

The Path to Supreme Happiness



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ABSTRACT

The heart of the Buddha's teaching lies in the Four Noble Truths which he expounded in his very first sermon to his old colleagues, the five ascetics, at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Varanasi. In this sermon, as we have it in the original texts, these Four Truths are given briefly. But there are innumerable places in the early Buddhist scriptures where they are explained again and again, with greater detail and in different ways. If we study the Four Noble Truths with the help of these references and explanations, we get a fairly good and accurate account of essential teachings of the Buddha according to the original texts.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Dukkha, suffering,
2. Sammudaya, the arising or origin of dukkha,
3. Nirodha, the cessation of dukkha,
4. Magga, the way leading to the cessation of dukkha.

In Pali terms *ariya sacca* are commonly translated as "noble truths". This translation is a convention started by the earliest translators of Buddhist texts into English. The Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta contains the fundamentals of Buddha's teachings, the so-called Middle Path and the enunciation of the four Truths. Ethically, the middle path connotes the moderate life of a recluse, i.e., the monastic system prescribed in the Vinaya Pitaka.

Keywords: Four Noble Truths, Buddhist Scriptures, Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta

Introduction

The first part of the Sutta opens with the statement that one should avoid the two “extremes”, one being the life of a worldly man, performing rituals and ceremonies but at the same time remaining immersed in pleasures, and the other the life of a recluse dedicated to self-mortifications. He should choose a middle path, which will open up the eyes of knowledge and lead him ultimately to enlightenment, i.e., Nibbana. By the first “extreme” evidently the Buddha had in mind the rich Brahmanas and Kshatriyas, who indulged in luxuries and sought happiness and heavenly existence through sacrifices performed by professional priests in a grand manner by killing hundreds of birds and animals. By the second “extreme”, he meant the non-Brahmanical ascetics who took to extreme rigorous practices like residing in a forest, living on a very scanty food, starving, or undergoing many other hardships to control their body and mind. A moderate form of asceticism was approved by Buddha but it was not made compulsory for all of his disciples. Rejecting the two “extreme” paths, he recommended that his disciples should have just enough food, clothing and a shelter to maintain their physical strength, which is necessary to perform the duties prescribed by him. He wanted that his disciples would remain unconcerned about their food and clothing and be satisfied with whatever they got by begging without expressing their intention to have any particular food or thing needed by them.

The second part of the Sutta contains the Four Truths propounded by Buddha. The fundamental aim and object of his teaching is how to arrest the dynamic flow of the constituents of a living being. The ways and means for doing so are summed up in his enunciation of the Four Truths. The Four Noble Truths are perhaps the most basic formulation of the Buddha’s teaching. They are expressed as follows:

All existence is *dukkha*. The word *dukkha* has been variously translated as ‘suffering’, ‘anguish’, ‘pain’, or ‘unsatisfactoriness’. The Buddha’s insight was that our lives are a struggle, and we do not find ultimate happiness or satisfaction in anything we experience. This is the problem of existence.

(A) The first truth is *dukkha* or Suffering: birth is suffering, so are disease, old age, death, grief and lamentation due to the death of friends and relatives. It means also physical and mental pain, meeting uncongenial persons, separation from dear ones, disappointment due to failure to obtain the desired objects.

The exposition given above, as found in the Mahavagga, is meant for the people in general. *Dukkha* in fact does not bear the ordinary meaning, the woes of the world. It means really any form of so-called existence in the world whether as an animal, as a human being, as a god, or even as a Brahma. The implied sense is that whatever a being possesses in this world, be it long life, health, wealth, property, sons or daughters, kingship of men or gods, even higher supernatural powers, is subject ultimately to decay. In other words, the combination of five aggregates (*khandhas*) ends in suffering, and it is always accompanied with pain on account of constant change and ultimate decay.

(B) The second truth is *dukkha-samudaya* or origin of suffering. The cause of *dukkha* is craving. The natural human tendency is to blame things outside ourselves for our difficulties. But the Buddha taught that their actual root is to be found in the mind itself. It is due to thirst for worldly objects, thirst for re-existence as desired by the externalists, and desire for self-annihilation as sought by the annihilists. Either of such thirst or desire is associated with wrong view, which causes rebirth. The thirst is caused by the notion of I-ness, which leads to self-centeredness, i.e., a being wants to be the center of all that is attractive in this phenomenal world but when it fails to achieve it, it suffers pain.

The second truth is enlarged by the addition of the twelve-linked formula known as the Law of Causation (*paticcasamuppada*), which traces the sources of suffering to ignorance (*avijja*) of the three verities, viz., absence of a permanent soul (*anatta*), the root-cause of the notion of I-ness; momentary impermanence of all worldly objects (*anicca*), and unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*).

(C) The third truth is *dukkha-nirodha* or the absolute ending of suffering by the removal of ignorance of the above-mentioned three verities. It stops the flow of worldly existences. It is the cessation of *dukkha*, complete detachment from desires, relinquishment of all worldly objects and of desires for their possession. The cessation of *dukkha* comes with the cessation of craving. As we are the ultimate cause of our difficulties, we are also the solution. We cannot change the things that happen to us, but we can change our responses.

It is tranquil, beyond death, singles and free from all characteristics. It is not non-existent like the horns of a hare because it can be realized if the right means are adopted. It is not a fruition of the right means. It is not like the eternally existing atoms (*anu-paramanu*) of the Vaisesikas, because atoms, however minute and subtle, are also caused, whereas *nirodha* is unborn, unoriginated, uncreated and constituted (*ajatam, abhutam, akatam and asamkhatam*). It called *sa-upadisesa-nirodha* when an *arahant* removes all the impurities

and realizes the truth but still retains the body, the last remains of past *upadhi*. When an *arahant* lays down his mortal frame, he is said to have *anupadisesa-nirodha*, and after this he never takes rebirth.

Buddha rejected both eternalism and annihilationism, hence the conception of Nirodha or Nibbana should be kept clear of these two views. He referred to it only by negatives though there are a few positive descriptions of same, e.g., it is existing, tranquil, happy and excellent. He said that Nibbana was transcendental, it was not possible to give any positive description of it by words of human creation, i.e., conventional. He would therefore leave it as indescribable and realizable only the wise, the perfect within one's self (*paccattam veditabbo viññuhi*).

(D) The fourth truth is *atthangika-magga* or the Path of Eightfold Practice. It states broadly the course of practices to be taken up by one seeing emancipation. It is divided into three sections: (i) moral precepts (*sila*), i.e., observance of all the disciplinary rules embodied in the Vinaya Pitaka, (ii) mind-control (*citta*) through various methods including meditations, and (iii) acquisition of knowledge (*pañña*) by comprehending the nature and constitution of a being. This is the path that leads from *dukkha*.

The Eight Parts of the Path to Liberation

The Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo atthangiko maggo*) is an early summary of the path of Buddhist practice leading to liberation from samsara, the painful cycle of rebirth. Within the fourth noble truth is found the guide to the end of suffering: the noble eightfold path. The eight parts of the path to liberation are grouped into three essential elements of Buddhist practice: moral conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. The Buddha taught the Eightfold Path in virtually all his discourses, and his directions are as clear and practical to his followers today as they were when he first gave them.

The Noble Eightfold Path:

1. Right understanding (*Samma ditthi*)
2. Right thought (*Samma sankappa*)
3. Right speech (*Samma vaca*)
4. Right action (*Samma kammanta*)
5. Right livelihood (*Samma ajiva*)

6. Right effort (*Samma vayama*)
7. Right mindfulness (*Samma sati*)
8. Right concentration (*Samma samadhi*)

Practically the whole teaching of the Buddha, to which he devoted himself during 45 years, deals in some way or other with this path. He explained it in different ways and in different words to different people, according to the stage of their development and their capacity to understand and follow him. But the essence of those many thousand discourses scattered in the Buddhist scriptures is found in the noble eightfold path.

It should not be thought that the eight categories or divisions of the path should be followed and practiced one after the other in the numerical order as given in the usual list above. But they are to be developed more or less simultaneously, as far as possible according to the capacity of each individual. They are all linked together and each helps the cultivation of the others.

Right Understanding

Right Understanding is clear knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, encompassing the “Three Basic Facts of Existence”: *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (non self or insubstantiality); and *dukkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness). These are big topics, and we look to the Dhamma teachings and commentaries, our own teachers, our own insight meditations for guidance on “right understanding.” Without understanding the Four Noble Truths (the “diseases”) of what use is the “cure” (The Eightfold Path)?

Right Thoughts

With clear knowledge, clear thinking follows suit. This is known as initial application of knowledge. Thoughts mold a person’s nature and direct their course and direction of action. Unwholesome thoughts will debase and erode a person’s character over time, while wholesome thoughts will lift him/her higher and higher up. In particular, Right Thoughts are:

- Renunciation (*nekkhamma*) of worldly pleasures, and selflessness. This is opposed to insatiable desires and selfishness.
- Loving-kindness (*metta*) or good will towards people, including yourself; which is opposed to hatred, ill-will, aversion, dislike, detest and spite.
- Harmlessness (*avihimsa*) or compassion, as opposed to cruelty and callousness.

Right Speech

Verbal expression and communication need to match Right Thoughts. For instance, you are cursing and swearing, or being harsh and abusive, your thoughts will certainly match your speech, and vice versa. The specifics are:

- Firstly, avoid speaking lies, slander, harsh words, and indulging in frivolous chatter.
- Secondly, as mentioned earlier, a harmless mind that generates loving-kindness the speaker, then hurts the listener. Last but not least, what is spoken should not only be true, but also sweet and gentle. If your comment is true, but hurtful and unnecessary / unconstructive; then just keep your noble silence.

Right Action

With good thoughts and wholesome speech, naturally, your actions have to be compatible. In particular, abstinence from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct (rape/molestation/deception/abuse). These three unwholesome deeds are caused by craving and anger, coupled to ignorance.

With the gradual elimination of these kammic causes (evil mental / verbal / physical actions) from your mind and body, blameworthy / bad tendencies will find no outlet nor route to express themselves.

Right Livelihood

If you feel good about your job, it's probably right livelihood. Do you help people? As long as you harm no one – and that would include the environment, since that impacts all beings – then it's right livelihood. Buddha wouldn't put things in a negative context, but it should be obvious that any attempt at purifying thoughts, words and actions would be severely hindered by five kinds of trade / business / job that clearly are not right livelihood:

- Weapons (arms) production
- Human slavery
- Breeding of animals for slaughter / slaughtering animals per se
- Illegal drugs (narcotics), alcohol, cigarettes and the like: producing anything known to be bad for sentient beings.
- Poisons: producing poisons, pollution and other harmful substances.
- Hypocritical conduct is cited as wrong livelihood for monks.

Right Effort

To do anything in life requires determination, persistence and energy. The sustained, lifelong practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, to lead a pure and spiritual life, is the very definition of Right Effort. Right effort includes developing good habits, such as practicing right mindfulness, right meditation and other positive moral acts in your daily life – not just occasionally.

Right Mindfulness

The practice of Right Mindfulness, in particular, requires Right Effort. It is the constant watching / observation of your own body and actions, feelings, thoughts and mental objects (your imagination / images in your mind).

This self-observation is useful in two major ways:

- It complements Vipassana Meditation. As subset to insight, it helps you gain better understanding of yourself, the ever-changing (impermanent) nature of your own mind and body.
- It enables you to check any subconscious or careless mental / verbal / physical actions that are negative or bad. In Anapanasati, mindfulness of breath, helps cultivate the seven factors of awakening as defined the Anapanasati Sutta : Sati (mindfulness, *dhamma-vicaya* (analysis), *viriya* (persistence), *piti* (rapture), *passadhi* (serenity), *samadhi* (concentration), *upekkha* (equanimity)).

They are also subsets, such as the “mindfulness of feelings” which can help one overcome afflictive emotions such as anger.

Right Meditation

Simply put, Right Meditation is deep concentration or total focus. The purpose is to train your mind to obey you and not the other way around. When you start practicing meditation, you will be shocked that your mind controls you, and how unruly it is, like a three-year child. (Sometimes we call it “monkey mind” because it won’t settle.) All sorts of thoughts will go and on in your mind. Initially, it will be like wrestling with a bull, or trying to ride a wild horse without getting thrown off. But, with persistence, strength and determination, you will gradually find it easier and easier to focus your mind. The key is to become the “observer.” Don’t judge what you observe, simply observe such as it is. Stay in the present, mindfully observing.

Right meditation includes many methods from different paths, all equally valid:

- Mindfulness meditation (*apannasati*): sitting, lying, walking, skateboarding, just being mindful all day long.
- *Samatha*: single-pointed meditation (concentrating single focus on breath, for example), helping to give insight into the transitory nature of reality.
- *Vipassana*: seeing things as they really are, or discerning “formations” (conditioned phenomena based on the five aggregates).

According to the traditional method of exposition, the whole of the Buddhist discipline, as shown in the chart, is divided into three sections, which in English phraseology may be put as physical, mental and intellectual, in Pali: *Sila*, *Citta*, and *Pañña*. If the discourses of the *Digha* and *Majjhima* Nikayas be carefully scanned, it will be noticed that the compilers kept this division at the back of their mind.

I. Sila

In every religion and not in Buddhism alone, the first demand that is made of the followers is observance of moral precepts (*sila*), that is restraint in physical actions including speech. It is ordinarily known as *brahmacarya*.

According to the Buddhist teaching, *sila* consists of *sammavaca*, *sammakammanta* and *sammaajiva*, the three of the eight divisions of the Path leading to Nibbana. These three terms practically include the whole code of moral laws that are prescribed for the conduct of the Buddhist monks. In the *Vibhanga* and *Majjhima* Nikaya these are detailed as follows:

Sammavaca: refraining from speaking falsehood, malicious words, harsh and frivolous talk.

Sammakammanta: refraining from killing, stealing, and misconduct.

Sammaajiva: refraining from earning livelihood by improper means, i.e., arts and crafts of layman. Some of these are astrological or astronomical forecasts, interpretation of dreams and omens, use of magical spells, determination of the nature of men, animal and things by their signs, acting as go-betweens between kings, talking path in marriage ceremonies, giving medicines and so forth.

II. *Citta*

Next to physical, the discipline that is expected of the followers of a religion is mental, which is generally known as *jhana* and *samadhi*. In Buddhism, mental discipline does not be evident from the three terms that have been used in analyzing it the formula of the eightfold path:

Sammavayama: effort or exertion to remove the existing evil thoughts, to keep the mind free from being polluted by fresh evil thoughts, and to preserve and increase the good thoughts.

Sammasati: mindfulness of all that is happening within the body and mind including feelings. And examination of the things of the world and at the same time suppressing covetousness (*abhijjha*) and avoiding mental depression (*domanassa*).

Sammasamadhi: four stages of meditation.

Sammasankappa: resolution for renunciation, as also for refraining from hatred and injury to other beings.

III. *Pañña*

The third, the intellectual discipline, is denoted by the term *sammaditthi*, which means the view propounded by Buddha about the nature of things of the world. Traditionally, it means realization of the Four Truths. Intellectual discipline means generally the comprehension of the four *ariyasaccas*, but actually, it means realization of the fact that the *khandhas*, *dhatas*, *ayatanas*, etc., have only momentary existence and are devoid of any substance (*anatta*).

According to Visuddhimagga, *silavisuddhi* (moral purification) and *cittavisuddhi* (perfection in mental exercises) form the two legs of Buddhism, its body being the *ditthivisuddhi* (the true or the Buddhist view about the nature of the Reality). After attaining perfection in physical and mental discipline, the adept can expect to develop a mind of complete renunciation of worldly attractions and direct his mind to the comprehension of the four Truths and thereby acquire the right view.

There are many more. All of these methods, taught by our precious teachers, are designed to bring us — we, ourselves — to our own realizations, our own ultimate Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

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