

## Notes and Quotes for May 15, 2022 *Dharma Reflections*:

### The Four Noble Truths: *Overview*

**The Buddha's "First Sermon," delivered at the deer park in Benares, sets out the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, a key concept of Buddhist thought. (*The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East, J. Horne, ed., Volume 10 [London: 1917].*)**

There are two extremes, oh Bhikkus, which a holy man should avoid--the habitual practice of . . . self-indulgence, which is vulgar and profitless . . . and the habitual practice of self-mortification, which is painful and equally profitless.

There is a middle path, oh Bhikkus, discovered by the Tathagata--a path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana. Verily! it is this noble eightfold path; that is to say: Right views; Right aspirations; Right speech; Right conduct; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness; and, Right contemplation.

This, oh Bhikkus, is that middle path, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the Tathagata--that path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana!

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning suffering. Birth is attended with pain, decay is painful, disease is painful, death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful, painful is separation from the pleasant; and any craving that is unsatisfied, that too is painful. In brief, these [components of individuality] are painful.

This, then, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning suffering.

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering. Verily, it is that thirst, causing the renewal of existence, accompanied by sensual delight, seeking satisfaction now here, now there--that is to say, the craving for the gratification of the passions, or the craving for a future life, or the craving for success in this present life.

This, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the origin of suffering.

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering. Verily, it is the destruction, in which no passion remains, of this very thirst; the laying aside of, the getting rid of, the being free from, the harboring no longer of this thirst.

This then, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of suffering.

Now this, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow. Verily! it is this noble eightfold path; that is to say: Right views; Right aspirations; Right speech; Right conduct; Right livelihood; Right effort; Right mindfulness; and, Right contemplation.

This then, oh Bhikkus, is the noble truth concerning the destruction of sorrow.

That this was the noble truth concerning sorrow, was not, oh Bhikkus, among the doctrines handed down, but there arose within me the eye to perceive it, there arose the knowledge of its nature, there arose the understanding of its cause, there arose the wisdom to guide in the path of tranquillity, there arose the light to dispel darkness from it.

. . . That I had become versed in the way which leads to the destruction of sorrow, though the noble truth concerning it was not among the doctrines handed down, there arose within me the eye, there arose the knowledge, there arose the understanding, there arose the wisdom, there arose the light.

So long, oh Bhikkus, as my knowledge and insight were not quite clear, regarding each of these four noble truths in this triple order, in this twelvefold manner--so long was I uncertain whether I had attained to the full insight of that wisdom which is unsurpassed in the heavens or on earth, among the whole race of Samanas and brahmins, or of gods or men.

But as soon, oh Bhikkus, as my knowledge and insight were quite clear regarding each of these four noble truths in this triple order, in this twelvefold manner--then did I become certain that I had attained to the full insight of that wisdom which is unsurpassed in the heavens or on earth, among the whole race of Samanas and brahmins, or of gods or men.

And now this knowledge and this insight has arisen within me. Immovable is the emancipation of my heart. This is my last existence. There will now be no rebirth for me!

- [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/religion/f2001/edit/docs/buddhas\\_first\\_sermon.htm](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/religion/f2001/edit/docs/buddhas_first_sermon.htm)

“Because we take ‘I’ and ‘mine’ as real, even though they are illusions, we ride an emotional roller coaster, needlessly and endlessly. We are constantly tossed about by hope and fear: hope, that ‘I’ will get what it wants, and fear that ‘I’ will lose what it has, get what it doesn’t want, and in the end, experience the misery of old age, sickness, and death. The Buddha described these phenomena as truths of suffering and its cause. The first truth is the pervasiveness of suffering; the second truth is that the cause of this pervasive suffering is clinging to the illusion of an ‘I’ and ‘mine’ as though they were real.

“This is summarized nicely by a quote from the seventh-century Indian Buddhist master Dharmakirti:

When there is a self, one believes there is other,  
From these images of self and other come attachment and aversion,  
As a result of getting wrapped up in these,  
All possible faults arise.” pp. 4-5

“...sentient beings have intense egolessness phobia. To help them overcome this, the Buddha introduced the true nature of reality in stages. The *first turning teachings* are presented in terms of the way things appear to ordinary beings. The self exists. Things exist. The world exists. Sentient beings exist. The three times (past, present, and future) exist. Suffering exists. Cessation of suffering exists. This is what is called apparent reality. It is the way reality appears to deluded beings, and it is in these terms that the teachings of the first turning are presented.” p. 20

“The Buddha’s first teaching was about suffering that arises from not getting what you want, getting what you don’t want, losing what you have, and from the simple realities of birth, old age, sickness, and death. He did not teach methods of avoiding them, but taught that the way to transcend suffering was to recognize their true nature and the true nature of the one who suffers. The real obstacles on the path are not the difficulties we will inevitably face but wanting things to be different. Because of this we do not see things as they are, and we are tormented by hopes and fears. As the *mahasiddha* Tilopa said to his student, Naropa, ‘Son, appearances don’t bind you. It is attachment that binds you. So give up your attachment, Naropa!’

“We need to learn how to take whatever we experience as the path: embarrassment is the path, disappointment is the path, confusion is the path. Of course this is not what we want to hear. We want to hear that if we practice well, we won’t have to face such difficulties, and if things go wrong, the buddhas and gurus will protect us from such obstacles” p. 196

- *Contemplating Reality—A Practitioner’s Guide to the View in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, Andy Karr, Shambhala, 2007.

The sixteen attributes of the Four Truths in the Sanskrit Tradition (the Pali Tradition also outlines sixteen similar attributes, with some different inflections of meaning):

“Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakosa* and Dharmakirti’s *Pramanavarttika* explain that each of the four truths has four attributes that counteract four distorted conceptions about that truth. The sixteen attributes explain the truths according to their different functions and demonstrate the existence of liberation and the method to attain it....

“*Four Attributes of True Dukkha...*

1. *The polluted aggregates are impermanent (anicca, anitya) because they undergo continuous momentary arising and disintegration....*
2. *The polluted aggregates are unsatisfactory (dukkha, dukkha) because they are under the control of afflictions and karma....*
3. *The polluted aggregates are empty (sunna, sunya) because of not being a permanent, unitary, and independent self....*
4. *The polluted aggregates are selfless (anatta, nairatmya) because they lack a self-sufficient substantially existent self....*

“To tie these four attributes together, our body and mind change moment by moment; this is their nature. Our aggregates are controlled by their causes, which are ultimately tied to ignorance. Anything caused by ignorance is by nature unsatisfactory; it is the dukkha of pervasive conditioning. Once we develop this awareness, then no matter how beautiful, pleasurable, and enticing things appear, we know they are not worth clinging to. They are empty and selfless.

“*Four Attributes of True Origins...*

1. *Craving and karma are the causes (hetu) of dukkha because they are its root; due to them dukkha constantly exists....*
2. *Craving and karma are the origins (samudaya) of dukkha because they repeatedly produce all the diverse forms of dukkha....*
3. *Craving and karma are the strong producers (pabhava, prabhava) because they act forcefully to produce strong dukkha....*
4. *Craving and karma are conditions (paccaya, pratyaya) because they act as the cooperating conditions for giving rise to dukkha....*

“Contemplation of these four attributes strengthens our determination to abandon true origins of dukkha.

“*Four Attributes of True Cessations...*

1. *Nirvana is the cessation (nirodha) of dukkha because, being a state in which the origins of dukkha have been abandoned, it ensures that dukkha will no longer be produced....*
2. *Nirvana is peace (santa) because it is a separation in which afflictions have been eliminated....*
3. *Nirvana is magnificent (panita, pranita) because it is the supreme source of benefit and happiness....*

4. *Nirvana is freedom (nissarana, nihsarana) because it is total, irreversible release from samsara....*

“Contemplating these four attributes encourages us not to stop partway but to continue practicing until we attain nirvana.

*“Four Attributes of True Paths*

“The Pali tradition describes true paths as the noble eightfold path. Madhyamikas say a true path (*maggasacca, margasatya*) is an arya’s realization informed by the wisdom directly realizing the emptiness of inherent existence. True paths exist in the mindstreams of arya’s of all three vehicles. The wisdom realizing emptiness (selflessness) is the principal true path because it directly contradicts ignorance. While ignorance grasps inherent existence, the wisdom realizing emptiness sees the absence of inherent existence. Thus it is able to completely uproot ignorance and the afflictions stemming from it. When afflictions cease, polluted karma is no longer created. There is no further impetus to be reborn in samsara, and liberation is attained.

1. *The wisdom directly realizing selflessness is the path (magga, marga) because it is the unmistakable path to liberation....*
2. *The wisdom directly realizing selflessness is suitable (naya, nyaya) because it acts as the direct counterforce to the afflictions....*
3. *The wisdom directly realizing selflessness is accomplishment (patipatti, pratipatti) because it unmistakably realizes the nature of mind....*
4. *The wisdom directly realizing selflessness is deliverance (niyyanika, nairtanika) because it brings irreversible liberation.*

“Contemplating these four attributes encourages us to meditate on true paths, destroy dukkha and its origins, and actualize final, true cessation.’

- *Buddhism—One Teacher, Many Traditions*, The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2014, pp. 39-49.

“The temptation to understand these four ‘truths’ as functioning as a kind of Buddhist creed should be resisted; they do not represent ‘truth claims’ that one must intellectually assent to on becoming a Buddhist. Part of the problem here is the word ‘truth’. The word *satya* (Pali *sacca*) can certainly mean truth, but it might equally be rendered as ‘real’ or ‘actual thing’. That is, we are not dealing here with propositional truths with which we must either agree or disagree, but with four ‘true things’ or ‘realities’ whose nature, we are told, the Buddha finally understood on the night of his awakening. The teachings of the Buddha thus state that suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to cessation are realities which we fail to see as they are, and this is as true for the ‘Buddhist’ as for the ‘non-Buddhist’. The ‘Buddhist’ is simply one committed to trying to follow the Buddha’s prescriptions for coming to see these realities as they are. This is not to say that the Buddha’s discourses do not contain theoretical statements of the nature of

suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, but these descriptions function not so much as dogmas of the Buddhist faith as a convenient conceptual framework for making sense of Buddhist thought. Thus from one point of view any piece of Buddhist theory can be considered as to do with the analysis of one or the other of the four truths.”

- *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Rupert Gethin, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 60.

“The Buddha taught these truths at Varanasi, explaining them in three ways. First of all, he simply pointed them out, saying: ‘This, O monks, is Suffering. This is the Source of Suffering. This is Cessation. This is the Path.’ Later he referred to their causal aspect when he said, ‘Suffering is to be understood. The source of suffering is to be discarded. Cessation is to be realized. The path thereto should be followed.’ Still later, he indicated their resultant aspect with these words: ‘O monks, when you have understood suffering, there is nothing more to understand. When you have discarded the source of suffering, there is nothing more to discard. When you have realized cessation, there is nothing more to realize. When you have followed the path, there is nothing more to follow.’ pp. 157-158

“It is said in the teachings that ‘the four truths are true because they are in harmony with the Doctrine and because the understanding of them is the cause of liberation.’ The four truths are true since the Buddha’s exposition of them corresponds with what is the case. Since the mind is unmistakable when it perceives these truths in the manner in which they were expounded, the four truths are true also from the point of view of the one who understands them. It should be noted, however, that only sublime beings or Aryas are able to understand what these truths really are. By contrast, even though sufferings, origins, and so on, are part of the experience of ordinary beings, the latter fail to recognize them for what they are, and in fact mistake them for their opposites. Therefore, these truths are called noble truths, or ‘truths for sublime beings.’ They are not posited as truths for ordinary beings.” p. 374

- *Treasury of Precious Qualities, Book One: Sutra Teachings*, by Jigme Lingpa, Commentary by Longchen Yeshe Dorje, Kangyur Rinpoche, Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group (Revised Edition), Shambhala, 2010.

“The words ‘experiencer’ and ‘agent’ are mere conventional labels. There is no need to assert a findable experiencer of kamma or a findable creator of kamma. Such a self is superfluous because we say ‘A person experiences pleasure or pain’ simply because that feeling has arisen in that person’s feeling aggregate. In speaking of the four truths, Buddhaghosa says...:

...in the ultimate sense all the truths should be abandoned as void because of the absence of any experiencer, and doer, anyone who is extinguished, and any goer. Hence this is said:

For there is suffering but no one who suffers;  
Doing exists although there is no doer;

Extinction is but no extinguished person;  
and although there is a path, there is no goer.”

- *Buddhism—One Teacher, Many Traditions*, The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, Wisdom, 2014, p. 174.

“Nor is there pain, or cause of pain,  
or cease in pain,  
or noble path to lead from pain;  
not even wisdom to attain:  
Attainment too is emptiness.”

- From Heart of Perfect Wisdom (Prajña Paramita Hridaya), in Chants & Recitations, Rochester Zen Center, 2005.

“Next, when Manjushri inquires, ‘How does one realize the four noble truths? he is following up on what was stated earlier—that one must realize the four truths perfectly as they are. In response the sutra (cited in Prasannapada, chap. 24, Toh 3860 Tengyur, dbu ma, a, 171b2, where Chandrakirti gives the name of the sutra as *Demonstrating All Phenomena to Be Non-Entering Sutra*) says:

“O Manjushri, he who sees all mental formations as unborn thoroughly recognizes suffering. He who sees all things as not coming into being has eliminated all its origins. He who sees all phenomena as permanently transcending sorrow has actualized cessation. He who sees all phenomena as utterly unborn has cultivated the path.

“In this way, the sutra explains how, through this path, free of appropriation, one transcends sorrow. This presents very clearly how it is seeing the four truths as devoid of intrinsic existence that frees one from cyclic existence, and how the path undivorced from grasping at true existence cannot help transcend cyclic existence. It therefore demonstrates how the path of the four truths and their sixteen characteristics such as impermanence alone cannot eliminate the seeds of afflictions and how, to eliminate these, one must meditate on the truth of ‘the way things really are’ on the basis of realizing it.

- *Illuminating the Intent—An Exposition of Candrakirti’s Entering the Middle Way*, Tsongkhapa, Trans. by Thubten Jinpa, Wisdom (part of their *The Library of Tibetan Classics*), 2021, pp. 90-91.

## Possible Discussion Starting Points

1. In preparing the materials for this discussion, I (Larry) came to realize how superficially I had been considering the Four Noble Truths, thinking, “Oh, that’s just the basics, for beginners.” I now feel I am just beginning to appreciate their profundity. What has been your experience?
2. Why do you suppose the Buddha selected this particular teaching to inaugurate his fifty-plus-year career expounding the Dharma?
3. What do you think of Andy Karr’s statement (p. 2) “The real obstacles on the path are not the difficulties we will inevitably face but wanting things to be different”? How does that line up with Gethin’s insight (p.4) “The ‘Buddhist’ is simply one committed to trying to follow the Buddha’s prescriptions for coming to see these realities as they are”?
4. In what way(s) do you see the Four Truths as encapsulating, or presenting, the entirety of Buddhist thought.
5. Starting at the bottom of page 5 through page 6, we see presentations, or reminders, of the emptiness aspect of the Four Truths. Do you find this to be confounding, or inspiring?
6. There are considerable depths and dimensions of the Four Truths, individually and collectively, that merit further exploration. Shall we proceed, discussing the pivotal notion of dukkha, next month?