

LESSON 3

THE FIRST TURNING OF THE WHEEL OF DHARMA

Shortly after attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha gave a sermon in Varanasi sharing the fruits of his realization. This sermon is referred to as the “**first turning of the wheel of Dharma.**” The word Dharma here refers to the Buddha’s teachings themselves. Buddhadharma is Buddha’s teachings and the inner experiences or realizations of these teachings. Buddha gave eighty-four thousand teachings¹. All these teachings and the inner realizations of them constitute Buddhadharma.

Buddhadharma does not stay in one place but moves from one country to another. Just as gold is precious and rare, so Buddhadharma is precious and very hard to find.

Buddha taught how to examine our mind and see which states produce misery and confusion and which states produce health and happiness. He taught how to overcome the compulsively non-virtuous minds that confine us to states of discontent and misery, and how to cultivate the virtuous minds that liberate us from pain and lead us to the bliss of full enlightenment.

By learning Buddhadharma, we will have the opportunity to gain the happiness we seek and to fulfill all our temporary and ultimate wishes.

It was this sermon in which the Buddha developed what would become the framework for the entirety of his teachings: The Four Noble Truths.

These four truths are the truth of suffering, the truth of its origin, the truth of its cessation, and the truth of the path that leads to that cessation. In essence, the Four Noble Truths say that we all naturally desire happiness and do not wish to suffer- and that the suffering we wish to avoid comes about as a result of a chain of causes and conditions begun even before our birth. If we are to pursue our aspiration to gain freedom from suffering, we need to clearly understand the causes and conditions that give rise to suffering and strive to eliminate them. This is the essence of the Four Noble Truths.

¹ This number represents “many”, it is not an exact number by counting.

Having established the framework of liberation in the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha further detailed **thirty-seven steps** along the path to its attainment; these are called the thirty-seven aspects of the path to enlightenment. These aspects show specifically how the principles of the Four Noble Truths are to be applied in one's day-to-day spiritual life. There are two primary components to these teachings: the cultivation of single-pointedness of mind, which is known as tranquil abiding (samatha), and the cultivation of penetrative insight (vipassana). If we examine the thirty-seven aspects of the path to enlightenment in relation to these two qualities of mind, we find aspects relating to both qualities.

Of the thirty-seven aspects, the first four are the four foundations of mindfulness:

1. The foundation of mindfulness of the body,
2. The foundation of mindfulness of the feelings,
3. The foundation of mindfulness of the mind, and
4. The foundation of mindfulness of phenomena.

As one's deepens one's practice of these four foundations of mindfulness, one will develop greater enthusiasm for positive or "wholesome" activities. Thus, we have the second list, namely, the four correct endeavors:

5. Abandoning negative acts,
6. Preventing future negative acts,
7. Enhancing one's existing positive qualities and past wholesome acts, and
8. Laying the foundation for future wholesome acts.

Once the spiritual aspirant lays the solid foundations of mindfulness and ethical conduct, he or she will be able to further develop single-pointedness of mind, and thereby accomplish mental activities that cannot be sustained by a lesser degree of concentration. Since these activities require a well-cultivated and unusually focused state of mind, they are called "supernatural." Therefore, the next four factors are the four supernatural feats:

9. The supernatural feat of aspiration,
10. The supernatural feat of joyous effort,
11. The supernatural feat of concentration, and
12. The supernatural feat of inquiry.

All of the first twelve factors relate to methods for enhancing one's capacity to remain focused single-pointedly on a chosen object of meditation. This enhanced capacity in turn leads to the enhancement of all of one's other positive spiritual faculties. Thus follow the five faculties:

13. The faculty of faith,

14. The faculty of joyous effort,
15. The faculty of mindfulness,
16. The faculty of meditative absorption, and
17. The faculty of wisdom or insight.

When these five faculties reach an advanced state, they become the five powers:

18. The power of faith,
19. The power of joyous effort,
20. The power of mindfulness,
21. The power of meditative absorption, and
22. The power of wisdom or insight.

When one develops these powers, one will naturally be able to follow the core of the Buddha's path, known as the eightfold noble path, which constitutes the next set, namely:

23. Right view,
24. Right thinking,
25. Right speech,
26. Right action,
27. Right livelihood,
28. Right effort,
29. Right mindfulness, and
30. Right concentration.

The final seven factors in this list are known as the seven branches of enlightenment:

31. The factor of enlightenment consisting of right mindfulness,
32. The factor of enlightenment consisting of right aspiration,
33. The factor of enlightenment consisting of right joyous effort,
34. The factor of enlightenment consisting of right joyfulness,
35. The factor of enlightenment consisting of right tranquility,
36. The factor of enlightenment consisting of right concentration, and
37. The factor of enlightenment consisting of right equanimity.

Together, the practice of the thirty-seven aspects of the path to enlightenment form the core of the practical application of the Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths and, therefore, of the Pali tradition of Buddhism. These, in turn can be said to be the foundations of Buddhism, and the first turning of the wheel of Dharma.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Notes: This document is prepared for temporarily internal use only. You can ignore all Pali or Sanskrit words.

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The **Four Noble Truths**: are the foundational teachings of Buddhism, typically given as the first lessons to anyone being introduced to the religion. More than simply a doctrine, they contain a way of life that followers believe can lead anyone to Nirvana (Pali: *Nibbana*), Sanskrit for "extinction" of suffering. Arising from the Buddha's enlightenment experience, they are regarded as deep psychological insight and a step-by-step cognitive methodology, not a mere philosophical theory.

In the *Majjhima Nikaya* of the *Culamalunkya sutta*, the Buddha explained why he taught them:

Why have I declared “the four noble truths”? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. That is why I have declared it.

² This number represents a “large number” not the “exact number.”

Contents

- [1 The Four Noble Truths](#)
- [2 The Eightfold Path](#)
- [3 Significance](#)

The Four Noble Truths affirm that suffering can be completely eliminated in one's life as long as a person devotedly follows these teachings. They present a permanent cure for suffering, one that is said to destroy suffering at its very root. Buddhism suggests that each one of us has the power to end suffering in our own lives.

The Four Noble Truths

Buddhists believe that when [Siddhartha Gautama](#) realized enlightenment sitting under the bodhi-tree, his realization was so profound that he hesitated to speak to anyone about it. How could ordinary beings understand what he had experienced? Then it is said that the [Hindu deva](#) (deity) [Brahmā](#) appeared, and beseeched him to teach what he had experienced from his enlightenment to all sentient beings (Brahmā included) who were trapped in the **cycle of rebirth** and suffering (*samsāra*). Upon hearing this appeal for help, the Buddha was moved to begin teaching others what he had realized in his [meditation](#). He gave his first sermon to his five ascetic companions on the subject of the Four Noble Truths, which are summarized as follows:

- 1. *Dukkha*: or the **noble truth of suffering**
- 2. *Samudaya*: or the **noble truth of the origin of suffering**
- 3. *Nirodha*: or the **noble truth of the cessation of suffering**
- 4. *Marga*: or the **noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering**

The first of the Buddha's teachings was the statement that life is *dukkha*, meaning that life in any of the three realms³ (read lesson 2: Buddhist cosmology) is characterized by suffering, frustration, and dissatisfaction. He stated:

Birth is *dukkha*, **old age** is *dukkha*, **sickness** is *dukkha*, and **death** is *dukkha*. Sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are *dukkha*. Contact with unpleasant things is *dukkha*, and separation from what one wishes is *dukkha*. In short, the [five aggregates](#)⁴ onto which one grasps are *dukkha*.

³ Three realms: Formless, Form, Desire realms. Six planes of existences: Hells, Spirits (Ghosts,) animals, human beings, Semi-gods, Gods.

⁴ Five aggregates (skandhas in Sanskrit): Form (matter,) feeling (sensation,) perception (cognition,) volition (mental formation,) consciousness (discernment.)

Duhkha, it is taught, exists in three primary ways. The first is the “suffering of suffering” (*duhkha-dukkhata*) that all living things are aware of—disease, war, physical pain, etc. The second is the pain and frustration caused by the impermanence (*anitya*) of all things (*viparinama-dukkhata*). We struggle all of our lives to stay comfortable and happy, yet pleasure cannot be indefinitely maintained, and invariably turns into pain. The third level is the suffering that is inevitable so long as we live in any of the realms of the *bhava-cakra* (*samsāra-dukkhata*). This level refers to the unavoidable suffering one must experience as a living being—for the pain of birth to the pain of death. The Buddha argued that these three dimensions of *duhkha* are pervasive in the unenlightened life. In Phat Quoc Meditation Center, we emphasize upon the suffering caused by the reincarnation because no one can show us the way to get out of the *samsara* but The Buddha Sakyamuni.

Some Western commentators on Buddhism have said that Buddhism is pessimistic because it concentrates so much on suffering. But actually, it is not pessimistic; it is **realistic**. The truth of suffering need not make us feel pessimistic and hopeless.

The diagnosis the Buddha gave is not terminal or with no hope of a cure. He went a step further to explain the origin of our illness, which is the Second Noble Truth: the cause of suffering. He stated that the primary cause of suffering is **craving** (Sanskrit: *trishna*). He taught that since we are constantly trying to arrange our selves and our lives in a manner that is pleasant, we are never satisfied with what we have and what we are. We always crave for more, materially, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, and as a result we feel pain (always not reach satisfaction.) The thing we cling to most of all is our belief in a independent and unchanging **self, ego** ([atman](#)), and this more than anything else is why we suffer.

The Buddha taught that knowing there is a root cause to our suffering enables us to overcome it. This leads to the Third Noble Truth. He explained the Third Noble Truth as follows:

[It is possible to attain] the complete cessation of suffering (*duhkha*.) It is the complete cessation of that very craving, giving it up, renouncing it, release from it, detachment from it.”

The Third Noble Truth is the affirmation of the cessation of suffering, [nirvana](#). Thus, rather than being seen as a pessimistic doctrine that is preoccupied with suffering, Buddhism is better described as an optimistic worldview because it insists that suffering can be completely eradicated in our lives. Many encountering these teachings for the first time often interpret this to mean that the Buddha wanted us to be devoid of passion and feeling, but this is not the case. The Buddha taught a “middle way” approach between indulgence and mortification, and here is referring to exaggerated forms of desire. For instance, eating a meal that is balanced and an appropriate sized serving is good, while gorging is not.

The [Noble Eightfold Path](#) is the prescription given to us by the Buddha to cure the [samsaric](#) condition of *duhkha*. Through following his instructions, he believed that anyone, regardless of race, caste, religion, or gender, could attain the same awakening as him. Since the Noble Eightfold Path is considered to be the essential "medicine" that the Buddha prescribed to alleviate suffering, this "medicine" will be described in the following section.

In the above way, the Buddha presented the Four Noble Truths as a medical diagnosis for the human existential condition: the First Noble Truth identified the disease of suffering, the Second Noble Truth outlined its causes, the Third Noble Truth offered a prognosis, and the Fourth Noble Truth provided a prescription or antidote to end suffering (i.e. the Noble Eightfold Path).

The Noble Eightfold Path

According to Buddhism, the Noble Eightfold Path provides the practical steps to eliminating suffering in our lives.

1. Right Viewpoint (Right Understanding) - Realizing the Four Noble Truths
2. Right Thoughts- Commitment to mental and ethical growth bases on the Right Viewpoint
3. Right Speech - One speaks in a non hurtful, not exaggerated, truthful way... based on the Right Viewpoint
4. Right Actions - Wholesome action, avoiding action that would do harm... based on the Right Viewpoint
5. Right Livelihood - One's job does not harm in any way oneself or others; directly or indirectly (makes weapons, drug dealer, butcher, etc.) based on the Right Viewpoint
6. Right Effort - One makes an effort to improve and to practice the seven other "Rights"
7. Right Mindfulness - Mental ability to see things for what they are with clear [consciousness](#) based on the Right Viewpoint
8. Right Meditation (Samadhi) - State where one reaches [enlightenment, get the wisdom](#) and the [ego](#) has disappeared .

“Right view”: The word "Right" that precedes each part of the Noble Eightfold Path implies the skillful application of each step. The “Right View” refers to seeing the world correctly, particularly in regards to accepting the Four Noble Truths and the “five aggregates have the three characteristics of impermanent, suffering, no self” (Theravada,) “the Emptiness of the five aggregates” (Mahayana.) The most important views to hold for a Buddhist are impermanence (*anitya*), no-self (*anatman*), interdependent arising (*pratitya-samutpada*), suffering (*duhkha*), and [nirvana](#). The worst view one can maintain is that “the elements of the psycho-physical personality –five aggregates- ([skandha](#) in Sanskrit) constitute a truly existent person.” The concern that the Buddha had with wrong views was not a purely philosophical one. The way we see the world determines how we interact with it, and if we see ourselves as isolated, self-contained, and unchanging beings, we will be unable to escape the influence of the three poisons (*klesha*) of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

“Right Thought” is concerned with the intentions and motivations of one's actions. Our actions (body,) speech, and mind (thoughts) must be always based on “right view.” The Buddha taught that [karma](#) is formed through intention, so that when one does anything based on negative emotions, the result is negative karma. However, if one acts from the motivations of compassion, wisdom, and generosity, the results are positive. The highest ground for any action in Buddhism is said to be a heartfelt concern for the **welfare of all beings**.

The “action” section has three divisions. The first is “**Right Speech,**” which is directly connected to Right Thought. It cannot be simplified to “do not lie,” because one can use the truth in a way that is deliberately harmful (i.e. unnecessarily pointing out another’s flaws or gossiping), and in some situations telling the truth may cause more harm than telling a “white lie” (as in the classic example of misleading to someone who is looking for a person they want to murder). Therefore the Buddha taught that when we speak, we must consider what is helpful and what is not.

The second is “**Right Action,**” which is concerned with the motivation behind everything we do. Contained within this are the five precepts, which list actions followers should refrain from, such as harming other beings and taking what is not given. As well, they are again encouraged to perform every deed motivated by compassion for all beings.

In “**Right Livelihood**” the Buddha taught that Buddhists should not engage in professions that cause harm. Examples he gave were selling weapons, mind-altering substances (particularly alcohol), and slaughtering animals. This in turn gives followers the “satisfaction of making a living for oneself and one’s family, serving humankind, and personally advancing toward spiritual advancement at the same time.”

“**Right Effort**” has four dimensions: preventing negative states from arising in the mind, abandoning any that have arisen, producing positive ones, and cultivating ones already present. This demonstrates the Buddhist practice of applying antidotes to unwholesome mind-states—greed is countered with generosity, hatred with love, and ignorance with wisdom.

Meditation is divided into two sections, the first of which is “**Right Mindfulness,**” which is intended to bring about a constant awareness of our sensory experiences (including the use of the “mind’s eye” that is aware of mental formations) and actions. Buddhists believe that through constant watchfulness, we will recognize the truth of the impermanence of all experiences (including the *skandhas* that we normally mistake for an unchanging self). Mindfulness also helps to prevent reflexive actions based on harmful emotions, mitigating both injury and negative karma.

“**Right Concentration**” aims to train our unfocused, scattered minds to rest on a single object. Once one is able to sit in [meditation](#), unmoved by laxity or excitement, one can enter the deeper meditative absorptions that led the Buddha to realize [nirvana](#).

The practices of the Noble Eightfold Path are meant to be taken on as mutually reinforcing guides that lead to liberation from suffering. As such, they cannot be effectively practiced in isolation from one another.

Significance

The Four Noble Truths have had a tremendous impact on the history of Indian and Asian thought. As the foundational teachings of the Buddhist religion, these precepts have inspired and motivated countless Buddhists to gain a deeper insight and appreciation of the nature of suffering and how it is overcome. They have also played a critical role in the cultivation of Buddhist philosophical discourse and monastic practice. While the Four Noble Truths are core teachings

of [Theravada](#) Buddhism, they also play an integral role as essential stepping stones in the cultivation of spiritual wisdom and compassion in both Mahayana and [Vajrayana](#) Buddhism. Thus, the Four Noble Truths are unifying principles in the world of Buddhism that unite the various Buddhist organizations and communities.