

Introduction to the Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths: A Study Guide

The four noble truths are the most basic expression of the Buddha's teaching. As Ven. Sariputta once said, they encompass the entire teaching, just as the footprint of an elephant can encompass the footprints of all other footed beings on earth.

These four truths are best understood, not as beliefs, but as categories of experience. They offer an alternative to the ordinary way we categorize what we can know and describe, in terms of me/not me, and being/not being. These ordinary categories create trouble, for the attempt to maintain full being for one's sense of "me" is a stressful effort doomed to failure, in that all of the components of that "me" are inconstant, stressful, and thus not worthy of identifying as "me" or "mine".

To counter this problem, the four noble truths drop ideas of me/not me, and being/not being, and replace them with two sets of variables: cause and effect, skillful and unskillful. In other words, there is the truth of stress and suffering (unskillful effect), the truth of the origination of stress (unskillful cause), the truth of the cessation of stress (skillful effect), and the truth of the path to the cessation of stress (skillful cause). Each of these truths entails a duty: stress is to be comprehended, the origination of stress abandoned, the cessation of stress realized, and the path to the cessation of stress developed. When all of these duties have been fully performed, the mind gains total release.

Many people have charged Buddhism with being pessimistic because the four truths start out with stress and suffering, but this charge misses the fact that the first truth is part of a strategy of diagnosis and therapy focusing on the basic problem in life so as to offer a solution to it. Thus the Buddha was like a doctor, focusing on the disease he wanted to cure. Charging him with pessimism is like charging a doctor with pessimism when he asks, "Where does it hurt?" The total cure the Buddha promised as a result of his course of therapy shows that, in actuality, he was much less pessimistic than the vast majority of the world, for whom wisdom means accepting the bad things in life with the good, assuming that there is no chance in this life for unalloyed happiness. The Buddha was an extremely demanding person, unwilling to bend to this supposed wisdom or to rest with anything less than absolute happiness. His course of therapy points to the fact that such a happiness is possible, and can be attained through our own efforts.

Another charge often leveled at Buddhism is that its focus is narrow, aiming only at the issue of stress and pain, and ignoring the larger or more uplifting issues of spiritual life. This, again, misses the thrust of the Buddha's cure for the ills of the heart and mind.

One of the most important insights leading up to the Buddha's Awakening was his realization that the act of comprehending pain lay at the essence of the spiritual quest. In trying to comprehend pain, one begins to delve into the non-verbal, subconscious levels of the mind, bringing to light many ill-formed and hidden processes of which one was previously unaware.

In this sense, pain is like a watering hole where all the animals in the forest — all the mind's subconscious tendencies — will eventually come to drink. Just as a naturalist who wants to make a survey of the wildlife in a particular area can simply station himself near a watering hole, in the same way, a meditator who wants to understand the mind can simply keep watch right at pain in order to see what subconscious reactions will appear.

Thus the act of trying to comprehend pain leads not only to an improved understanding of pain itself, but also to an increased awareness of the most basic processes at work in the mind. As one fully comprehends pain, one gains a full comprehension of other spiritual issues as well, realizing which questions were worth asking and which ones weren't, at the same time gaining answers to the first set of questions and learning how to put the second set aside.

Thus the study of the four noble truths [see Study Guide in citation below] is aimed first at understanding these four categories, and then at applying them to experience so that one may act properly toward each of the categories and thus attain the highest, most total happiness possible.

The material in the Study Guide starts with a basic exercise in categorizing one's actions in terms of the variables at the heart of the four noble truths: cause and effect, and skillful and unskillful. It then builds on this understanding by discussing the role of the four noble truths in the course of the practice, and then analyzing in detail each of the truths, together with the duty appropriate to each. Further related readings can be found in the book, *The Wings to Awakening*. [This book can be found at

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/wings/index.html>]

Source: "The Four Noble Truths: A Study Guide", by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/truths.html> . [Only the Introduction to the cited Study Guide has been excerpted by Alexander Peck.]

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