

The Teaching on the Four Noble Truths and the Problem of Peace

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Abstract

Buddhism presents teachings which are the right ways of life. Those teachings have a unique feature; they include the specific teachings and the teachings laid down as a neutral principle that can be fairly applied to every issue. Therefore, teachings in Buddhism cover all fields of knowledge or science dealing with living of human beings including peace.

According to the Collection of the Middle Length Sayings, the Buddha told his intention for seeking peace: “Then I, Monks, after a time, being young, my hair coal-black, possessed of radiant youth, in the prime of my life—although my unwilling parents wept and wailed—having cut off my hair and beard, having put on yellow robes, went forth from home into homelessness. I, being gone forth thus, a quester for whatever is good, searching for the incomparable, matchless path to peace, approached Alara the Kalama.”

Keywords: Teaching; Four Noble Truths; Peace

Introduction

The Four Noble Truths (Pali: *cattāriariyasaccāni*) are one of the central teachings of the Buddhist tradition. The teachings on the four noble truths explain the nature of *dukkha* (Pali; commonly translated as "suffering", "anxiety", "stress", "unsatisfactoriness"), its causes, and how it can be overcome.

According to the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha first taught the four noble truths in the very first teaching he gave after he attained enlightenment, as recorded in the discourse *Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma* (*Dhammacakkappavattansutta*), and he further clarified their meaning in many subsequent teachings.

The Four Noble Truths are regarded as central to the teachings of Buddhism; they are said to provide a unifying theme, or conceptual framework, for all of Buddhist thought. In the Buddhist tradition, it is said that the Buddha compared these four truths to the footprints of an elephant: just as the footprints of all the other animals can fit within the footprint of an elephant, in the same way, all of the teachings of the Buddha are contained within the teachings on the four noble truths.

According to tradition, the Buddha taught on the four noble truths repeatedly throughout his lifetime, continually expanding and clarifying his meaning. Walpola Rahula explains:

The heart of the Buddha's teaching lies in the Four Noble Truths (*Cattāri Ariyasaccāni*) which he expounded in his very first sermon to his old colleagues, the five ascetics, at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Benares. 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 the essential teachings of the Buddha according to the original texts.²

The four truths are presented in the Buddha's first discourse, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (*Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma*). An English translation is as follows:³

1. "This is the noble truth of *dukkha*: birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are *dukkha*; union with what is

displeasing is dukkha; separation from what is pleasing is dukkha; not to get what one wants is dukkha; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are dukkha."

2. "This is the noble truth of the origin of dukkha: it is this craving which 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."

3. "This is the noble truth of the cessation of dukkha: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it."

4. "This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of dukkha: it is the Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration."

The four noble truths can be summarized as follows:

1. The noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*)
2. The noble truth of the origin of suffering (*samudaya*)
3. The noble truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*)
4. The noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering (*maggā*)

The first noble truth is the truth of *dukkha*. The Pali term *dukkha* is typically translated as "suffering", but the term *dukkha* has a much broader meaning than the typical use of the word "suffering". *Dukkha* suggests a basic unsatisfactoriness pervading all forms of life, due to the fact that all forms of life are impermanent and constantly changing. *Dukkha* indicates a lack of satisfaction, a sense that things never measure up to our expectations or standards.

The emphasis on *dukkha* is not intended to be pessimistic, but rather to identify the nature of dukkha, in order that dukkha things may be overcome. The Buddha acknowledged that there is both happiness and sorrow in the world, but he taught that even when we have some kind of happiness, it is not permanent; it is subject to change. And due to this unstable, impermanent nature of all things, everything we experience is said to have the quality of *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness. Therefore unless we can gain insight into that truth, and understand what is really able to give us happiness, and what is unable to provide happiness, the experience of dissatisfaction will persist.⁴

The second noble truth is the truth of the origin of *dukkha*. Within the context of the four noble truths, the origin of *dukkha* is commonly explained as craving (Pāli: *tanha*) conditioned by ignorance (Pāli: *avijja*). This craving runs on three channels:⁵

1) Craving for sense-pleasures (*kama-tanha*): this is craving for sense objects which provide pleasant feeling, or craving for sensory pleasures.

2) Craving to be (*bhava-tanha*): this is craving to be something, to unite with an experience. This includes craving to be solid and ongoing, to be a being that has a past and a future, and craving to prevail and dominate over others.

3) Craving not to be (*vibhava-tanha*): this is craving to not experience the world, and to be nothing; a wish to be separated from painful feelings.

The third Noble Truth is the truth of the cessation of *dukkha*. Cessation refers to the cessation of suffering and the causes of suffering. It is the cessation of all the unsatisfactory experiences and their causes in such a way that they can no longer occur again. It's the removal, the final absence, the cessation of those things, their non-arising."

Cessation is the goal of one's spiritual practice in the Buddhist tradition. According to the Buddhist point of view, once we have developed a genuine understanding of the causes of suffering, such as craving (*tanha*) and ignorance (*avijja*), then we can completely eradicate these causes and thus be free from suffering.⁶

Cessation is often equated with nirvana (Pali: *nibbana*), which can be described as the state of being in cessation or the event or process of the cessation. A temporary state of nirvana can be said to occur whenever the causes of suffering (e.g. craving) have ceased in our mind.⁷

The fourth noble truth is the path to the cessation of *dukkha*. This path is called the Noble Eightfold Path, and it is considered to be the essence of Buddhist practice. The eightfold path consists of: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

While the first three truths are primarily concerned with understanding the nature of *dukkha* (suffering, anxiety, stress), its causes and its cessation, the fourth truth presents a practical method for overcoming *dukkha*. The path consists of a set of eight interconnected factors or conditions, that when developed together, lead to the cessation of *dukkha*.

Ajahn Sucitto describes the path as "a mandala of interconnected factors that support and moderate each other."⁸

Thus, the eight items of the path are not to be understood as stages, in which each stage is completed before moving on to the next. Rather, they are to be understood as eight significant dimensions of one's behaviour—mental, spoken, and bodily—that operate in dependence on one another; taken together, they define a complete path, or way of living.

It is important to understand and practice the four noble truths correctly. Each truth must be related to its appropriate duty. By "duties" is meant the practices which must be carried out in relation to each of the four noble truths, which are:⁹

- 1) The noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*) is to be known.
- 2) The noble truth of the cause of suffering (*samudaya*) is to be abandoned.
- 3) The noble truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) is to be realized.
- 4) The noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering (*magga*) is to be cultivated.

Each of these duties must be observed completely for its respective noble truth. In practical terms, before it is possible to really practice them, there must be some measures of insight (*ñāna*). There are three stages of insight into the four noble truths, which are used as a standard to gauge enlightenment. That is, when there is insight to the four noble truths, complete with the three insights for each truth (giving altogether twelve insights, or twelve aspects to the one insight), then, and only then, can there be real knowledge of the four noble truths, or enlightenment.

Those three insights are called in full "knowledge and insight (*ñānadassana*) with the three stages (*parivatta*)," or the three stages of knowledge and insight, which are:¹⁰

1. *Saccañāṇa*: insight into the truth: this is suffering, this is the cause of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, and this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

2. *Kiccañāṇa*: insight into the duty to be done: suffering is to be observed, the cause of suffering to be abandoned, the cessation of suffering to be realized, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering to be cultivated.

3. *Katañāṇa*: insight into accomplishment: the suffering which should be observed has been observed; the cause of suffering which should be abandoned has been abandoned;

the cessation of suffering which should be realized has been realized; the wayleading to the cessation of suffering which should be cultivated has been cultivated.

These three stages in each of the four noble truths give altogether twelve insights, or twelve properties. It was only when the Buddha had insight into the four noble truths, in all three stages and their twelve properties, that he declared his attainment of Perfect, Unexcelled Enlightenment. These twelve properties of the four noble truths can be used as a gauge to measure success in addressing problems of every description.

The four noble truths are regarded as the teaching on how to solve or manage the problem of life systematically, effectively and scientifically. The four noble truths can be also applied to solve or manage all other problems in society. In fact, they can be applied to realize everything at its true nature. This is because the structure of the four noble truths is to realize a thing by answering its four main fundamental questions: What is it? What does it come from? What is it for? And how is it to be created? That is why Ven. Buddhadasabhikkhusaid “We should notice that the form of the Four Noble Truths can be applied to all objects of knowledge. We can ask of every object: what is it? What does it come from? What is it for? How is it to be created? When we know the answers to these questions, we can say that we know the four truths of the object”¹¹ Therefore, by the structural principle, the four noble truths can be replaced by anything to realize or manage with.

The problem of peace can be too realized and managed in accordance with the principle of the four noble truths. Because the principle of the four noble truths covers all matters as mentioned above. In addition, the goal of the teaching on the four noble truths aims at attaining the cessation of suffering or *nirodha*. That is *Nibbāna* or peace. In fact, the four noble truths are nothing but the process of realizing peace in order to achieve peace.

What is the problem of peace? To this question, the answers may vary. Different definitions are a problem. Not knowing the real causes of the problem of peace is also a problem. It may include not knowing which process or way is the right one to win peace. In conclusion, it can be said that having no peace is a problem. In order to apply the principle of the four noble truths to the problem of peace effectively, it is necessary to follow the three stages of the process of realizing the problem due to the structural principle of the four noble truths: The first stage: *Saccañāṇa*: insight into the truth. It is a must to understand completely the total truth of the problem basing on the four main fundamental questions: What is it?

Where does it come from? What is it for? And how is it to be created? Therefore, it must start from the first question: what is the problem of peace? Firstly, it is very important to understand the truth of the problem of peace. If we don't know what it is, we could not know how to manage with it. Secondly, we must know its real cause of the problem of peace. Of all problems if we don't know what their real causes are; we could not solve the problem effectively. Because it is not the real cause to be eradicated. Thirdly, we must know the goal or the end of the problem of peace. What is the desirable result we want? Fourthly, we must know what the right and effective method to deal with the problem of peace is. If we don't know the correct method or the right way to proceed, it is impossible to achieve peace. The right way will lead to the destination; likewise, the right peace method will definitely lead to peace.

The second stage: *Kiccañāṇa*: insight into the duty to be done. Though we have understood or known the true nature or truth about the problem of peace, but we have to proceed to the next stage. That is, we must realize how to do with it or what it should be done. The problem of peace should be comprehended. If we don't comprehend it, the problem will be left as it is. The cause of the problem of peace should be abandoned. Even we have known its cause but we don't abandon it, the problem will never be eradicated. The cessation of the problem of peace should be realized. We must realize it to aim at. The right way or the correct method to the cessation of the problem of peace should be cultivated and developed. If we don't cultivate and develop, how can it lead to the goal?

The third stage: *Katañāṇa*: insight into accomplishment. In this stage, It is like examining or checking that everything about the problem of peace which should be done, has been already done, namely the problem of peace which should be observed has been observed; the cause of the problem of peace which should be abandoned has been abandoned; the cessation of the problem of peace which should be realized has been realized; the way leading to the cessation of the problem of peace which should be cultivated has been cultivated. It is a measure of success. From what above mentioned, it is obvious that the teaching on the four noble truths can be applied to manage the problem of peace effectively. This is because the management of the problem in accordance with the principle of the four noble truths has the process and causality. It is systematic and consistent with the scientific method. It shows clearly how to deal with the problem successfully.

Conclusion

Buddhism derives from the Buddha's enlightening of the natural truth. Buddha's enlightening made him attain purity, light and peacefulness; and it was getting rid of all defilements that caused sufferings and chaos to oneself and others. Then it led to establishing of Buddhism, the way of good, happy and peaceful life.

Buddhism accepts nonviolent deeds; according to the Buddha's saying, "Nonviolence is the happiness in the world". Buddhism does not support all kinds of killings and harming other people. Therefore, the Five Precepts are presented as the fundamental rule for the Buddhist. Also, Buddhism teaches loving kindness and tolerance, which is the universal ethics for peace.¹²

Buddhism realized the importance of peace. The Buddhists are taught, "There is no bliss higher than peace"¹³. This religion requests people to study the concept of peace as it mentions that "It is peace that must be studied by all". Buddhism vehemently teaches peace in many spheres such as political, economical and education. In the history, there is no war in the name of Buddhism at all because this religion believes in peace and harmony. Buddhism is widely known as the religion of peace.

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