

The Four Noble Truths (Cattari Ariyasaccani)

The Buddha had experienced two extremes before he decided to meditate under the Bodhi Tree to gain enlightenment. One extreme is the constant attachment to Sensual pleasures (kamasukhallikanuyoga) which He deemed as base, vulgar, worldly, ignoble and profitless. The other extreme is the constant addiction to Self-mortification (attakilamathanuyoga) which He remarked as painful, ignoble and profitless. Both these extremes were rejected by the Buddha.

After his enlightenment, having realized that his two former teachers were dead and did not have the opportunity to listen to his dhamma, the Buddha went to Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Benares, to look for his old colleagues, the five ascetics whom He expounded his first sermon. This first sermon is known as the Dhamacakkappavattana Sutta, 'Setting in Motion the Wheel of Truth' or The Four Noble Truths, which are :-

1. Dukkha (sufferings or unsatisfactoriness)
2. Samudaya (the arising or origin of dukkha)
3. Nirodha (the cessation of dukkha)
4. Magga (the way leading to the cessation of dukkha)

The First Noble Truth: Dukkha

The First Noble Truth of Suffering is interpreted to mean that life according to Buddhism is nothing but suffering and pain, which can be very misleading that many people have been misled into regarding Buddhism as pessimistic. On the contrary, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic. In fact, Buddhist by understanding the world as it is, are the happiest people who realized freedom, peace, tranquility and happiness. Then, what is suffering?

Sufferings are viewed from three aspects :

- 1) dukkha as ordinary suffering (dukkha-dukkha)
- 2) dukkha as produced by change (viparinama-dukkha)
- 3) dukkha as conditioned states (samkhara-dukkha)

All kinds of suffering in life like birth, old age, sickness, death, association with unpleasant persons and conditions, separation from beloved ones and pleasant conditions, not getting what one desires, grief, lamentation, distress –all such forms of physical and mental suffering, which are universally accepted as suffering or pain, are included in dukkha as ordinary suffering.

A happy feeling, a happy condition in life, is not permanent, not everlasting. It changes sooner or later. When it changes, it produces pain, suffering, unhappiness. This vicissitude is included in dukkha as suffering produced by change.

The third form of dukkha as conditioned states is the most important philosophical aspect of the First Noble Truth, and it requires come analytical explanation of what we consider as a 'being', as an 'individual', or as 'I'. What we call a 'being', or an individual', or 'I' is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which

may be divided into five groups or aggregates of Matter, Sensations, Perceptions, Mental Formations and Consciousness. These Five Aggregates of Attachment are constantly changing and they are all impermanent. Whatever is impermanent is dukkha (Yad aniccam tam dukkham).

The Second Noble Truth: Samudaya

The Second Noble Truth is that of the arising or origin of dukkha. It is this "thirst" (craving, tanha) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, and which is bound up with passionate greed, and which finds fresh delights now here and now there, namely;

- 1) thirst for sense-pleasures (kama-tanha)
- 2) thirst for existence and becoming (bhava-tanha)
- 3) thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation, vibbava-tanha)

It is this "thirst", desire, greed, craving, manifesting itself in various ways, that gives rise to all forms of suffering and the continuity of beings. "Thirst" also includes not only desire for, and attachment to, sense-pleasures, wealth and power, but also desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, views, opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs. All the troubles and strife in the world, from little personal quarrels in families to great wars between nations and countries, arise out of this selfish "thirst". From this point of view, all economic, political and social problems are rooted in this selfish "thirst". Great statesmen who try to settle international disputes and talk of war and peace only in economic and political terms touch the superficialities, and never go deep into the real root of the problem. As the Buddha says, "The world lacks and hankers, and is enslaved to "thirst".

The Third Noble Truth: Nirodha

The Third Noble Truth is that there is emancipation, liberation, freedom from suffering, from the continuity of dukkha. This is called the Noble Truth of the Cessation of dukkha, which is Nibbana.

To eliminate dukkha completely one has to eliminate the main root of dukkha, which is "thirst". Therefore Nibbana is known also by the term "Extinction of Thirst". Nibbana is the complete cessation of that very "thirst", giving it up, renouncing it, emancipation from it, detachment from it. To calm of all conditioned things, to give up of all defilements, and the extinction of "thirst", detachment, cessation, Nibbana. In other words, the extinction of desire, the extinction of hatred, the extinction of illusion (lobha, dosa and moha) that ultimately leads to the abandoning and destruction of desire and craving for these Five Aggregates of Attachment: that is the cessation of dukkha. The cessation of Continuity and becoming is Nibbana.

The Fourth Noble Truth: Magga

The Fourth Noble Truth is that of the Way leading to the Cessation of Dukkha. This is known as the 'Middle Path' (Majjhima Patipada), because it avoids two extremes: one extreme being the search for happiness through the pleasures of the senses, which is 'low, common, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary people'; the other being the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, 'which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable'. This Middle Path gives vision and knowledge, which leads

to Calm, Insight, Enlightenment, Nibbana. It is general known as the Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya-Atthangika-Magga) consist of:-

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)

It is not necessary to follow and practice these eight categories one after the other in the numerical order, but should be developed more or less simultaneously. They are all linked together and each helps the cultivation of the others. These eight factors aim at promoting and perfecting the three essentials of Buddhist training and discipline: namely; (a) Ethical Conduct (Sila), (b) Mental Discipline (Samadhi) and (c) Wisdom (Panna).
Ethical Conduct:

- 1) Right Speech
 - a. Abstain from telling lies
 - b. Abstain from slander
 - c. Abstain from harsh speech
 - d. Abstain from idle talk
- 2) Right Action
 - a. Abstain from killing
 - b. Abstain from stealing
 - c. Abstain from lying
 - d. Abstain from sexual misconduct
- 3) Right Livelihood
 - a. Abstain from trafficking in arms and lethal weapons
 - b. Abstain from breeding and slaughter of animals
 - c. Abstain from trafficking in human trade
 - d. Abstain from intoxicant and poison

Mental Discipline

- 1) Right Effort
 - a. To prevent evil and unwholesome states of mind from arising
 - b. To get rid of such evil and unwholesome states that already arisen
 - c. To cause to arise good and wholesome states of mind not yet arisen
 - d. To develop and bring to perfection the good and wholesome states of mind already arisen
- 2) Right Mindfulness – to be diligently aware, mindful and attentive with regard to:
 - a. The activities of the body
 - b. Sensations or feelings
 - c. The activities of the mind
 - d. Ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (mental objects)
- 3) Right Concentration
 - a. Focus and maintain the mind and the mental properties in a state of balance

- b. To achieve one-pointedness of the mind in a state of equanimity

Wisdom

- 1) Right Thought
 - a. Thoughts of renunciation or detachment which are opposed to lustful desire
 - b. Thoughts of Benevolence which are opposed to ill-will
 - c. Thoughts of Harmlessness which are opposed to cruelty
- 2) Right Understanding
 - a. Understanding of the Four Noble Truths and to see things as they really are

With regard to the Four Noble Truths, four functions need to perform:

The First Noble Truth is Dukkha, the nature of life, its suffering, its sorrows and joys, its imperfection and unsatisfactoriness, its impermanence and insubstantiality. One must understand it as a fact, clearly and completely.

The Second Noble Truth is the Origin of Dukkha, which is desire, 'thirst' accompanied by all other passions, defilements and impurities. One has to discard it, to eliminate, to destroy and eradicate it.

The Third Noble Truth is the Cessation of Dukkha, Nibbana, the Absolute Truth, the Ultimate Reality. One is to realize it.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Path leading to the realization of Nibbana. One is to follow it and keep to it.

Prepared by Raymond Yow
For YMBA Senior Part 1