

The Four Noble Truths འཕགས་པའི་བདེན་པ་བཞི་

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Introduction

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If the Buddha had taught his disciples principally by using his miraculous abilities and various powers, it would not have been very effective in helping human beings on the path of **liberation (relief)**. The best way to show them **wisdom and liberation** was to point out the very truth of things; to point out the way things really are. So, this is what he did: He showed the truth through the four noble truths

By seeing the way things really are, the students learned how to remove their mistakes and their delusions (mistaken belief). Removing one's mistakes and mistaken belief automatically destroys the causes (reason) of one's suffering and hardships. This allows one

to progressively reach the state of liberation (relief) and great wisdom. That is why the four noble truths is the essence of the first teachings of the Buddha.

The First Noble Truth: Full understanding of suffering (feeling pain) and its existence (origin)

As we all know people are aware of suffering (pain), knowing when we have unhappy result of hunger, cold, or sickness, and recognize these as things that we all don't like. But the first noble truth includes awareness of all the result of suffering, because it surrounds the very nature and essence of suffering. This includes knowledge of the nice and the clear sides of suffering. The obvious aspect of suffering is immediate pain or difficulty in the moment. Subtle suffering is more difficult to understand, because it begins with happiness. But by its very nature this happiness must change because it can't go on forever. Because it must change into suffering, subtle suffering is the impermanence of pleasure.

We think that a particular situation will give us the most happiness we can ever imagine, but actually, within the situation, there is a huge amount of pain. If we think of those who are really fortunate —those gods or human beings with a very rich and healthy life— it seems as though they have nothing but happiness. It is hard to understand that the origin, the very fiber of what is taking place is suffering, because the situation is subject to change.

The first noble truth makes it clear that there is suffering. Once one knows what suffering is, one must remove that suffering. It is not a question of removing the suffering itself, but of removing the causes of suffering. Once one removes the causes of suffering, then automatically the effect, which is suffering, is no longer present. This is why; in order to remove this suffering, one becomes aware of the second noble truth, the truth of universal origination.

The Second Noble Truth: Truth of the Cause (origin) of Suffering/Interdependent Origination

The truth of origination indicates that the root cause of suffering is negative karma (Negative activities). If one does not understand the Buddha's teachings, one would most likely attribute all happiness and suffering to some external cause. One might think that happiness and suffering come from the environment, or from the gods, and that everything

that happens originates in some source outside of one's control. If one believes this, then it is extremely hard, if not impossible, to remove suffering and its causes.

On the other hand, when one realizes that the experience of suffering is a result of what one has done, that is, a result of one's karma (positive or negative activities), removing suffering becomes possible. Once one is aware of how suffering takes place, then one can begin to remove the causes of suffering. First, one must know that what one experiences is not dependent on outside forces, but on what one has done before. This is the understanding of karma. Negative karma produces suffering and is controlled by the bad mind.

The Third Noble Truth: The cessation (how to stop) of suffering (the pain) is possible by removing the causes or reason.

We have control over suffering, because karma (Good/Bad Actions) and the defilements (bad emotions) take place within us—we create them, we experience them. For that reason, we don't need to depend on anyone else to remove the cause of suffering. The truth of interdependent origination means that if we do unvirtuous (Bad) actions, we are creating suffering.

It also means if we stop bad actions, we remove the possibility of experiencing suffering in the future. What we experience is entirely in our hands. Therefore, the Buddha has said that we should give up the causes of negative karma and the bad mindset. Good actions result in the outside state of happiness and bad actions result in suffering. This idea is not particularly easy to grasp, because one can't see the whole process take place from beginning to end.

There are three kinds of actions: mental or mind, verbal or speech, and physical or body. These are subdivided into bad and good physical, verbal and mental actions. If one stops the three types of bad actions, then one's actions become automatically good.

We can go on to examine the various states of mind and see that a good mind produces happiness and bad mind creates unhappiness. For example, strong aggression or anger will cause us to lose our friends. Because of our aggressiveness, our enemies will become even worse enemies and the situation will become inflamed. If we are aggressive and hurt others and they have friends, then eventually those friends will also become our enemies.

On the other hand, if we wish to benefit others, goodness will come out of it through the power of caring for our loved ones and then through wishing to help them develop goodness. Through this they will become close and helpful friends. Through the power of our love and care, our enemies and people we don't get along with will improve their behavior and those enemies may eventually become friends. If we have companions and wish to benefit others, we can end up with very good friends and all the benefits which that brings. In this way, we can see how cause and effect operate, how a virtuous mind brings about happiness and how a unvirtuous mind brings about suffering and problems.

However, the Buddha in his great kindness and wisdom has given us a very skillful way to eliminate the very root of all the problems through the examination of the belief in the existence of self or ego.

To summarize, once we recognize what suffering really is, then we begin by removing its causes. We stop doing bad actions that create suffering. To stop these bad activities, we find out from where it came, which are the problems and the various unhealthy attitudes. To remove the problems, we need to remove their heart, which is the belief in a self. If we do that, then we will eventually come to realize the wisdom of non-self. Through understanding the absence of a self, we no longer create the problems and negative actions and this brings an end to that whole process. This outcome is certain; thus, this is the third Noble Truth of Cessation.

The Fourth Noble Truth: The Path which leads to the Ultimate Goal exists

One travels the Buddhist path step by step, stage by stage, progressively completing one's journey. The main stages of Buddhism are called "the five paths" because by progressively traversing them, one eventually reaches one's destination which is cessation. This path of the Buddha can be analyzed through its five main stages which are called the five paths. The names of the five paths are the stage of accumulation, the stage of junction, the stage of insight, the stage of cultivation, and the final stage of no more learning. Properly speaking, the first four of these are the path, with the fifth one being the effect.

The first path is called the "path of accumulation" because on this path we accumulate all the positive factors needed to progress. We try to cultivate diligence, good qualities, and wisdom which penetrates more deeply into the meaning of things. We commit ourselves to accumulating all the positive aspects of practice. We gather the positive elements into our being while at the same time working on many different ways to remove

all the unwanted elements from our life. We also apply various techniques to eliminate the blockages and obstacles that are holding us back. This is called the stage of accumulation because we engage in this manifold activity and gather all of these new things into our life. So, first of all, in order to gain good qualities, we need to work on creating all the different conditions which will make those qualities emerge. To develop the various insights of meditation and real wisdom, we need to develop great faith and confidence in the validity and usefulness of that wisdom. Once we are convinced of its value, we need to change our habits so that we have the diligence to do all the things necessary to make insight and wisdom emerge. Therefore, there are many factors and conditions we must generate within our life that will bring about our happiness.

Eventually, because of the complete gathering of favorable conditions, we will reach the third stage which is the “path of insight.” This is the stage during which insight into the way things actually are is developed, beyond the veil of delusion.

When we attain insight into the way things really are and this insight develops beyond the level of delusion and mistaken views, we realize that there is no self. Once there is no longer a belief in self, there are no longer any root defilements of attachment, aggression, or mental darkness associated with the idea of self. Once there are no longer any defilements, one does nothing unvirtuous and has no more suffering.

Now, it is true that once we have that insight, all suffering is immediately removed, but in another way, that is not true. This is because the delusion of self is a habit which has been built up for such a long time and is very, very hard to remove. For example, when we believe in the self and we hit our finger with a hammer, it hurts. Even when we have realized that an unchanging self is just a delusion fabricated by our minds, still when we hit our finger with a hammer it hurts. We still have the feeling, “I am suffering,” because there is an enduring built-up association of “I” with the flesh of our body. Removal of that long established conditioning of self is carried out through a long process of accustoming oneself to the truth of non-self. This is the fourth stage of the cultivation (of insight).

The fourth stage is called the path of cultivation. The word gom (in Tibetan) is usually translated as “meditation” but actually means “to get used to something” or “to accustom oneself.” This is why it is translated here as “the path of cultivation,” while other texts translate it as “the path of meditation.” But this stage is the idea of getting used to the insight into the nature of things. Through becoming more and more familiar with the truth of

things, we can remove the very fine traces of defilements and subconscious conditioning that still exist. Through gradual working on these, the goal of Buddhahood will be attained. Through the cultivation of insight, we eventually reach the goal of the fifth path that is called “the path of no more learning.” Through cultivation, we remove even the most subtle causes of suffering. Once this is completed we have reached the highest state and there are no more new paths to go along making this “the path of no more study” or “the path of no more learning.”

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