



The Four Noble Truths: The Essence of Buddhism

Buddhism in Every Step (A3)
(英文版)

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The Four Noble Truths: The Essence of Buddhism

The first teaching of the Buddha, delivered after he attained enlightenment at Isipatana, near Varanasi,¹ was on the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are the fundamental teachings of Buddhism; they were realized, experienced, and taught by the Buddha himself. The following Four Noble Truths encapsulate the true nature of life and the universe.

- I. The Truth of Suffering
- II. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering
- III. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering
- IV. The Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

The Four Noble Truths form the foundation of Buddhism from which all Buddhist sutras are derived. Though the Four Noble Truths are usually

1. Modern day Sarnath, near Benares.

associated with Theravada Buddhism, *The Flower Adornment Sutra*, a Mahayana sutra, even has a chapter devoted to the Four Noble Truths. Thus, all Buddhists should learn the fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths.

The word “truth” in the Four Noble Truths has the meaning of investigating reality. The first noble truth is the “truth of suffering,” which is to see that this world is like a burning house, full of suffering and lacking in joy. The second noble truth is the “truth of the cause of suffering,” which is to realize that the afflictions of greed, anger, and ignorance are the causes of birth, death, and suffering. The third noble truth is the “truth of the cessation of suffering,” which is to attain the true nature of nirvana. The fourth noble truth is the “truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering,” which is to find the way to transcend the world of suffering and find real happiness via what the Buddha called the Noble Eightfold Path.

The first and second noble truths describe the formation of this mundane world of delusion; the second noble truth is the cause, and the first is the effect. In the same way, the third and fourth noble truths describe how we can enter the supramundane world of enlightenment; the fourth noble truth—the eightfold path—when it is practiced, acts as the cause for the third noble truth: nirvana. Let us look at the Four Noble Truths one by one.

I. The Truth of Suffering

We should have a joyful, optimistic, and positive outlook on life. We should not constantly talk about suffering, walk around with knitted eyebrows and sad expressions, and be consumed by depression and misery. However, after hearing the Four Noble Truths, some people may wonder: If we should seek joy in life, then why does Buddhism dwell so much on suffering?

The reason the Buddha spoke of suffering is because it is important for us to realize that all kinds of suffering exist in this world. Once we know the true nature of suffering, we can find a way to end our suffering. Understanding the existence of suffering is only part of the process. Learning how to put an end to it, and, thus, how to be free from it, is the ultimate reason we talk about suffering in Buddhism.

Some people may think, “Why does Buddhism say that life is full of suffering? I am not hungry for fame and wealth, nor am I hampered by love and emotion. My life is filled with happiness.” According to the Buddhist sutras, there are many forms of suffering, both physical and mental. Some people have less desire for material comforts; they are able to withstand the hardships of extreme weather and accept the pain of poverty. There are those who can rise above the attachment of emotions, handle the agony

of being separated from loved ones, and tolerate the hassle of dealing with people they do not like. No one, however, is free from the pain that occurs at the end of one's life. Therefore, it does not make a difference whether or not we discuss suffering; everyone will experience some kind of suffering during his or her lifetime. If we can fully understand the sources of suffering and find ways to overcome them, then we can free ourselves from the deep sea of suffering and enjoy real happiness. What are the causes of suffering?

A. Material Things

The first cause of suffering is the disharmony between material things and oneself. For example, if we live in a small house with many people, we may feel cramped and our crowded living conditions can become a source of suffering. If a pillow is too thick or too thin, we may not be able to get any sleep, causing us to become restless and then short-tempered. To a student, even the height of a desk or the brightness of a light can be a distraction and a source of discomfort. Therefore, dissatisfaction with such material things in our everyday lives can give rise to suffering.

Not only can external material things be a source of suffering, but one's skin, hair, and nails, if not taken care of properly, can also become filthy and become a source of distress. There is a Chinese proverb

that says, “Our hair is like three thousand strands of trouble.” Our lives are inextricably connected to material things.

B. People

The disharmony between other people and oneself can be the greatest cause of affliction. For example, we cannot always be with the people we love, yet we have to deal with people we dislike.

Due to differences in our views and the ways in which we handle situations, conflicts arise and suffering ensues. Sometimes, even when we are careful and try not to offend others, we still feel insecure when we see people whispering in a group because we assume that they are criticizing us behind our backs. Disharmony in our relationships with other people can diminish our aspirations and result in a sense of dejection and apathy. Thus, it is essential to establish harmonious relationships when we deal with others.

C. The Body

Some people say, “Health is wealth.” Even if we possess all the treasures in the world and have unparalleled talents, we cannot accomplish anything without a healthy body. The body’s cycle of aging, sickness, and death is a natural phenomenon that no one can escape. A healthy person will become weak

one day. A beautiful complexion will wither with age. Although we may flaunt our strength when we are young, our bodily organs will nonetheless start to deteriorate with the passing of time. Our eyesight will degenerate and our movements will slow down. Even a minor cold can confine us to bed for several days. A minor toothache can make us toss and turn in our sleep. Due to the disharmony between one's body and oneself, all manner of suffering occurs one after another.

D. The Mind

The mind likes to take control and be like a king, ruling over all his subjects. It is also like an untamed horse running wild, not willing to be controlled. When greed, anger, and ignorance appear in our minds, though we try hard to keep them under control, they resurface time and time again. Our efforts seem so futile. Suffering arising from the disharmony between one's mind and oneself can exceed the suffering brought about by disharmony of the body. When the body becomes ill, we can cure it with medicine, but when the mind is sick, even the best physician may not know what to do.

We often hear people complaining to others: "You're not listening to what I am saying!" Actually, the one who is not listening is not someone else, but our own mind. We often cannot stop our minds

from wandering or creating mental afflictions. In this sense, our own mind can be our most formidable enemy. If we are constantly at odds with our own mind, suffering is inevitable.

E. Desire

As human beings, it is impossible for us to be completely without desire, but desires can be wholesome or unwholesome. Wholesome desires are those such as wanting to become a sage or a Buddha, to excel in one's career, to serve one's community, or to benefit one's country and fellow human beings. On the other hand, coveting material comforts, grasping for power and position, or craving the pleasure of a love affair are unwholesome desires and can lead to our downfall. Even wholesome desires, when not managed properly, can become overwhelming burdens and give rise to great suffering. Unwholesome desires are even more damaging! Thus, an important ingredient of success is knowing how to transcend one's material desires.

F. Views

“View” refers to our way of thinking and our perceptions. While a lack of material things is tolerable, isolation due to one's views and solitude of the spirit are the most difficult to bear. Since ancient times, many seekers of truth have found themselves having

to travel the path of truth alone. In fact, the Buddha considered entering nirvana immediately after his enlightenment due to concern that sentient beings may not be able to understand the truth he had realized.

What makes us suffer most are those views and concepts which seem correct but are actually wrong. During the Buddha's time, there were ascetics who practiced all kinds of self-mortification. Some stood upside down in the forest; some sat dangerously close to fires; some submerged themselves in water; some refused to eat; and some went about naked. They tried to use every type of method to torture their bodies so that they might be liberated from their bodies. Because of their wrong views and understanding, these ascetics inflicted physical pain on themselves unnecessarily. Wrong views and understanding can cause us much suffering; they are the main stumbling blocks to our realization of the truth.

G. Nature

In human history, our first struggles were between ourselves and the natural world. Since ancient times, the amount of suffering brought upon us by natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and fires, has been incalculable. When there is too much rain, flooding occurs and can completely cover low-lying areas. When there is too little rain, a drought occurs, cracking the soil and making it impossible to plant crops.

The suffering we experience because of the disharmony between nature and ourselves is clear and direct.

H. The Self

The real root of suffering, whether caused by external factors such as material things and nature, or by internal factors such as the mind and our views, can be traced to our attachment to “I” and “mine.” According to Buddhism, the source of all suffering is the illusory self, the “I.” This “I” is but a combination of what the Buddha called the “five aggregates”: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. When the five aggregates come together, they result in life, but they can only exist together as long as the proper conditions are present.

Nothing can exist unless the conditions for its existence are appropriate. Ordinarily, we live as if the body, which is made up of the five aggregates, can exist eternally. We cling to the body as the real self, creating all kinds of cravings, which in turn lead to endless suffering. If we can see through the illusion of the “self” and realize the wondrous truth of emptiness, then we can transcend all suffering. *The Heart Sutra* says, “[Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva] realized the five aggregates are empty and was liberated from all suffering and hardship.”

How can we realize the emptiness of the five aggregates and be liberated from all suffering and

hardship? If we can realize the “selfless” nature of all things, (i.e., all things do not have an independent, permanent “self”), then we can realize the emptiness of the five aggregates. Once this is realized, we are liberated from all suffering and hardship. Let me illustrate what this means with the following example.

Soccer is a very popular sport around the world, and spectators at soccer matches often number in the tens of thousands. Among the spectators at one of these matches was a man who was smoking while watching the game. He was so absorbed in the game that he did not realize his cigarette was too close to the man next to him and it burned a hole in his neighbor’s clothing.

“Ouch, that hurts!” the neighbor yelled.

The smoker then realized what he had done, and quickly apologized. The person whose clothing was burned was so caught up in the excitement of the game he said, “It doesn’t matter. I’ll buy another one later.”

How would you describe the neighbor’s state of mind? He was so focused on the match that he was in the state of “non-self.” At this particular moment, watching the match was all that mattered to him. Even having a hole burned in his clothes was not worth a fight. If he were not so caught up in the game, such an incident would have developed into a big fight. But, when both parties focused all their attention on watching which side was winning or

losing, the concept of “self” no longer mattered. Imagine: something as simple as a soccer match is enough to capture our attention, so much so that we can forget the “self” and pay little heed to a burning pain. If we can realize the emptiness of the five aggregates, we can definitely be liberated from all suffering and hardship.

The existence of suffering is an undeniable truth. Buddhism not only emphasizes that we understand that suffering exists, but takes the next step and looks for a way to overcome this problem. Actually, all modern studies, such as economics, medicine, and politics seek to improve our lives and minimize human suffering. But ordinary social welfare endeavors, such as aiding the poor and needy through the provision of food and clothing, can only give momentary relief. These cannot eradicate the roots of suffering. Buddhism not only emphasizes the eradication of our present suffering; more importantly, it teaches us how to eradicate the roots of suffering and liberate ourselves from the endless cycle of birth and death. Suffering in Buddhism is not pessimistic acceptance; it is something we must actively overcome and transcend.

Some may say, “I am not a Buddhist, and I am not free from the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. But even Buddhists are still subject to those same kinds of suffering. What then is the point

of Buddhism?” This is true; believing in Buddhism cannot prevent birth, aging, sickness, and death. But, when faced with such suffering, we will have greater strength to overcome it. When we come face to face with death, we will be able to accept it more openly and gracefully.

Many of the great enlightened Buddhist masters chose to live in the forest, by the water, or even in cemeteries, in order to realize their Buddha nature. Many of the noble followers of Confucianism chose to leave the hustle and bustle of city life to lead a simple, honest, and tranquil life without any worldly desires. Most people find such a lifestyle difficult to accept, but these sages willingly lived lives of simplicity and in great happiness. Why? This was because they had such high aspirations for themselves. They had great confidence in their ideals, so they had the strength to endure the hardships and suffering that ordinary people cannot.

A proper understanding of religion will give us the strength to overcome hardships willingly. Many people pray to all varieties of gods, asking for protection, money, wealth, health, and all the things that they deem “good” in life. This type of belief can only encourage greed. When these people cannot get what they want, they end up in despair. Some might even blame the gods for their suffering. This kind of belief system, which is based on greed, cannot give people strength.

True Buddhists should not make unreasonable demands from the Buddhas or bodhisattvas.² Instead, we should follow the way of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and be willing to dedicate ourselves to the benefit of all beings. If we have this kind of belief and spiritual understanding, then we will have the strength to overcome the afflictions caused by misfortune and other difficulties. If we can accept with equanimity when others are either nice or hostile to us, and if we can look at all worldly matters, be they good or bad, in the same way, then we can confront suffering with ease and calmness.

Buddhism may speak of suffering in life, but I personally feel that life is full of joy. Why? Although suffering exists, if we can use our strength to deal with it then we can understand the real meaning of joy. The fruit which ripens after diligent cultivation tastes particularly sweet. The cultivation of a correct and strong faith is an important key that aids us in transcending suffering.

While the cultivation of a strong faith can aid us in transcending the pain of suffering, the eradication of the fundamental suffering of life and death is the ultimate goal of practitioners. We should not be complacent just because we can deal with suffering through our willpower, mental adjustment, and

2. A bodhisattva is a Buddhist practitioner who has vowed to become a Buddha to liberate all sentient beings.

thinking. Even when we have control over the minor afflictions of life, if we are not completely free from birth, aging, sickness, and death, then suffering still exists. A Chinese proverb says, “To catch a gang of thieves, one should catch their leader first.” Therefore, we must eradicate the root of suffering in order to attain eternal joy.

The root of suffering is “self”—attachment to the self, love for the self, and our self-centered viewpoints. Because of “self,” we seek nice things to satisfy our needs, and this pursuit gives way to greed. When our greed cannot be satisfied, anger arises. When we cling to our deluded views without understanding the truth of the facts, ignorance arises. Because of “self,” the fetters of greed, anger, and ignorance follow us like shadows. How can we eradicate the root of suffering? If we can understand the truth of “non-self,” then the root of suffering can be eradicated. However, “non-self” does not mean that we have to destroy our lives; Buddhism is not nihilistic! Buddhism does not deny that life has value and meaning. “Non-self” means to free oneself from attachment to the self, the love of self, and the desires of the self. It does not mean we should destroy everything or give up everything. Even if we were to commit suicide, death would only occur to this illusory body, not to our persistent clinging to the “self.”

In Buddhism, the teachings on “non-self” encompass the teachings on wisdom, dependent origination, compassion, and emptiness. It is through letting go of the attachment to “self” and wrong views that we can realize the ultimate truth. It is only when we can eradicate the “small self” of the ego which is associated with greed, anger, and selfish desires that we can manifest our true, pure, and joyous nature. The noble men and women who realize the true nature of “self” do not leave the multitude. They still drink tea, eat meals, deal with other people, and handle matters; they still live normal lives. The only difference is that they have a pure state of mind in their daily and spiritual lives. They have given up all kinds of obsessions and have realized the real nature of things. They are free from the suffering caused by impermanence and have experienced eternity.

The “self” that we cling to so dearly is like a dream: it is an illusion. Our life lasts only for a few decades; it is illusory and changes constantly. The real “self” transcends time, space, and relativity. It is free from afflictions and is pure. The key to freeing ourselves from suffering and attaining joy is to expand the “small self” and realize the boundless life of the true self. This is something that we need to attend to urgently.

II. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering

In Buddhism, “karma” refers to all that we do, say, and think. Throughout our lives, we create a lot of unwholesome karma because of our ignorant urges and cravings. Unwholesome karma is like a seed that bears the fruit of suffering. Thus, our suffering is caused by our own karma, as we are subject to the effects of whatever actions we have done. Karma does not disappear; it only accumulates. However, karma is not all bad. There is also good karma. Whether we taste the fruit of suffering or of joy depends on the karmic seeds we sow.

Karma and the law of cause and effect are both concepts that are common to many Indian philosophies. Karma is also one of the great teachings of Buddhism. The teaching on karma is what allows us to create a bright future for ourselves, and can be a source of hope. There are some who will ask, “Didn’t you just say that karma is the cause of suffering? Now, why do you say it gives us hope? Isn’t this contradictory?” If you truly understand the teaching of karma and how it works, you will not doubt that it is indeed very hopeful.

The essential teaching of karma is that everyone is responsible for his or her own actions. Throughout history, there has always been one inexplicable question that has confounded philosophers and religious

thinkers alike: What is the origin of life and the universe? Various theories have been proposed to explain the origin of the universe and human life, such as the theory of natural elements and the theory of evolution. The Christian religion maintains that the world was created by God. Brahmanism in India holds the view that everything evolved from Brahma. These religions, and others, attempt to explain the initial creation of life and the universe, and to establish a set of laws in which everything is controlled by a god.

Alternatively, Buddhism teaches us that human beings themselves, not someone else, are in charge of their own destinies. Even God or Brahma cannot escape the law of cause and effect. In Buddhism, karmic retribution is created by oneself, not by deities. The happiness or suffering in one's life and the brightness or darkness of one's future is not bestowed by gods, but determined by the effort that we have made. Wholesome fruit is produced from the seeds of our wholesome deeds. Likewise, unwholesome fruit is produced from the seeds of our unwholesome deeds. No one can give us fortune or misfortune. We create our own good and bad actions; no one else controls us. Thus, we can see that Buddhism has a great deal of respect for free will. It is a religion that believes in self-discipline, and that one will reap the results of one's own actions.

Dr. Hu Shi, the great modern Chinese Scholar, said, “Whatever harvest one wants, one must first plant accordingly.” Karma is like a seed. We have to sow the kind of seed that will produce the type of fruit we would like to harvest. Similarly, our actions will determine our karmic effect. Karma presents equal opportunity and is perfectly accurate. No one is exempt from the effects of karma, even the rich and powerful. The effects of karma apply equally to everyone regardless of position, gender, status, or wealth. Everyone will receive what they deserve and render their own karmic outcome. No one can take someone else’s place, whether it be husband or wife, father or son, teacher or student, or our friends. Our karma is a clear record of our actions, so accurate that not even today’s supercomputers can be compared to it.

When everyone understands the concept of cause and effect, the morals of society will improve, crime will decrease, and we will be able to easily establish a joyous and peaceful society. Therefore, the concept of cause and effect plays a very important role in purifying our minds and raising the morality of society.

But there are still questions that remain. One may say, “I know a person who has done many bad things in his life. He has not only gone unpunished but enjoys honor and wealth. On the other hand, another person I know has done many good things, but

misfortune seems to follow him. How does the law of cause and effect work in these situations?”

Actually, this, too, is the law of cause and effect. Why? As mentioned earlier, the law of cause and effect is like planting seeds. Some plants will become lush and green in one year. Some will take several years to grow. Likewise, some karmic results will ripen in this lifetime, some will ripen in the next lifetime, and some will not ripen for many lifetimes to come. The effects of karma may be immediate or delayed, but we cannot refute their existence. There is a proverb in Buddhism that says, “Good begets good, evil begets evil. All causes will give rise to results; it is just a matter of time.” The law of cause and effect is absolutely fair. It is only a matter of time. This is why we talk about cause and effect in terms of past, present, and future lifetimes.

Some readers who have received a higher education may react by saying, “This is the 21st century; our technology and civilization are highly advanced. Why should we believe in superstitions like cause and effect?” Actually, the law of cause and effect is the most scientific and accurate of all the natural laws. The law of cause and effect controls every single minute of our lives; we cannot live apart from it. For example, when we are hungry, we eat. After we eat, we are not hungry anymore. When we are tired, we rest. After we rest, we will be full of energy. Every

little part of our lives, even our mental activities of perception, emotion, and volition, play out according to the law of cause and effect. Therefore, if we wish to be happy, we should sow good seeds. Then we will taste the sweetness of our own good fruit.

When the first child conceived through *in vitro* fertilization was born the entire world was shocked. Although the child was not conceived inside the mother, the child still required the father's sperm and the mother's ovum, together with the support of science, in order to grow. Even a child conceived through *in vitro* fertilization still requires all the right conditions to be present; thus this method of conception is totally consistent with the law of cause and effect.

There is nothing in this world that can escape the law of cause and effect. Once unwholesome karma is done, a bad effect will surely follow. Although the arising and the accumulation of bad karma can bring us suffering, after it reaches fruition there is still room for hope and a bright future. It is similar to a person who borrows money from many people and is heavily in debt. After he repays all his debts, he will be free. It may also be compared to a criminal who is freed after serving a prison term. A person who has committed many bad deeds can still have a beautiful future after he has borne the fruit of his karma.

According to the Buddha's teachings, all phenomena are impermanent. Bad karma is also

impermanent and empty, without an innate self-nature. If we stop creating unwholesome karma and instead create wholesome karma, we will be free from suffering one day and can be truly happy. Thus, the law of cause and effect is neither pessimistic nor fatalistic; rather, it is optimistic and progressive. If we want to free ourselves from the depths of the sea of suffering, we must first eradicate the cause of suffering and then cease to generate any more unwholesome karma. Then a life of joy will not be out of reach. Therefore, a full understanding of the original cause of suffering is absolutely necessary to achieve a life of joy.

III. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

If someone were to ask, “Why be a Buddhist? What is the purpose of Buddhism?” How would you answer? If you ask me, my answer may frighten you, because I am a Buddhist for the sake of seeking “cessation.”

The word “cessation” may make people think of annihilation, extermination, or nothingness, and make people fearful. In the history of Buddhism, there have been many cases in which the meaning of the Buddha’s teaching was misinterpreted due to incorrect translations, and these mistakes became obstacles to the propagation of Buddhism. Ordinary people may hear the word “cessation” and think of

annihilation or extermination, but the real meaning of the third noble truth is to rid oneself of the affliction of delusion and discrimination so that one's true nature is revealed just as it is. Thus, cessation in this case is not pessimistic nor destructive, but positive, creative, and constructive.

“Cessation” is the ideal state in which greed, anger, and ignorance have been completely eradicated. The quiet, peaceful state of nirvana will appear only when the fire of sensual desire is extinguished. The Buddha's teachings on wisdom and emptiness also point to the same goal: we should empty out our delusion, greed, and craving so that we can uncover our wisdom.

When the concept of “emptiness” is brought up, there are some who object and say, “I suppose then that heaven and earth are empty and that the self and others do not exist. This ‘emptiness’ pulls people into an aimless world of nothingness. It sounds horrible!”

Actually, the doctrine of emptiness in Buddhism does *not* mean nonexistence or nihilism. The infinite expanse of existence is contained within emptiness; there would be no existence without emptiness. Our typical conception of existence is inaccurate, but the Buddhist idea of emptiness allows for true existence and all the wonders of reality. How does emptiness become non-empty and cessation become unceasing?

If I wished to organize a lecture, the first question to consider would be “Where should we hold the

lecture?” If there’s no space, it’s not possible for us to organize the lecture. Usually, when we want to organize something, we have to consider five factors: people, subject, time, place, and object. “Place” means space. Space has a very intimate relationship with our lives. For example, your pocket can hold things if it has space. You can put money in your purse if it is empty. It is because your nose, ears, mouth, stomach, intestines, and pores are empty that you can breathe, absorb nutrients, metabolize, and maintain your life. If all these spaces were not empty, people would not be able to survive. Because there is emptiness, there is existence. If there were no empty space, we could not construct buildings. This is how emptiness gives rise to existence. Thus “cessation” and “emptiness” do not mean nothingness. The cessation of illusion and the elimination of the unreal are the prerequisites for the manifestation of true, wondrous existence.

Xunzi, the great Confucian scholar, suggested that one needs to go through three stages to cultivate the mind: emptiness, unification, and stillness. The first stage, emptiness, means that one should create an appropriate “space” within one’s mind and not be stubborn or condescending. If one has space within, new knowledge can be easily absorbed and others’ suggestions are readily accepted. Progress will surely follow.

It says in one of the sutras, “If one wishes to know about the Buddha’s state of mind, one should expand

one's mind like empty space." We have all seen space, but who can clearly describe its form and shape? Is space rectangular in shape, square, or circular? Space is everywhere. The space that fills a cup will take on a cup-like shape, while the space inside a box is rectangular in shape. Since space does not have any definite, fixed form, it can take on any form. The teaching on emptiness transcends both existence and nonexistence. If we can expand our minds to be like the infinity of space, we will understand the Buddha's state of mind.

To become a Buddha we must realize the true nature of wisdom and emptiness, and understand the truth of nirvana and cessation. Cessation means the extinction of birth and death and the severing of the cycle of rebirth. The cycle of rebirth is the reason for our suffering, which we must endure through long periods of anguish. Therefore, only by eradicating the cycle of rebirth—which we are caught in because of our desires—will we attain the ultimate freedom of no birth and no death. Hence, if we wish to be free from the pain of suffering, we must solve the problem at its root, that is, to extinguish all of our mundane desires.

When you hear that Buddhism advocates that people should eliminate all mundane desires, you may fear that if you become a Buddhist you are no longer free to marry, have children, make money, have a high position, or enjoy worldly pleasures. However, there is no need to worry. Buddhism is

a religion that seeks peace and joy. It does not renounce normal living; what it rejects is overindulgence. In fact, as a Buddhist, one can still marry, do business, and live a normal life. There is a Buddhist sutra, *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, that describes a layman named Vimalakirti who was married and very well-to-do, yet he was not a slave to material desire. In the sutra, he is described thus: “Though a layman, he is not attached to the three realms. Though married, he always cultivates purity.”

There are those who say that Buddhism rejects affection. In reality, Buddhism strongly emphasizes affection; what Buddhism seeks to eliminate is selfish affection and desire. One should transform selfish affection into compassion and selfish desire into wisdom. The affection advocated by Buddhism is devotion, not possession. It promotes the compassion of giving, not wanting. The love advocated by Buddhism is love for all sentient beings, not just one specific being. The bodhisattva’s compassionate act of aiding all sentient beings is the manifestation of this selfless affection in its highest form. Affection that embodies compassion and wisdom will not go away. Some people seek out romantic love all their lives. Although love may bring about happiness, it can also be a source of suffering. When we read the newspaper, we see that murders occur every day. When we examine the underlying causes of these

crimes, we see that relationships and money are usually the main causes. Love without wisdom and compassion is a very dangerous trap.

There are some who believe that joy in life is nothing but the possession of love and money. Buddhism advocates that people should eliminate selfish affection and greed for money. In that case, what kind of happiness can one attain from Buddhism? Actually, Buddhism does not get rid of money itself, nor does it say that “money is a poisonous snake.” Being poor is not a sin, nor is being rich loathsome. In fact, according to the Mahayana bodhisattva path, as long as wealth does not make one greedy, and as long as position can benefit the propagation of Buddhism, wealth or a high position can be beneficial. Wealth and position can be very useful in promoting Buddhism. Wealth in itself is neither good nor bad; the key lies in the way it was created and is used.

Some people have the misconception that Buddhism says that we must renounce all possessions. This simply is not true. Actually, Buddhism says that it is important to have things; it is just that the things we should have are different from what people generally think. According to Buddhism what we should “have” is joy, not just for ourselves, but for all sentient beings. The way to accomplish this goal is to develop the mind of non-attachment, that is, to have everything by not possessing anything.

I often say that we should consider “not having” as “having,” just as we should see emptiness as existence. As I mentioned earlier, without emptiness there is no existence; and in the same way, we can only “have” things by “not having.” When we possess things, they are by nature limited, measurable, and calculable; whereas, “not having” is limitless, immeasurable, and boundless.

Within life, there are two worlds. The one before our eyes is a narrow “world of possessing.” Because of their ignorance, sentient beings fight for their possessions. They do not know that when they turn around, they will find that there is another larger and wider world behind them. This other world is the “world of not having” and will be realized only if one’s selfish desires and emotions are eradicated. In this world of “not having,” birth and death are eradicated, desires are extinguished, and all duality, differences, and illusions no longer exist. It is a completely liberated and carefree state of being. This is the state that all Buddhists should strive to attain.

When can this state of liberation be attained? Does one have to wait until one’s physical body is dead and life is no more? No. This very state was attained by the Buddha as he sat beneath the bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment. If we work diligently, we can attain this state just as the Buddha did.

What is the state of an enlightened being? In the eyes of most people, an enlightened person often behaves very strangely. For example, in the records of Chan Buddhism,³ the enlightened Chan masters had different ways of expressing themselves when they became enlightened. Some disciples laughed madly, and others struck their masters. The masters did not mind such behavior; they actually approved of it. This kind of behavior was completely unacceptable to ordinary people. However, to an enlightened being, expressions such as these denote the nature of Chan.

IV. The Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

How can we remove the causes of suffering? The Buddhist teachings describe the process in great detail, and there are many teachings, including the four immeasurable minds, the four universal vows, the threefold training, the five precepts, the ten wholesome actions, the seven factors of awakening, the Noble Eightfold Path, the thirty-seven aspects of awakening, and the six perfections. All of these are considered part of the path, but for the sake of brevity it is best to describe the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path includes eight factors that, when practiced correctly, lead to the cessation

3. Also known as Zen Buddhism.

of suffering. These steps are right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditative concentration. The Noble Eightfold Path appears to be very simple, but to understand it thoroughly is not so easy. Let us take a look at each of the elements in the Noble Eightfold Path.

A. *Right View*

Right view is what enables us to maintain our faith in the truth when faced with inequalities or difficulties. Worldly knowledge can be both good and bad. Sometimes it is not reliable and can mislead us. Consider for a moment the Chinese character for ignorance (*chi*):

痴

This character is a compound of two other characters: 知 *zhi*, which means knowledge and 疒 *chuang*, which means ailment. When knowledge is corrupted, it turns into ignorance. Some people are extremely clever, but when they do bad things, it is doubly destructive! For example, both Nazi Germany's Hitler and the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty were clever, yet diabolic. As we can see, a person's profound knowledge is not necessarily proportional to his morality. Knowledge is like a sharp knife. If not used properly, it can hurt others. Therefore, it is very

important for us to know how to transform knowledge into wisdom and right view.

Transforming knowledge into wisdom and right view is not easy. The principle is the same as in taking photographs. The focus, distance, and shutter speed must be adjusted accordingly before one can take a clear and beautiful picture. Similarly, one can see the true nature of life and the universe as it really is, only if one has the right view. If one lacks the right view when observing this earthly world, serious mistakes will be made. It is like peering at flowers through a heavy fog or like blind people touching an elephant.

B. Right Thought

Right thought is right volition, decision, and contemplation. It means not having thoughts of greed, anger, and ignorance. These three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance are the main obstacles on our road to enlightenment. They continually occupy our minds and contaminate our pure nature. It is not easy to be rid of these three poisons. We have to exert effort constantly to maintain the right thinking needed to overcome these three poisons and enter the path to Buddhahood.

C. Right Speech

Using right speech means that we should not lie, slander others, use harsh language, or utter frivolous speech. There is a Chinese proverb that says, “Illness comes from what you eat. Trouble comes from what you say.” Our mouth is like a very sharp axe. If we say something inappropriate, we will not only hurt others but also ourselves. Thus, it is very important that we choose our words wisely.

D. Right Action

Right action means that we should not kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, or take intoxicants of any kind. Besides abstaining from doing unwholesome deeds, we also need to actively perform wholesome deeds.

E. Right Livelihood

Right livelihood refers to the proper way of making a living; abstaining from unethical jobs such as operating gambling houses, selling alcoholic beverages or instruments that can kill; and operating slaughterhouses. Also, part of right livelihood is having well-disciplined habits such as getting an adequate amount of sleep, food, exercise, rest, and work. Right livelihood not only promotes efficiency and health, it also enables us to have a joyous family life and a stable society.

F. Right Effort

Right effort means to apply our effort in four areas: 1) to not produce unwholesome qualities that have not been produced; 2) to eliminate the unwholesome qualities that already exist; 3) to nurture wholesome qualities that have not yet been produced; and 4) to maintain and multiply the wholesome qualities that already exist.

G. Right Mindfulness

To have right mindfulness is to keep one's attention, awareness, and mind focused on the four foundations of mindfulness: 1) the body is impure; 2) feelings will always result in suffering; 3) the mind is impermanent; 4) all phenomena do not have a substantial self.

If we always contemplate the meaning of impermanence, suffering, and non-self, we will not be greedy for the triflings of this world. We will strive diligently for the truth.

H. Right Meditative Concentration

Right concentration refers to the four stages of meditative concentration (*dhyana*). What it really means is that we should concentrate our volition and thoughts through meditation.

If we can fully master the eight elements of this Noble Eightfold Path, we will reach Buddhahood.

So far, we have learned about the Four Noble Truths, which can be compared to the process of curing a disease. The second noble truth, the cause of suffering, describes how a person becomes sick. After determining the root of the illness, we prescribe different methods for curing it, which is the fourth noble truth—the path that leads to the eradication of suffering. When the correct prescription is applied and the disease is cured, it is the third noble truth—the cessation of suffering. Physical illnesses are cured with medicine, but mental illnesses are cured with Buddhism. When we look at the Four Noble Truths through the principles of curing a disease, we can see that Buddhism is very logical and scientific.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha started teaching what he had realized. The first time he taught the Dharma, he “turned the wheel of Dharma” three times by emphasizing different aspects of the Four Noble Truths. The first turning was instructive; he taught about the content and definitions of the Four Noble Truths. He said, “Such is suffering, which is oppressive; such is the cause of suffering, which beckons; such is the cessation of suffering, which is attainable; such is the path, which can be practiced.” The second turning of the wheel was to provide encouragement. The Buddha persuaded his students to

practice the Four Noble Truths, to eradicate afflictions and attain enlightenment. He told them, “Such is suffering, which you should understand; such is the cause of suffering, which you should end; such is the cessation of suffering, which you should realize; such is the path, which you should practice.” In the third turning the Buddha shared his realization. The Buddha told his students that he himself had realized the Four Noble Truths. He encouraged all sentient beings to put forth their effort and strive to realize the Four Noble Truths just as he had done himself. The Buddha told them, “Such is suffering, which I have understood; such is the cause of suffering, which I have ended; such is the cessation of suffering, which I have realized; such is the path, which I have practiced.” From the emphasis the Buddha put on the Four Noble Truths, we know they must be very important.

The Four Noble Truths are the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. They have been practiced for over two thousand years. Their content is very profound indeed, such that it is difficult to express their profundity in such a short space. Although what you have just read is only a brief introduction, it has surely planted wholesome seeds for your future investigation of Buddhism.

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