

Week 1: The Four Noble Truths

Buddhism level 2: Buddhist wisdom – Doctrinal Dharma

SIDDHARATHA'S QUEST

Important to realise what is the question that Buddhism is trying to answer; does it tally with our own? Siddhartha's quest started on seeing the four sights: the sick person, the old person and the dead person. He saw the inevitability of suffering – dukkha – and was impelled to look for a solution; he was looking for the solution to old age, sickness and death; the way to end dukkha.

One of the fundamental ways he (as the Buddha) expressed his discovery was as the four Noble Truths.

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: DUKKHA

Why do we begin with consideration of dukkha? It's something we all have in common. Not a dogmatic truth or pronouncement about life, but a practical observation. By definition, it's our major problem in life.

"By beginning with the fact of pain, Buddhism involves the whole emotional nature of man from the outset. Recognition of the first Noble Truth comes not as a pleasant intellectual diversion but as a terrible emotional shock. The scriptures say that one feels then like a man who suddenly realises that his turban is in flames. Only a shock of this kind is strong enough to galvanize the whole being into action... Pain is the common ground whereon meet prince and peasant, mill-hand and millionaire, old and young..."

Sangharakshita, Where Buddhism begins and why it begins there

Different translations of dukkha: suffering, unsatisfactoriness, stress, frustration, misery, pain, an ill-fitting cart-wheel, a bumpy ride

"There is this noble truth of dukkha: birth is dukkha, ageing is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are dukkha, association with the loathed is dukkha, dissociation from the loved is dukkha, not to get what one wants is dukkha — in short, the five aggregates [all elements of unenlightened experience] affected by clinging [upadana] are dukkha."

First Noble truth is really a call to reflect on our life, to notice the inextricable element of dukkha; motivation to act.

THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: CAUSE OF SUFFERING IS CRAVING

The essential cause of suffering, the Buddha says, is craving, the natural but painful desire for things to be other than they are. If we can let go of that desire, if we can accept the rise and fall of experience as it is — not just in our heads, but in our heart of hearts — the problem of suffering will be solved.

Sangharakshita, Living with Kindness

We saw this represented on the wheel of life; it is the link between feeling and craving that causes the rest of the "wheel to spin", ending with dukkha (old age & death).

THE THIRD NOBLE TRUTH – COMPLETE HAPPINESS IS POSSIBLE

Dwelling on dukkha wouldn't be very valuable if there were not a way of transcending it. But the Buddha said it's possible, and called it Enlightenment; the answer to his quest.

Happiness is opposite of dukkha; not the happiness of getting something you want (which is more like pleasure). More like a deep equanimity, contentment, feeling so “big” that you don’t experience a small self lacking anything.

Desire nothing, and you’re content with everything.

Pursue things, and you’re thwarted at every turn.

Wild greens can stave off hunger.

A simple robe serves to cover the skin.

Going for a solitary stroll

I fall in with the deer.

When the children from the village sing, I join

right in at the top of my lungs.

I cleanse my ears in the sound of water

tumbling over rocks,

And gladden my heart with the whisper of pines

high on the mountains’ peaks.

RYOKAN

Unconditioned happiness is not fighting reality, not demanding things to be other than they are. But the Buddha still experienced physical pain while he was embodied – the difference was how he responded to it.

4TH NOBLE TRUTH – THERE IS A PATH TO CESSATION OF SUFFERING

There is a set of do-able practices, a way to live life that brings about increasing freedom from self-caused suffering. This path is usually summarised in Noble Eightfold Path; an even more terse summary is the Threefold path: ethics, meditation, wisdom.

HOME PRACTICE

Notice moments of *dukkha* in your life (whatever translation worked). Is it true that *dukkha* arises from wanting things to be different from what they are?

Try, in these moments, to turn towards the experience of unpleasantness rather than fighting it. What happens if you let yourself experience it more fully?

NB. This is not to say we should not try to change things for the better in the future or remove ourselves from discomfort; but it is about being fully present to the current experience without resistance.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

“Where Buddhism begins and why it begins there”, Sangharakshita, in “Crossing the Stream” (copies available in CBC lending library)

A good reference for this module and the next is “What is the Dharma?” by Sangharakshita.

Much on the web. Eg.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/beliefs/fournobletruths.shtml> 4 radio talks

<http://www.buddhanet.net/4noble.htm> thorough piece by Ajahn Sumedho

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/truths.html> many references to original suttas.