

The Four Noble Truths

In the first sermon that the Buddha taught after his enlightenment, to an audience of only five, he gave a brief outline that was to provide a framework for all of the rest of his teachings. He structured this outline as four simple statements, which he referred to as Noble Truths. They are:

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering
2. The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering
3. The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering
4. The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

In today's talk, I'll try to give a brief introduction to the first three of these Noble Truths. Next week, Adeesha will be talking about the Fourth Noble Truth.

The First Noble Truth: *Dukkha*

The First Noble Truth, that of suffering, is perhaps the most self-evident of the four, but is nevertheless often misunderstood. So what is this “suffering” that Buddhists are always going on about?

The Pali word for this phenomenon is *dukkha*, and its most common translation as “suffering” may not be the best. Some people prefer to translate it as “stress,” others as “unsatisfactoriness.” That last one is a terrible word, but is perhaps closest to the true meaning as I understand it.

“Suffering,” as we use it in normal English, usually denotes a dramatic and obvious type of *dukkha*: the death of a loved one, a chronic medical condition, a severe bodily injury. All of these things are part of *dukkha*, but are not the whole story.

The Buddha describes *dukkha* like this:

Birth is *dukkha*, aging is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are *dukkha*; association with the unloved is *dukkha*; separation from the loved is *dukkha*; not getting what is wanted is *dukkha*. In short, the five aggregates of clinging are *dukkha*. – SN 56.11

So *dukkha* is not just the big stuff. We don't have the time to go into the five aggregates of clinging, but it is probably safe to paraphrase that last sentence as “all conditioned phenomena are *dukkha*.”

So we see that *dukkha* is a much broader concept than what is normally included in the English word “suffering.” It denotes everything from terminal cancer down to that feeling you have when you get a 98 on a test but think you should have gotten 100. It includes every little feeling of “not right” that you’ve ever had.

The Buddha further breaks down *dukkha* into three types (SN 45.165):

Dukkha-dukkha – this is the obvious sort of *dukkha* that might appropriately be designated as “suffering,” such as a response to bodily pain.

Viparinama-dukkha – “suffering in change” This includes the *dukkha* that is inherent in pleasurable phenomena because we know that they will not last. The sunshine that you are enjoying on a nice day will inevitably end at dusk; the flowers your significant other gave you will die.

Sankhara-dukkha – “suffering due to formations” This is the really deep level of *dukkha* that is inherent in all phenomena. In fact, in addition to being the First Noble Truth, *dukkha* is also listed as one of the three characteristics of all phenomena, emphasizing once again that *dukkha* is all-pervasive, not just something that we experience on bad days.

So, enough about what *dukkha* is. Why do we care? Why did the Buddha begin the most fundamental of his teachings with *dukkha*?

There are many ways in which the Buddha has been portrayed in various cultures, but one of these ways is as the Great Physician. Just as a doctor begins his work with a diagnosis, the Buddha began his teaching with a statement of the problem that he, and each of us, wants to solve. The rest of the Buddha’s forty years of teaching were oriented entirely toward that goal. In fact, when asked to summarize his teachings, the Buddha often said: “I declare only *dukkha* and the cessation of *dukkha*” (e.g., MN 22).

The Second Noble Truth: *Samudaya*

So, the First Noble Truth is the truth of *dukkha*, an all-pervasive unsatisfactoriness inherent in our existence. Continuing the metaphor of the Great Physician, we know that the Buddha has diagnosed the problem; he then seeks the underlying cause. Hence the Second Noble Truth is known as *dukkha samudayo*, the origin of suffering. Why do we suffer? The Buddha’s answer is *tanha* or craving:

And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of *dukkha*: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there—i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. –SN 56.11

Here the Buddha enumerates three kinds of *tanha*. *Kama-tanha*, the craving for sensual pleasure, is often the most obviously troublesome. This includes our everyday desires for things like food, sex, and money. *Bhava-tanha* includes things like attachment to ideas (“I believe in God.” “I believe in communism.”). Attachments to ideas can be very strong, especially if we make them a part of our identity: “I’m a woman.” “I’m a man.” “I’m a democrat.” “I’m a Buddhist.” Finally, *vibhava-tanha* denotes a craving for annihilation or attachment to a nihilistic worldview.

The Buddhist *suttas* include some very evocative metaphors for *tanha*. An entire chapter (24) of the *Dhammapada* is devoted to the topic. Some selections:

The craving of a person who lives carelessly
grows like a creeping vine.
He plunges from existence to existence,
like a monkey seeking fruit in the forest.

Here we see *tanha* as a creeping vine. Remember that this is from India, home of the strangler fig. For those of you from the South, think kudzu.

Whomever this miserable craving,
this entanglement in the world, overcomes,
his sorrow grows, like grass well rained upon.

Another translation of this verse uses the term “sticky, uncouth craving.” This harkens back to a pre-Buddhist notion of *asavas*, which were viewed as a sort of glue that binds beings to the cycle of rebirth.

Notice how the Second Noble Truth takes us a fair distance toward a solution to *dukkha*. We know that *dukkha* itself is inherent in conditioned existence: there’s not much we can *directly* do about it. But craving is something that we *do*, something that we can at least try to control.

The Third Noble Truth: *Nirodha*

The third truth follows very naturally from the second. If craving is the cause of *dukkha*, then *dukkha* can be eliminated by removing craving. So the Third Noble Truth is the truth of the cessation (*nirodha*) of *dukkha*. In the Buddha’s words:

And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of *dukkha*: the remainderless fading and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving. --SN 56.11

The Buddha used a very interesting term to describe the result of this cessation: *nibbana*. This word is better known in the Sanskrit form: *nirvana*. Probably the best English translation of this term is “unbinding.” It is the word used to

describe a fire going out. To us, that sounds like a bad thing. When modern westerners think of a fire going out, we might think of death or annihilation, like Othello blowing out the candle before he kills his wife. But in the physical science of the Buddha's time, a fire was seen as being bound to and dependent upon its fuel, so a fire going out carried the connotation of freedom, not extinction. Much of the language used to describe *nibbana* centers around this idea of freedom. Some of this language is quite poetic and employs seeming contradictions to point to the fact that *nibbana* is outside the conditional world with which we are familiar.

Where water, earth, fire, and wind have no footing:
There the stars do not shine,
 the sun is not visible,
 the moon does not appear,
 darkness is not found.
And when a sage,
 a Brahman through sagacity,
 has known this for himself,
then from form and formless,
 from bliss and pain,
 he is freed.

--Ud. 1.10

The Buddha identified this sense of freedom as the keynote to all his teachings:

Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so this doctrine-and-discipline has but one taste, the taste of freedom. –Ud.?

Next time we meet, we'll talk about the Fourth Noble Truth, which is a detailed path for achieving this cessation. This is known as the Noble Eightfold Path. For now I'd just like to mention one aspect of that path: concentration. Looking back at some of the passages I just read, we see that the Buddha characterizes craving as "relishing now here and now there." It is "like a monkey seeking fruit in the forest." Craving is inherently unstable: it grasps at one thing and then another. By definition, it is never satisfied. When we sit in meditation, we still our minds, at least a little, and give ourselves a break from craving. Eventually, we hope, this will develop into a mental habit that will help to achieve a more lasting freedom from craving, and thus also from *dukkha*.