

3. Suffering:

The First Noble Truth

Recognizing that there is suffering is the first step toward ending it.

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are the first teachings the Buddha gave in Sarnath, India. Soon after his enlightenment in Bodhgaya, the Buddha explained the Four Noble Truths (Dharma) to the five ascetics in Deer Park. Upon listening to and accepting the teaching, the ascetics immediately took refuge in the Buddha and the Dharma and became the first disciples of the Buddha to form the Sangha.⁴

Based on an honest observation of the ways of life, this teaching helps us understand the roots of all the pain and difficulties we encounter in life and how to apply lasting solutions for their eradication. From the moment he first turned the Dharma wheel⁵ up until he entered nirvana⁶, everything the Buddha taught was founded on the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are: the truth of suffering, the truth of the causes of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering (nirvana), and the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (the Noble Eightfold Path). Practicing the Four Noble Truths

⁴ The *Buddha* is Sanskrit for an awakened one. The *Dharma* is Sanskrit for the Buddha's teaching. The *Sangha* is Sanskrit for the community of Buddhist monastics. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are known as the Three Jewels.

⁵ To turn the Dharma wheel is a Buddhist term meaning to teach the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching.

⁶ *Nirvana*: the state of absolute peace and bliss free from all suffering; for more details, see Unit 7.

can be likened to receiving treatment for an ailment. When we feel sick and in pain (1st truth), we go to a doctor who examines the causes of our disease (2nd truth) and prescribes the corresponding medicine (4th truth) to cure the ailment. By listening to the doctor's advice and taking the medication, our illness is cured, and we are healthy again (3rd truth).

The First Noble Truth

Dukkha (Sanskrit; Pali. *dukkha*) means suffering or pain and connotes the sense of dissatisfaction or imperfection in the context of the Four Noble Truths. Whether we feel bored doing our daily chores, stressed at work, anxious about not getting what we want, or grief over the loss of a loved one—these experiences are all *dukkha*. At the same time, we may think that while there is suffering in life, there is also happiness. It is by this very fact that the Buddha taught that this world is a *saha* world, or a world that is endurable (*i.e.*, the suffering in this world is still endurable). Nonetheless, *dukkha* (be it minor or serious) is marked by irritation, annoyance and a sense of irresistibility, and it is in everyone's life.

Whether you are a man or a woman, old or young, from the West or the East, wealthy or poor, *dukkha* is a universal human experience we all encounter. This observation is the first of the Four Noble Truths.

Eight Kinds of Suffering

Everyone experiences the eight kinds of suffering: birth, aging, illness, death, separation from the ones we love, being

with people we dislike, wishing for things we cannot have, and the imbalance of body and mind.

Birth: During childbirth, aside from going through the excruciating pain of delivering the baby, both mother and child are in danger of injury or death. For the fetus, being in the womb is like being in a prison and coming out of the womb is like being squeezed through two mountains closing in. After birth, the newborn experiences more pain when its tender skin is even slightly touched. The mother not only suffers the pain of labor, but also various prenatal and postnatal risks, other complications and, at times, depression.

Aging: As we age, our physical body and health deteriorate. Our memory and concentration often fail us. Our strength, vitality, and even mobility decline, and it becomes a struggle to do even the simplest tasks.

Illness: Despite the advances in medicine, there are always more diseases than the available cures. No one is immune to illness and even the powerful and the strong will feel helpless when bedridden.

Death: A sutra⁷ says that the pain of death is like that of a live turtle having its shell peeled off. As the elements of our body break down, we may see our whole life flash before our eyes, or have frightening visions of the earth shattering, an overwhelming flood or a scorching fire.

Separation from the ones we love: Be it our parents, spouse, siblings, or friends, we all have our own course in life and we all must die. Therefore, parting from our loved ones is inevitable and can happen at any time.

⁷ Sutra: Sanskrit for a Buddhist scripture, or a record of the Buddha's teaching.

Being with people we dislike: No matter where we are, whether at work, at school, or even at home, there is always someone whom we prefer not to be with, who bothers us and arouses in us various negative emotions and uneasiness.

Desiring things we cannot get: Human desire is insatiable—be it for wealth, love, fame, power, food, sleep, material possessions or spiritual accomplishments—we are always seeking for more. There are always things we don't have, or don't have enough of. And even when we do get the things we want, they do not quench our desire to have more; they still do not make us happy.

Imbalance of body and mind: Annoyance, frustration, irritation, boredom, anxiety, depression, fear, and emotional ups and downs are mental afflictions that are easily induced by an imbalance of body and mind, or of the five *skandhas*.⁸ An example of this is a teenager's experience with their changing bodies and hormones. The process of these changes not only impacts the adolescent's physical growth, but also their emotions, and mood.

Three Kinds of Duhkha

In addition to teaching the eight kinds of suffering, the Buddha also taught the three kinds of duhkha to help us understand suffering in more detail.

⁸ The five skandhas (aggregates) are form, feeling, conception, volition, and consciousness. Form refers to the body, the other four skandhas constitute the mind.

Duhkha-duhkha: Duhkha of ordinary suffering and pain associated with unpleasant feelings and situations. The eight kinds of suffering are good examples.

Duhkha due to change: The Buddha never denied the existence of happiness in life when he taught about duhkha as the First Noble Truth. Nonetheless, an experience or feeling of happiness does not last long, it changes, and it will come to an end. The passing of happiness may leave us with a sense of loss, or dissatisfaction. Those first moments of happiness we are enjoying are changing even though we might be unaware of those changes. Let's say we bought a delicious cake, as we are happily carrying it while walking home anticipating having a slice of it, we trip over a stone, fall on the ground, scrape a knee, and ruin the cake.

Duhkha of conditioned existence: This kind of duhkha, such as boredom and restlessness of mind, is usually too subtle to detect. For example, sometimes we do not know what to do to kill time, so we stare at a TV without really watching it or aimlessly browse our social media feeds to ignore what's going on around us. This duhkha (a conditioned, changing state of the mind) is usually underlying neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feelings.

Suffering and Impermanence

Impermanence is a feature of reality that we often ignore. Things change when the causal conditions that gave rise to them change. Nothing in nature is fixed; everything is always in flux. People, property, money, fame, power, love, family, enemies, pleasure, pain, life, and the cosmos—all things,

physical and nonphysical, come and go. When we are ignorant of or choose to ignore this reality, we bring dukkha into our life.

Therefore, when we choose to believe that things will always stay the same, or when we cling to the past, present or future, we are unprepared for when changes happen, and consequently, we suffer.

Acknowledge Reality

The First Noble Truth states that everyone encounters dissatisfaction and suffering in life. To be truly free of suffering, we must first acknowledge that it is there. In this way, we discover their causes and effectively address them—this is where the real opportunity for ending our suffering begins.

The teaching of dukkha lends clarity and direction to our lives rather than pessimism or cynicism. The Buddha taught this Noble Truth so that we can learn to face the difficulties in life truthfully and realistically. We place our attention on suffering with courage and understanding in order to positively and effectively resolve the issues that afflict us. As we face, address and reconcile our afflictions, we can eventually become liberated from them, and this liberation is called nirvana. It isn't easy, but it is doable.

Reflection:

1. What are you dissatisfied with or suffering from in life? Can you categorize these experiences under one of the eight kinds of suffering?
2. Pick a weekend, and carefully examine if you experience any of the three kinds of dukkha. If you have some

duhkha, how do you face it and what approach do you take to end it?