

The Four Truths: The Essence of Buddha's Teachings - Introduction

In the last edition of our newsletter, we explained that we will gradually add teachings to Prajna's 'Discovering Buddhism' guide page to support a deeper exploration and understanding of the different topics presented on that page. We launched this process with a collection of teachings exploring what it means to embark on the spiritual path by using the example of the Buddha's life and his enlightenment. In this edition now, we will delve into the first series of teachings the Buddha gave after his enlightenment known as the four truths of the noble ones: The truth of:

Suffering, which is to be understood; the causes of suffering, which are to be abandoned; the cessation of suffering, which is to be actualized and the path to cessation which is to be relied upon.

The first teaching explores Buddha's enlightenment and his decision to teach.

VIDEO: Profound peace, free of complexity

(6 min)

Sogyal Rinpoche, New Delhi, 15 February 1996

Reflection

What the Buddha realized is that all sentient beings have as their essence the Buddha nature, which he described as "profound peace, free of complexity, uncompounded luminosity." *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* describes Buddha nature like this:

Where exactly is this Buddha nature? It is in the sky-like nature of our mind. Utterly open, free and limitless, it is fundamentally so simple and natural that it can never be complicated, corrupted or stained, so pure that it is beyond the concept of purity or impurity. ...Buddha nature has a quality the sky cannot have, that of the radiant clarity of awareness. As it is said:

It is simply your flawless, present awareness, cognizant and empty, naked and awake.

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche described this awareness as "merely the immaculate looking naturally at itself."¹

¹ Both quotes are from chapter four of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, pages 49-50.

—Read and reflect on the descriptions of Buddha nature given above, or if you prefer you could reflect on the example of the vase given in the teaching you just heard.² What do you understand from this? What makes buddha nature difficult to describe or express?

How Buddha introduced the four truths of the noble ones

Buddha presented his teachings in ways that the particular people he was addressing could understand, because he understood that the path towards enlightenment needs to be understood and practised in progressive and manageable stages. Buddha gave three bodies of teachings to beings of different capacities. These cycles of teachings are known as the Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma, the first of which is the teaching on the Four Truths of the Noble Ones.

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche begins the following teaching by describing how Buddha gave the teaching on the Four Truths of the Noble Ones. Then he explains the structure, framework and logic of these four truths, and how we can apply them to ourselves. As you listen, note down this structure and logic.

VIDEO: The First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma: The Four Noble Truths (15 min)

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, Gangtok 27 June 2020

Study question

The Four Truths of the Noble Ones are not supposed to be seen just as something we understand simply intellectually, or as a set of rules, but as insights and a set of actions that we actively apply to our lives. What did Ringu Tulku Rinpoche say about how we need to apply each action to ourselves?

Reflection

—The Four Truths of the Noble Ones begin with the experience and understanding of suffering. It seems to suggest that it is our experience of suffering that is the main trigger for our interest in following the Buddhist path. Do you agree? Could there be other reasons? What drew you initially to this path?

² This example is also given in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, on page 49.

Points on The Four Truths of the Noble Ones for your study

If you like, cut and paste this page into a separate file to keep for future reference.

The structure of the Four Truths of the Noble Ones – pairs of cause and effect.

Suffering, which is to be understood	effect
Causes of Suffering, which is to be abandoned	cause
Cessation of suffering, which is to be actualized	effect
Path, which is to be relied upon	cause

—The first pair of truths describe the **mechanism of samsara**: the cause and effect of suffering, they describe what our lives are like first of all and then what is at its root.

—The second pair describe the end of suffering, **nirvana**, state totally free of suffering followed by the path, the method we apply to get there.

Why are Four Truths of the Noble Ones arranged in this way? It is an *experiential logic*.

First we need to realize we are suffering, and then look for its cause. Cessation comes before the path because it gives us hope that there is a way out and suffering can be eliminated completely. Becoming confident that nirvana is possible comes before our following the path of Dharma, which we are unlikely to do if we don't believe suffering can be brought to an end.

One image used to explain the logic of the Four Truths of the Noble Ones is that of an experienced doctor. The Buddha is seen as the doctor, and we are like the patient.

—Suffering is the patient's condition.

—The causes of suffering are like the diagnosis of that condition.

— The cessation of suffering is like becoming completely well again.

— The path is the treatment proscribed by the doctor to bring about the cure.

Of course this implies that we need to apply the doctor's advice to ourselves if we want to get well!

If you wish to study the structure and logic of the Four Truths of the Noble Ones more deeply, then watch this ~~optional~~ teaching:

VIDEO: Introduction to the Four Noble Truths

(15 min)

Sogyal Rinpoche, Haileybury, 9 April 2013

Can you answer the following questions:

—Can you recall the Four Truths of the Noble Ones, with their qualifications (or sets of actions)?

—Which of the Four Noble Truths are connected to samsara and which are connected with nirvana?

—How is the term *klesha* defined in the teaching?

— Give a summary of the four truths relating them to cause and effect and also using the example of curing a disease.

Making the Four Truths of the Noble Ones work for us

Although they are a framework for Buddha's teachings, the Four Truths of the Noble Ones are not something merely to recite unquestioningly. As Khandro Rinpoche explains in the next teaching, they are something to apply to our way of experiencing and reacting to external events.

VIDEO: The Four Noble Truths: Taking responsibility for our true potential (8 min)

Khandro Rinpoche, Karma Shedrup Ling, Oslo, 23 April 2012

Reflection

Khandro Rinpoche says that the truth of the path "addresses the need for every human being to be responsible for whatever good potential they have. And that is the main emphasis of the Buddhist teachings."

—For those who have been studying and practising for a while, how does this description fit with your understanding and experience of the Buddhist teachings?

—For those who are relatively new students, how does it feel to have the Buddhist path described in this way?