

Introduction

All sentient beings seek happiness and removal from suffering. We look for happiness and find it to be elusive, impermanent and unsatisfactory. When we study the way we ourselves and others behave, we see that attempts to achieve happiness are often ineffective. Essentially, we lack understanding of our true nature and the causes and conditions which affect it. Based on wrong concepts, we do not know quite what we want, where we can find it or how we can find it.

The Buddha's first discourse, after attaining enlightenment, was the Four Noble Truths. These relate to what is commonly called suffering, but is perhaps better termed unease, unsatisfactoriness or discontent. These Truths are as follows:

1. the existence of suffering (*dukha*)
2. the origin of suffering (*samudaya*)
3. the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*)
4. the path which is the cessation of suffering (*marga*)

In order to establish some confidence in the Buddha and his teachings, we firstly have to check if there is a suitable understanding or explanation of life's problems - a correct diagnosis, so to speak. If a doctor explains our own illness to us in a way we can understand, this gives us confidence in his ability. Secondly, if a good understanding of the root causes of the problem is displayed, then we know that the problem can be effectively tackled at source and not superficially. Thirdly, faith that a solution is possible needs to be generated to ensure appropriate effort is applied. Finally, the actual path to solving the problem needs explanation. This path will eventually need to encompass a deeper understanding of the previous three.

At first sight, it may appear that the Buddhism is pessimistic; that it advocates rejection of a worldly existence whose nature is considered to be suffering; that there is nothing to be enjoyed in life. But, as the Buddha found after abandoning ascetic practices, aversion is as detrimental to our happiness as desire. Our present condition, for all its faults, provides us with a rare opportunity to develop on the spiritual path - to achieve eventual liberation from the continuing cyclic existence of life and death known as *samsara*. We need to understand and accept how things really are. On this basis we renounce worldly enjoyments - not reject them. Renunciation means an understanding, or appreciation, that these enjoyments are ephemeral and that to become too bound up in them is to create the causes for future disappointment. What is to be renounced is the notion of any permanence associated with them. Just to be aware of this, and to remain aware, is of great benefit. It is through such realisations that we use our present state to gain insight and understanding that will eventually liberate us, as the beautiful lotus emerges from the muddy water.

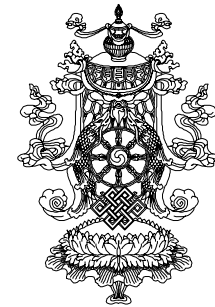
Recommended Reading

A library is available for general use. There is also a shop where books can be bought 'off-the-shelf' or to order. The Four Noble Truths are a cornerstone of Buddhist teaching and reference to them may be found in many Buddhist books. The following are particularly recommended:

What the Buddha Taught, Walpola Rahula
Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand, Pabongka Rinpoche
The Essential Nectar, Geshé Rabten
Being Nobody, Going Nowhere, Ayya Khema

"... do not accept my teachings merely out of respect for me, but analyse and check them, the way that a goldsmith tests gold by rubbing, cutting and melting it".

Shakyamuni Buddha



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THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS (ARYASATYA)

The Truth of Suffering (*Dukha*)

The Buddha taught that all *samsaric* existence is suffering. We experience suffering from time to time but sometimes we are unaware of the true extent of suffering. The Buddha categorised it in three ways:

1. The suffering of suffering
2. The suffering of change
3. Pervasive suffering

The suffering of suffering is that with which we are all familiar. This is conventional suffering: birth, death, aging and illness.

The suffering of change arises as follows. We project a permanent nature onto phenomena and suffer when they change. Also our mind's perception changes and we become dissatisfied. This can also be familiar to us. Material possessions wear out or cease to function. Loved ones leave us or pass away. That which once gave us pleasure no longer has the same attraction. If all that we cherish doesn't fade away of its own nature, we will eventually lose interest in it anyway. Even people, places and things that we enjoy cease to be enjoyable if pursued too long. Thus there is no inherent enjoyment in any worldly phenomena. This is due to impermanence - change.

Lastly, we are all subject to pervasive suffering: the very existence in which we see ourselves. It is the context in which the other sufferings arise. If we were not caught up in the continual round of birth and rebirth in *samsara*, how could we experience suffering? We may sometimes regard change as a means to relieve suffering. When bored with one thing we change to another. This variety leads us to believe that change is something we can manipulate at will to bring us happiness. However, any opportunity to bring about change is very short-lived. Our ability to do this is governed by past actions, from this life and past lives. We need to have created the causes before we can experience the effects we desire.

The Origin of Suffering (*Samudaya*)

The Wheel of Life depicts the changes the mind-stream undergoes within *samsara*. At the centre of the wheel there is a pig, a cockerel and a snake; they emerge from each other's mouth. These represent the three poisons of ignorance,



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desire and hatred. The root cause of all suffering is ignorance. From this arises the self-cherishing mind. Because we do not understand our condition, we act unskillfully and create the causes of future suffering through *karma*.

Our minds are constantly under the influence of delusion. The six subtle and extensive root delusions of *samsaric* existence are: attachment, anger, pride, ignorance, wrong views, and doubt. All these derive fundamentally from grasping at an illusory, perishable self which we conceive to be permanent. Under this delusion, bad *karma* is created. This sets up a cause, or a propensity, in the mind-stream for an effect to happen. This is like a seed from which *karma* ripens. The characteristics of *karma* are as follows:

karma is fixed: the results follow the nature of the cause
karma increases: the results are greater than the cause
karma must be created for it to ripen: there is no result without cause
karma, once created, has a result: it does not disappear of its own accord

The sufferings we experience in life result from our ignorance. The deluded mind perpetuates this condition. Through a lack of understanding, or even rejection, of the nature of self and the process of cause and effect, beings continue to create the causes of suffering. These causes stretch back into countless past lives and because these cannot be seen, the deluded mind puts the blame elsewhere - usually on others - with unpleasant consequences which eventually rebound on us.

The Cessation of Suffering (*Nirodha*)

Just as suffering arises through ignorance, perpetuated in unsatisfactory states through impermanence and change, so this same process of change can be used in a beneficial manner. Suffering arises from unskillful actions of body, speech and mind underlain by ignorance. When bad actions are reduced, bad results are reduced. When good actions are increased, good results increase. If some understanding of actions and their effects can be acquired, actions become more skillful, more effective. Just as self-cherishing increases at times, it can also reduce at other times. This is clearly possible in theory. The Fourth Noble Truth enables it to be put into practice.

The Path to Cessation of Suffering (*Marga*)

The Buddha saw the suffering of all sentient beings and sought to help. However, the Buddha can only show the way - he cannot liberate us by his own powers. All our suffering has been caused by ourselves over countless lives of unskillful action. Only we can bring about change. Based on his wisdom and compassion, the Buddha taught the Eightfold Path to liberation. If we find the Buddha's 'diagnosis' reasonable, we will find motivation comes more readily. We need to check the Buddha's teachings thoroughly. The Eightfold Path is in three parts: wisdom, morality and meditation. The first two factors are wisdom; the next three are morality; the last three are meditation. They are as follows:

Right Understanding: both a conventional understanding and an ultimate, penetrating understanding of things as they really are: the nature of self and cause and effect.

Right Thought: right conceptualisation to establish right motive, having three characteristics: selfless renunciation, loving kindness and compassion.

Right Speech: right verbal expression, instilling respect for the *dharma*.

Right Action: of body, speech, mind: avoiding the ten non-virtues of stealing, killing, sexual misconduct, lying, slander, abuse, gossip, harmful mind, desirous mind, wrong view.

Right Livelihood: abstention from a living which brings harm to others.

Right Effort: preventing negative mind arising, eliminating negative mind already arisen, causing positive mind to arise, increasing positive mind already arisen.

Right Mindfulness: to be aware of body, speech and mind by constantly recollecting the object of our motivation.

Right Concentration: maintaining tranquillity and insight through which equanimity and balance are obtained.