference between this statement and the statements about the first two Noble Truths is that here there is something for us to do. The first two Truths tell us that there are certain things that are unavoidable. The last two tell us that there are, nonetheless, some things that we can and should do. To have spirit means both to have some fire and to keep it under control. It means to accept and not be defeated by what we can do nothing about. It also means to rise to the challenge of doing what needs to be done.

I therefore reject the idea that nirvana means the extinction of the fire...Dharma is not about destroying the energy of our passion, nor repression. It is, rather, about the conscious direction of the energy. It is about harnessing, not destroying. *Nirodha* means to capture, not to destroy. By capturing fire, mankind was able to create civilization. By capturing our own inner fire, we will transform the world.

As long as we are at the mercy of the winds of greed, hate, and delusion, we will continue to create injustice, oppression, and cruelty, however much we may believe that we are good civilized citizens. By becoming masters of our fire, however, we become *bodhisattvas*, awakened beings capable of working for the real good of the world. Such a person has character. They have spiritual fire and they have it well-sheltered so that it is at their command...The task of spirituality is to channel energy rather than destroy it. The Buddha says that the way to confine the energy of feelings is not by suppressing the feeling, but by detaching from the object of the feeling. This is an immensely important distinction.

Batchelor

The ceasing (*nirodha*) is to be beheld (*sacchikata*).

The third facet of the fourfold task is to “behold the ceasing,” which is equivalent to becoming aware of nirvana. Here is the classical definition of “ceasing”:

This is the ceasing: the traceless fading away and ceasing of that reactivity (*tanha*), the letting go and abandoning of it, freedom and independence from it.

This succinct description allows for nirvana to be understood in one of two senses: either as the ceasing of *tanha* or as freedom and independence from *tanha*.

Gotama’s conversation with the wanderer Sivaka implies that one can become aware of nirvana *whenever* greed, hatred, and confusion are momentarily inactive—irrespective of whether one self-identifies as a Buddhist or practices meditation.

For the second sense of nirvana as freedom *from* reactivity, we again need to turn to the dialogues with Mara. Here one becomes aware of nirvana whenever one understands reactivity for what it is and thereby gains freedom from its control. In this case, the experience of nirvana becomes possible even while in the throes of reactivity itself.

To behold nirvana is to realize that one is not beholden to the prompts of sensual desire, being, and ignorance. Yet the freedom enabled in this non-reactive space does not occur in a vacuum but within the context of the “six sense fields of a living body,” which are not empty at all but full of both anxiety and possibility. The challenge of “beholding what ceases” is to learn how to live *in* and *from* the perspective of such emptiness—the “abode,” as Gotama put it, “of the great person”—all the while engaging with a world that constantly and unpredictably impacts one’s senses, triggering cascades of reactivity.

Marga

Pali Canon

“And what, monks, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathagata? It is this Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed.”

Hagen

The fourth truth of the Buddha-dharma, also known as the eightfold path, offers us a realization and a practice for bringing about the cessation of *dukkha*. This is not a path we can take to get

from point A to point B. Its peculiar nature is that the moment we step on it, the entire path is realized at once. Still, with each step we take we can deepen our understanding.

The eight aspects of this path are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation....

first let's consider the word "right." The word the Buddha actually used was *samma*. *Samma* is usually translated as "right"—but not "right" as opposed to "wrong," or "bad," or "evil." ...It's better that we understand right as "this is appropriate," "this works," "this is in sync with Reality." ...It refers to being in touch with Reality as opposed to being deluded by our own prejudices, thoughts, and beliefs. *Samma* refers to wholeness rather than fragmentation.

Brazier

The fourth noble truth is *Marga*, the path. When we are lost in the woods and we come across a path we feel such relief. Suddenly we feel hope and confidence again. Now we can start going somewhere. We may not yet know exactly where the path will take us but we know people have been there before. To be on the path means to start going in a consistent direction. If the Third Noble Truth means saying no to the urge to stray, then the Fourth Truth means saying yes to joining the path. This path is the Middle Path. This Middle Path includes both no and yes. It avoids the extremes. In the extremes we are dominated either by yes alone or by no alone.

The Buddha therefore, taught, firstly, that affliction is real and noble; secondly that the feelings that come up in us in response to it are also real and noble; thirdly that we can capture and harness those feelings—just as one might capture and harness a wild horse; and fourthly, that by doing so we can enter upon a wholesome, constructive and satisfying way of life....

It is necessary to take the first step which is to share and recognize how we and others are afflicted. It is necessary to take the second step of sharing and recognizing how that makes us feel. These are two essential steps. It is then necessary to take the other two steps. The third step is to see that in these feelings lies the energy we need. We can trust the process of self-transformation as long as we can provide a container for it. We need to hold these feelings securely. this is *nirodha*. Then we need to take the fourth step which is to say yes to a positive path of living. Actually, if we can do the first three steps, the fourth follows naturally. By the time we have got to the fourth step, if we have done the first three well, we already have the necessary momentum.

The Middle Path, the Eightfold Way, is not the means to eliminate suffering. It is the noble outcome of facing the reality of affliction and working through what comes up for us in a courageous and authentic way. When we do so, the eight elements of the path described by the Buddha are not the means to an end. They are simply a description of our authentic life. The Eightfold Path emerges from the spiritual work described in the first three Truths.

Batchelor

The path (*magga*) is to be cultivated (*bhavana*)

Everything we have covered so far—comprehending *dukkha*, letting go of reactivity, and beholding its ceasing—are also aspects of cultivating the path. This further emphasizes how the fourfold task is as much a synergy of interrelated acts as a causal sequence of practices.

This path, which Gotama calls a “middle” or “centered path, outlines a way of life that includes every aspect of a person’s humanity. Here is the classical definition:

And this is the path: the path with eight branches: complete view, complete thought, complete speech, complete action, complete livelihood, complete effort, complete mindfulness, complete concentration.

I translate *samma* as “complete” rather than as the more usual “right.” It is what the term literally means: the phrase *samma sambuddha*, for example, means a completely awakened one. “Complete” lacks the moralistic overtones of “right” and suggests how each element of the path can become an integral part of a whole. The eightfold path is a model for a centered life, which is balanced, harmonious, and integrated instead of imbalanced, discordant, and fragmented. It is not a recipe for a pious Buddhist existence in which the practitioner does everything right and gets nothing wrong.

The goal of the fourfold task, I would argue, is to lead an integrated life...Logically, an integrated life is the outcome of having embraced the suffering world, let go of reactivity, and beheld reactivity’s ceasing. From this still and empty space one then *responds* with intuitions, thoughts, intentions, words, and acts that are not determined by reactivity. In practice, though, the moment in which reactivity ceases is also the moment that allows a “complete view” (the first branch of the path) to emerge.

[A follower of the Buddha, Kaccana) asks the Buddha, “You say ‘complete view,’ ‘complete view.’ What is this complete view?” Gotama replies:

By and large, Kaccana, this world relies on the duality of “it is” and “it is not.” But one who sees the arising of the world as it happens with complete understanding has no sense of “it is not” about the world. And one who sees the ceasing of the world as it happens with complete understanding has no sense of “it is” about the world.”

“By and large,” continues Gotama in his reply to Kaccana, “this world is bound to its prejudices and habits.” But, he says, someone who has achieved this [complete] view “does not get caught up in the habits, fixations, prejudices or biases of the mind. He is not fixated on ‘my self.’ He does not doubt that when something is occurring it is occurring and when it has come to an end it has come to an end. His knowledge is independent of others. In these respects his view is complete.”

To say that the eightfold path is to be cultivated means that it needs to be created and sustained from moment to moment. The path does not stretch out ahead into the distance waiting for you to take a leisurely stroll along it. It requires ongoing care and application.

I strongly encourage you to study these authors for their depth and their unique perspectives on the dharma.