



The Four Noble Truths

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Geshe la: Today we are talking about the Four Noble Truths, which are the bottom line of The Buddha's teachings and the essence of both the Theravada and Mahayana schools. The Four Noble Truths are the main subject matter of The Buddha's first public teachings given at Varanasi, India.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. The truth of dukha, suffering
2. The truth of the origin of suffering
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering
4. The truth of the path that leads to that cessation

When we talk about the truth of suffering there are three levels of suffering: The suffering of pain, the suffering of change, and the suffering of conditioning.

The suffering of pain refers to all the obvious sufferings like physical and mental pain, which can be identified as a suffering even by ordinary people. Examples are illness, hunger, poverty, war, and such. This type of suffering is so gross even the animals can see it as suffering.

The second type of suffering, the suffering of change, is subtler than the first and we ordinary beings are unable to identify it as suffering. The suffering of change means that all our contaminated pleasurable experiences are ultimately suffering in nature because these are temporary and occur only in relation to the background of our experiences. The suffering of change arises only through meeting with desirable objects, or the objects of the five senses.

According to Buddhist understanding, these pleasurable experiences, although they give some sense of joy, pleasure and satisfaction, are the beginnings of new sufferings. An example would be our relationship with friends: At the beginning, it is enjoyable but eventually it leads to further sufferings such as disappointment, frustrations, anger, and many other mental confictions. If we closely examine within ourselves we find that the very nature of sensual pleasures are something like a sense of relief or pleasure that arises like scratching the itchy rash on body or skin. When you scratch the rash you will find some relief but you will have the same problem. The more you scratch, the more it itches. You will never find long lasting satisfaction. In the same way you will gain some relief and pleasure when you obtain the objects of desire, then again you need more. This goes on endlessly without long lasting satisfaction. I think for many of our ordinary beings, psychological or emotional pain and frustrations develop because of really not knowing that ordinary pleasurable experiences are ultimately the nature of suffering. If we have gained some degree of understanding the very nature of this second type of suffering it will protect one's mind from undesirable mental pain and confliction.

The sincere meditation practitioner is trying to reach the deeper levels of peace, and joyful experiences that is purely born within one's mind as a result of meditation not as a result of meeting with the objects of the five senses.

The third type of suffering, the suffering of conditioning, means as long as we remain a slave of delusions, afflictive emotions, discursive thoughts and karmic imprints there is no room for long lasting peace and joy because we will undergo some sort of suffering sooner or later due to this very imperfect conditioned state. For example: In our society, we can see that many people are somehow unhappy and sad, something is missing within them although they have all the material possessions, a nice house, a good car, a good family, good health, yet they will face the same problem wherever they move or wherever they live, in all corners of the world. This is said to be suffering of conditioning.

If we lack profound understanding of the second and third types of suffering we will never have the true aspiration to gain or achieve the liberation or freedom from it and we will be totally caught in the nets of samsara, or cyclic existence, or the cycle of birth and death.

All these sufferings or unsatisfactory states of life do not occur without cause. They occur as a result of causes and conditions. The very cause of this suffering is said to be the second of the Four Noble Truths, the truth of origin of suffering. Within this origin of suffering, there are primarily only two factors: Delusions and Karma.

According to Buddhist understanding delusion, or Klesha (in Sanskrit) is a negative state of mind. Once it develops within us it destroys the calmness and peace of mind and it drives people crazy. One example is anger. At the moment it arises in us it destroys calmness and peace of mind leaving no room for peace and happiness. Therefore, we will not find flavor in any taste, even if we drink champagne. On the other hand, when our mind is undisturbed and peaceful, we will find flavor even in ordinary water.

According to Buddhist psychology, anger is a very unhealthy destructive emotion. Anger not only destroys one's calmness and peace of mind, it also destroys the peace of mind of others creating a very unpleasant atmosphere, which makes others very uncomfortable, even the dogs and cats. If we remain under the power of these unhealthy and destructive emotions it not only makes you unhappy at that moment but it also leads us to indulge in negative actions that will lead to further negative consequences and suffering.

Once a clear understanding of the realization of second of the Four Noble Truths is gained, the individual can see that one's mind is the creator of all happiness and unhappiness. Therefore, Buddhists believe in self-creation rather than someone else creating us.

The third noble truth, the truth of cessation refers to freedom from the control of delusions and karma, which is the true highest state of peace and happiness rather than a momentary feeling of peace and happiness.

The fourth noble truth is the truth of path. The actual truth of path is the inner realizations combined with the direct experience of emptiness and genuine altruistic attitude. In order to gain this one really needs profound understandings of emptiness and the high experience of

compassion, not allowing one's self to be content with intellectual satisfactions but to have meditative experiences. In order to have this one really needs a lot of study, contemplation, meditation, living sound ethical way of life, changing one's unhealthy mental states and behaviors and engaging in purifications practice.

Student: Geshe la, could you suggest some purification practices?

Geshe la: The most effective purification practice is the practice of Vajrasattva which involves visualizations, recitations of the one hundred syllable mantra and strong feelings of regret towards negative actions that you have done or committed in the past.

Student: I'm new to Buddhism. What do you suggest as good reading material to help me along in understanding more about it.

Geshe la: "The Way Of Freedom" by His Holiness the Dalai Lama is good for beginners.

Student: Geshe La, you talked a bit about anger, it seems to be one of the most destructive emotions, is this true?

Geshe la: Yes, of course.

Student: And how do I rid myself of it?

Geshe la: First you must have awareness of the negative effects of anger and the positive effects of patience or tolerance. Second, you should have the ability to live with mindfulness. Third, you should not feed the cause that gives rise to anger. You might be interested in knowing the cause that gives rise to anger. The fundamental cause that gives rise to anger is nothing other than one's own feelings of mental unhappiness and mental discomfort. Besides this, others are all secondary such as harsh speech used towards you by someone. The reason why it is secondary is because harsh speech will not directly cause you to get angry, it only gives you feelings of mental unhappiness or discomfort. If you feed this mental discomfort by means of thinking the way someone uses harsh speech, with no reason and 'I have done nothing bad to him or her, they are just using harsh words due to jealousy'. If you think in this way then your mental discomfort will intensify and it will explode! That very explosion is anger and it will burn your mind. It makes you unhappy. This is the way to get rid of anger

Student: In what way can a person at the beginning of the path find contentment?

Geshe la: I can guarantee you that merely obtaining the objects of desire cannot provide you full satisfaction or contentment unless you yourself, manage to cultivate a sense of contentment in your mind. In order to cultivate this sense of contentment you need to have a strong understanding of the defects of desire and expectations because desire will increase like a thirsty person drinking salty water to relieve the sufferings of thirst.