

The Four Truths: The Essence of Buddha's Teachings - The First Noble Truth

After gaining enlightenment Buddha gave his first teaching on the four truths of the noble ones. Previously we looked at the structure, framework and logic of the four truths, and saw that they are not simply something we learn, but insights and a set of actions to apply to our lives.

—Can you recall the four truths of the noble ones in the right order, together with the qualifications explaining the actions to take for each one?

For our study on the first truth, the truth of suffering, we begin with Patrick Gaffney.

PLAY VIDEO: Suffering must be known

(15 min)

Patrick Gaffney, Haileybury, 9 April 2013

a) *See if you can answer the following questions:*

—Why is it so important to know what is meant by suffering and to fully understand it?

—Patrick used the example of someone waiting behind a door wearing a tiger mask. What does this example tell us about how we could have a different relationship with suffering?

b) *Contemplation:*

Read this passage written by the Dalai Lama:

It's very important that we understand the context of the Buddhist emphasis on recognizing that we are all in the state of suffering. Otherwise there is a danger we could misunderstand the Buddhist outlook and think that it involves a rather morbid pessimism and obsessiveness about the reality of suffering. The reason why Buddha laid so much emphasis on developing insight into the nature of suffering is that there is an alternative, there is a way out. It's actually possible to free oneself from it.

—How does this point change the way you look at gaining insight into suffering and your responses to it?

Points on The Truth of Suffering for your study

Buddhism distinguishes three types of suffering:

1. The suffering of suffering is unpleasant for as long as it persists, and pleasurable when it ceases, like salt in a wound.

This is the most obvious category of suffering. It includes the suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death, separation from what we hold dear, encountering what is undesirable, and failing to achieve what we want. All these types of suffering are undesirable from the very first moment they appear, and are therefore easily understood to be painful.

Suffering of suffering can also include one type of suffering heaped upon another. For example: we take a trip to Paris, our passport is stolen, running after the thief we break a leg, so when we are taken to hospital we can no longer identify who we are etc. etc.

2. The suffering of change is pleasant when it arises and unpleasant when it ceases, like eating too much or too little.

The suffering of change means that no matter where we are, and no matter how seemingly pleasurable and attractive our house, body or life is, our situation cannot possibly remain as it is. It is bound to change, because it is still subject to the laws of impermanence. When it does change, what was previously a pleasurable experience becomes a source of suffering.

3. The all-pervasive suffering of conditioning is difficult for ordinary beings to apprehend but unbearable for enlightened beings who perceive it clearly. The difference between the two is likened to that of an eyelash in the hand, and an eyelash in the eye.

This refers to an underlying feeling of dissatisfaction we have with our lives, a background sense of unease. We can feel insecure and frustrated about our own limitations and our inability to control our life and our world.

This kind of suffering is less easy to notice. Quite often, we are completely unaware of it. The Buddhist understanding of all-pervasive suffering is based on seeing everything in the world as interdependent, impermanent, and constantly shifting. We do not always stay aware of this and, whenever we are ignorant of the fundamental reality of things, we will suffer.

Changing the way we look at suffering

We can't change the fact that there is suffering, but we can change our attitude to suffering. The next three teachings offer us different perspectives on how we can do that. The first teaching shows us how suffering can teach us renunciation and compassion for others.

PLAY VIDEO: We have a limited understanding of suffering (7 min)

Khandro Rinpoche, Mindrol Ling Monastery, 19 April 2020

Practice

Khandro Rinpoche tells us that looking at suffering, “breaks the cocoon of our fragile self and our tendency for self-cherishing tendency. It allows us to have a much clearer understanding of what the suffering of other sentient beings is, and how many of those experiences are beyond what we can imagine them to be. It makes our mind more tender.”

Reflecting on suffering can therefore open our hearts, so let's practise doing this now:

—First of all, settle your mind for a short while.

—Now, bring alive in your mind the plight of a particular animal, or of one of the many forms of human suffering that we can see every day on the news.

—As it says in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*: “Any one of these sights could open the eyes of your heart to the fact of vast suffering in the world. Let it.”

—“Be vulnerable: use that quick, bright uprush of compassion; focus on it, go deep into your heart and meditate on it, develop it, enhance, and deepen it.”

—“All beings, everywhere, suffer; let your heart go out to them all in spontaneous and immeasurable compassion, and direct that compassion, along with the blessing of all the buddhas, to the alleviation of suffering everywhere.”¹

—After a while, drop your focus and return to meditation, staying open to any sense of compassion you have opened to during the practice.

How to do something about the suffering we experience

When Buddha saw the suffering of old age, sickness and death, he didn't just ignore it and absent-mindedly get on with his life. He immediately started looking for a wisdom and a method that would help himself and all other sentient beings to overcome suffering. His

¹ From chapter 12, 'Compassion: The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel', '5. How to Meditate on Compassion', page 203 of the English edition.

determination led to renounce the pleasures of life, to free himself from samsara and to show others how to do the same. In the next teaching, Sogyal Rinpoche advises us not to be passive with samsara, but to let it be a springboard for renunciation.

PLAY VIDEO: Don't be patient with samsara

(8 min)

Sogyal Rinpoche, Lerab Ling, 4 August 2000

Some points to consider

—Why is samsara a bankrupt bank or propaganda? If you don't think it is, what's your reasoning?

—How can you renounce samsara and still have fun?

—What advice does this teaching give about how to be at work?

The illusion of suffering

Before hearing Ringu Tulku Rinpoche present a way of seeing through suffering, answer this question:

—Is it possible to get rid of suffering?

PLAY VIDEO: Seeing through suffering is the truth of suffering

(13 min)

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, Dzogchen Beara, 1 June 2002

Consider the following questions:

—What is meant by “seeing through suffering is the truth of suffering”?

—Read this quotation from the teaching and see what you understand from it:

I need to understand that everything is changing. That is the way it is. I am myself like a process. Everything is like a process, and I'm trying to grab at a thing which is not possible to hold onto. If I try to grab flowing water, and say, “Oh, it's terrible, I cannot hold this”, it's not the water's fault. It's my fault. I don't know the nature of the water, so therefore I have a problem.

—What did Milarepa realise that allowed him to overcome all fear of death?

Further study: Read, or reread chapters two and three of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.