

The Four Noble Truths

Over the course of this semester, we've talked about *a lot* of different things, and a lot of very metaphysical and philosophical things—

- 1) Buddhism's views and attitude towards sex,
- 2) ideas of Buddhism and the self and soul (or rather, a lack),
- 3) Buddhism and skepticism,
- 4) and the nature of interconnectedness in all of phenomena.

However, when we talk about all of these things, I think the main question we should be asking is “So, *why is this important?*” *Why* does Buddhism have an opinion on sex, how is this formed, how is this useful; *why* does Buddhism have such strong ideas on self and identity, how is this formed, how is this useful to me, etc?

Basically, everything we discuss in Buddhism ties itself back to the Four Noble Truths—the very first thing the Buddha ever spoke about after his enlightenment. It is from this perspective of looking at the world that Buddhism forms its opinions and views. All things are related to these truths, and whether you are Buddhist or not, I think you can find some obvious truth in them (which is why they're called truths). *Although seemingly basic, these are some of the single most important words of wisdom we can know and realize.*

So, today we'll be talking about

- 1) What are the Four Noble Truths
- 2) What they mean
- 3) Why this is important to our practice and lives

What Are the Four Noble Truths?

The Four Noble Truths are the first words of wisdom realized by the Buddha—they are a statement about the condition of our lives, and the potential that lies within that condition. They are:

- 1) There is suffering (The Noble Truth of Suffering)
- 2) Suffering has a cause (The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering)
- 3) Suffering can be removed (The Noble Truth of the Extinction of Suffering)
- 4) How we remove suffering (The Noble Truth of the Path that Leads to the Extinction of Suffering; or, The Eightfold Path)

#1 - There is Suffering

A lot of people find this to be a bleak truth, and a pessimistic one. After all, it seems sad that the very first thing The Buddha came to realize in his enlightenment was that life is suffering—that life sucks. However, a lot of you may be saying “Well, *duh*”—hell, we all know life sucks sometimes. It's not an inherently awe-inspiring truth, but it is a very *very* important one to recognize.

Quite frequently the Buddha is referred to as the Great Physician, because his wisdom and teachings are said to cure us of suffering. Like a physician, he starts with a diagnosis of our lives, which is that we are suffering. Although a diagnosis can seem like a bad thing, it is actually the

best thing that can happen to you when you are looking to fight any disease. You first have to recognize that you have a problem before you can fix it—this is the first noble truth.

So, we suffer, and we suffer from many things:

“Birth is suffering; decay is suffering; Death is suffering; Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to get what one desires is suffering; in short: the five aggregates of existence are suffering.” (Digha Nikaya, 22)

#2 - There is a Cause to Suffering

Although suffering exists, it is not the permanent state of our lives—suffering, like all things, has causes. Like diagnosing a disease, just knowing we have a problem doesn't fully help us; we have to know *why* our problem is coming about in order to stop it.

The Buddha said that our suffering stems directly from our craving:

“...Craving gives rise to fresh rebirth, and, bound up with pleasure and lust, now here, now there, finds ever fresh delight... Where does this craving arise and take root? Wherever in the world there is the delightful and pleasurable, there this craving arises and takes root. Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind are delightful and pleasurable; there this craving arises and takes root.” (DN, 22)

So, our craving and attachment is the causation of our suffering. It's easy to misinterpret this in the lens of the Puritanical belief that many of us are familiar with in the West, and think that the Buddha is calling the world around us an evil and lustful place. This, however, is not the case.

What the Buddha is claiming is that the world around us is not the problem, but how we interpret it and deal with it is. When we encounter any phenomenon, we naturally classify it as *good*, *bad*, or *neutral*. Obviously, we want to keep good things and we want to get rid of bad things. That's pretty understandable—so why should that cause us to suffer?

The suffering comes about due to the impermanence of all things—recalling the Five Aggregates, everything is composed of many smaller things, but each of these cannot last forever. That good thing we want can't last. *We are going to be separated from the things we like, and we're going to get things we don't like.* This is why we suffer.

#3-Suffering can be Removed

Here is the upswing of the Four Noble Truths: *we don't have to suffer.* Suffering, like all things, has a cause, and thus can be just as impermanent as everything else. If we remove the cause of suffering—attachment—we remove suffering itself.

The third noble truth is “the complete fading away and extinction of this craving, its forsaking and giving up, the liberation and detachment from it...Wherever in this world there are delightful and pleasurable things, there this craving may vanish, there it may be extinguished” (DN, 22).

“Whosoever of the monks or priests regards the delightful and pleasurable things in the world as impermanent, miserable (causing suffering), or without an ego (or inherent nature, or *atman*)...it is [they] who overcomes this craving” (Samyutta Nikaya, 12:66).

#4- *The Way to Remove the Causes of Suffering*

Conceptually, Truth #3 makes sense—if you get rid of the causes of suffering, you won’t suffer—but that is clearly easier said than done. Thus, the Buddha gave us advice for how to remove the causes of suffering.

First, he suggested we live a life of moderation. By avoiding excesses of sensual pleasure and total self mortification, one walks “The Middle Path.” This one requires some historical context to understand fully: during the Buddha’s time, the mindset of most people was that that your main options in life were to live in total hedonistic gluttony, or to practice rigorous, and often dangerous asceticism. The Buddha disagreed, and said that it is between these two lifestyles that one finds happiness—live a healthy life of moderation, and you’ll find contentment. Although ancient in its roots, its application is just as plausible.

The Buddha also laid out *how* to walk the Middle Path in eight steps, which we call the Eightfold Path. This helps us plan how to live a life full of 1) Wisdom, 2) Ethical Conduct, and 3) Mental Development:

- 1) Right Understanding
- 2) Right Mindedness
- 3) Right Speech
- 4) Right Action
- 5) Right Living
- 6) Right Effort
- 7) Right Attentiveness
- 8) Right Concentration

Adeesha will be talking in-depth about the Eightfold Path next week, so I will say nothing else about it, but will stress its importance. This is the actual treatment to our diagnosis of suffering!

So, Why is this Important?

It is important to remember that the Four Noble Truths *are not* commandments that restrict us, but rather is a means of guidance; they are a tools to guide our practice so we can remove our suffering. We are not here to serve the Truths, but they are here to serve us. Thus, the importance of these truths is that they are the process of diagnosing and treating the suffering in our life—however, simply by knowing them they do nothing. Like a medical treatment, it is up to the patient to apply the medication and advice into their life. Only then are the Truths useful: when we actualize them into our actions and lifestyles; when they do not become vague concepts and philosophy, but reality.