

## 3. Suffering:

### The First Noble Truth

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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.<sup>4</sup>

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 wheel<sup>5</sup> up until he entered nirvana<sup>6</sup>, 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

<sup>6</sup> *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 sutra<sup>7</sup> 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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*.<sup>8</sup> 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 Dukkha

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

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<sup>8</sup> 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?

## 4. The Causes of Suffering: The Second Noble Truth I

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The suffering we experience results from the causes within ourselves.

To eliminate suffering, we must learn to understand these causes.

### The Second Noble Truth

The First Noble Truth observes that *duhkha* is a universal condition experienced by all beings. The Second Noble Truth teaches that the suffering we experience results from the causes within ourselves. To eliminate suffering, we must learn to understand these causes.

### What Causes Suffering

The Sanskrit term for the various causes of suffering is *klesha*, often translated as defilements, afflictions, or vexations. There are two major classes of *klesha*: false views and false thoughts.

False views are based on our misperception and misunderstanding of reality. They include: a belief that there is a self, dualistic views, and the denial of causality.<sup>9</sup> False thoughts are the thoughts and behavioral patterns that develop from false views, such as our habitual responses based on greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, jealousy, etc.

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to the said three false views, there are other erroneous views, such as 1) taking one's own opinion, speculation, or theory to be correct and strongly attaching to it; and, 2) mistaking certain beliefs or practices (e.g., asceticism) as the truth leading to liberation and holding on to them even though they are untrue.

## False Views

### The False Self

Many of us carry the idea that we have a lasting and unchanging identity which we call the “self.” We often take this sense of identity—“I” or “me”—for granted and believe that it makes us individual and distinct from “others.” It is hard to pinpoint or define it clearly, yet we feel that this “I” is who we have been since birth, who we are right now, and who we will be until death. But upon examining more closely the answers we give ourselves when we ask, “Who am I?” or “What am I?” a precise answer seems to elude us all.

In fact, the identity we have built around this “I” has many sides to it: how we see ourselves in the mirror, what our parents, spouse, or children expect of us, what schools we attended or company we work for, what our colleagues and friends think of us, what our current habits and preferences are, and so on. All of these factors, usually pertaining to some kind of role we are playing in life, are always fluctuating between one and the other.

What this reveals is that our identity changes according to the situation we find ourselves in at any given moment. At times we see ourselves as a success, at other times we see ourselves as a failure. At work we may be a doctor, yet at home we’re the parent of a young child who doesn’t know (or really care if) we’re a doctor. Yesterday I was sad, yet today I am happy. In one moment we see an “I” that is loved, in another moment we see an “I” that is despised. Which one of these “I”s is the real “I”?

None of these identities is the real “I.” All of these identities actually constitute what in Buddhism is known as the false self, or what is commonly called the ego. When “I” am angry or hurt, it is the ego that is angry and hurt. When the “I” thinks it knows what it wants (“I know what I want!”) and begins to scheme for ways to get it and hold on to it, it is the ego who is feeling insecure about its existence.

Yet amid these changing identities, we have come to believe that there is an unchanging “self” underneath our thoughts, feelings, and physical being that is real and permanent; and it is this belief in the existence of a fixed self that is the most fundamental of our delusions and the primary cause of all our suffering.

## **Dualistic Views**

Eternalism and nihilism are examples of dualistic or extreme views about the nature of existence. Eternalism refers to the belief in an eternal, unchanging entity, a self or a soul that exists forever. Nihilism is the belief that upon death, sentient beings are annihilated and that nothing remains, including the consequences of their past actions. Both views are false perceptions of reality and directly lead to suffering.

As mentioned before, it is the belief in the existence of an unchanging, separate self (the ego) that is the most fundamental of our delusions and the primary cause of dukkha. Because of this ego, one draws an illusory boundary that falsely separates the self from the rest of the world. As a result, many dualistic views arise and we seemingly find ourselves trapped between ideas of self and others, life and death, permanence and impermanence, good and bad, likes and dislikes, pleasure and

pain, motion and stillness, and so on--the perfect setup for continued suffering in which we are tearing ourselves apart in two and easily become biased, intolerant and even extreme. This dualistic outlook, however, is misleading. On closer examination, the distinction between each of the opposite pairs becomes hazy.

Let's take a look at the notions of good and bad: something apparently good may lead to something bad. Something that seems bad may lead to something good. As the ancient Chinese story of a frontier man who loses his horse tells us, sometimes misfortune is a blessing in disguise. Failing a test in school may motivate the student to study harder than ever, thereby getting better grades than before. Wealth and fame have often been the beginning of one's downfall. What we seem to dislike now, we may come to love later. Having too much of a good thing, and we become weary of it. Even with life and death: as soon as one is born, one begins the journey toward death. Dualistic views are essentially connected. Realizing this connection between all things, we begin to see all the possibilities in between a situation, not just two, and we will no longer fall into the trap of dualistic views and live in harmony with reality as it is.

## **Denial of Causality**

The principle of causality states that every phenomenon comes into being due to various causes and conditions. When the necessary causes and conditions come together, the corresponding result arises.

In the course of our life, whatever we do, say, and think about will exert some effect on us and the rest of the world. In Buddhist terminology, whenever we act, we produce *karma*

(Sanskrit for action). Actions that benefit others, known as good karma, will bring us blessings. Actions that harm others, or bad karma, will bring us the corresponding hurt and pain. In other words, what happens in our life is the result of our past and present actions.

Denial of causality refers to the rejection of this law of cause and effect. Those who hold this false view may attribute the events that happen in life to coincidence or chance, blame others for one's misfortunes, or deny there are consequences to bear for one's harmful deeds.

## **Summary**

Our false perceptions and concepts of ourselves and the world are the basis of our false thought patterns and behaviors that bring suffering into our lives. While it is relatively easier to understand the rationales of why certain views and perspectives are incorrect, it takes longer to change our entrenched thought patterns. We will discuss these thought patterns and behaviors in Unit 6.

## **Reflection:**

Regarding the dissatisfactions or sufferings you may face now, do you see how they can be the result of the false views explained in the Second Noble Truth above?

## 5. Group Discussion

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1. Bring your Meditation Record to class and share your meditation experience of the past weeks, including any difficulties encountered and effects or changes in yourself you have observed.
2. Discuss how we can use the First and Second Noble Truths to help us understand life's experiences and to resolve difficulties?

## 6. The Causes of Suffering: The Second Noble Truth II

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When klesha arises, suffering follows.

When klesha is extinguished, suffering ceases.

### **False thoughts**

There are two major classes of klesha, or afflictions, which cause suffering and dissatisfaction in our lives: false views and false thoughts. In Unit 4, we discussed false views: the false self, dualistic views, and denial of causality.

False thoughts are the entrenched patterns of thought and behavior that are based on false views and that take a longer time and mindful effort to change and remove. For example, we may understand as false that smoking is enjoyable, especially upon seeing the evidence and then knowing that in fact smoking can cause cancer and many other serious illnesses that lead to suffering and death. Yet, someone who has a nicotine addiction may just ignore this evidence and light a cigarette when the desire to smoke arises. In fact, many, if not all, of our thought patterns that cause us harm follow this same tendency. We are fully aware that getting angry will only make a situation worse and hurt someone, yet we still get angry; or that eating that extra slice of pizza will raise one's cholesterol level to a dangerous limit, yet eat it anyway. We get carried away by the patterns of our false thoughts and ultimately harm ourselves, and in many cases, others as well.

Primary examples of false thoughts include greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt.

**Greed:** the desire for sights, sounds, smells, taste, and touch; the craving for wealth, lust, fame, power, and food, etc. In general, it is the tendency to desire for more of what we like or attach to without the mindfulness to reduce or stop it when it is necessary to do so.

**Anger:** a state of annoyance, resentment or bitterness toward situations that go against our desires and wishes. It is the most basic form of ill will which gives rise to other hostile emotions, including anxiety/torment, hatred/hostility, and jealousy.

**Ignorance:** a state of confusion and haziness, unable to understand or accept the truths about reality as taught in the Dharma. With ignorance, we take what is seeming as real and do what should not be done (or we are unable to do what should be done).

**Pride:** an inflated sense of self-importance, arrogance, condescension and self-conceit. In essence, there is a presumption in the mind that one has virtues one actually does not possess and that one is better or superior to others, no matter what one's station in life is.

**Doubt:** an attitude of indecisiveness, suspicion, and distrust about everything and everyone (including oneself and one's teachers), a lack of faith in understanding and accepting the Dharma and putting it into practice. It also leads to destructive regret or remorse and prevents one from being certain even about one's own enlightenment.

## Recognize the Causes of Our Predicaments

A sutra says: “When this arises, that arises. When this is extinguished, that is extinguished.” In a nutshell, this

summarizes the law of causality, the foundation of the Four Noble Truths.

When klesha arises, suffering follows. When klesha is extinguished, suffering ceases. The Second Noble Truth explains the causes that need to be eradicated in order for suffering to cease. Otherwise, klesha and dukkha, afflictions and sufferings, reinforce each other, trapping us in the endless cycle of samsara.<sup>10</sup>

It is important for us to think deeply about how these causes lead to the dissatisfaction we experience in life and to reflect often that our false thoughts and deeds are the causes of our problems: Are we thinking and acting out of our false ego, our tendency to draw false boundaries, our craving, anger or other afflictions?

In applying the teachings of the First and Second Noble Truths to examine our lives, we more clearly understand the causes and results of our actions and eventually extinguish the conditions that bring us suffering.

### **Reflection:**

Reflect on an unhappy experience you had in the past weeks. Do you see how it might be the result of false thoughts as

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<sup>10</sup> Samsara: A Sanskrit word meaning the endless cycle of birth and death in which sentient beings are trapped. In this present life, when we act and react in the same mistaken way out of ignorance, we will suffer the same consequences over and over again—this repeated cycle of suffering is also called samsara—samsara on a daily or even moment-by-moment scale.

explained above? If a similar experience happens again in the future, what would you do differently to avoid this unhappiness?

## 7. Nirvana:

### The Third Noble Truth

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Nirvana is the cessation of all suffering and of all the causes of suffering.

#### The Third Noble Truth

The Third Noble Truth conveys the hope and sublime happiness that suffering surely can come to an end, and this state of freedom from all suffering is called *nirvana*. Suffering is caused by *klesha*. When we extinguish these causes, our suffering ceases, and we reach the state of nirvana, which may be described in the following ways:

- **Extinction:** the cessation of all suffering and all the causes of suffering.
- **Tranquility:** absolute peace and serenity.
- **Transcendence:** transcending mundane existence and the experience of samsara.
- **Unborn, Deathless:** the neither-arising-nor-ceasing state of mind, and the state of no longer having to experience any future rebirth or death, or the state of being at one with our original nature, which is unborn and deathless.
- **Liberation, Bliss:** forever liberated from all misery; the state of ultimate bliss.

#### Two Kinds of Nirvana

According to the Mahayana tradition, there are two kinds of nirvana: that which is attained by arhats, and that which is attained by bodhisattvas and buddhas. Buddhas, bodhisattvas,

and arhats are enlightened beings who have achieved different levels of realization.

Buddhas have attained perfect and ultimate enlightenment and understand reality as it is without any delusion. They have also perfected the skillful means to liberate all sentient beings, guiding each according to his or her disposition and needs.

Bodhisattvas are buddhas-to-be who have perfected their understanding of the reality and aspire to attain ultimate enlightenment with a vow to liberate all beings from suffering before they themselves are completely liberated.

Arhats have extinguished the poisons of greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and false views by having realized the Four Noble Truths and practiced the Noble Eightfold Path (discussed next in Unit 8). Even though they have transcended the cycle of life and death (samsara), they have not yet attained the all-encompassing wisdom of the buddhas, nor have yet developed the boundless compassion of the bodhisattvas to liberate all beings.

## **The Nirvana of the Arhats**

The nirvana of the arhats is mainly a state of self-liberation. Arhats realize that according to the principle of causality,<sup>11</sup> whenever we act and create karma in the mundane world we become subject to its effects. To be free from the sufferings of mundane existence and samsara, arhats perfectly realize the Four Noble Truths and practice the Noble Eightfold Path to eradicate all afflictions, cease to create karma, and abide in the stillness and tranquility of nirvana.

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<sup>11</sup> For the principle of causality and karma, refer to Unit 4.

## **The Nirvana of the Buddhas**

The nirvana of the buddhas is the state of ultimate liberation wherein they are free of the suffering of samsara, clearly see and understand reality as it is, and have the boundless compassion to embrace and benefit all sentient beings at any time.

Following the Buddha Way, bodhisattvas aspire to reach the same liberation of the buddhas. They cultivate to free themselves from delusion and suffering with a vow to liberate all beings. To fulfill their vow, they work to learn all the Dharma and master the skills that help all beings of different capacities attain buddhahood. With an attitude of goodwill, bodhisattvas are tirelessly performing good deeds to benefit others without any attachment to their own efforts and results. They neither expect praise, reward, or fame for their good deeds, nor do they become disappointed or resentful of any ingratitude, criticism, mockery or slandering of their efforts.

## **Nirvana Is an Attainable Goal**

Just as suffering is the result of afflictions and unwholesome deeds, nirvana is the result of practicing and completing the path of liberation. It is attained when the mind has returned from a state of turbidity to its original state of purity, from irritation and agitation to inconceivable serenity, from duality to nonduality, from the conditioned to the unconditioned. This is the state of ultimate peace, tranquility and bliss.

The Third Noble Truth teaches us to set nirvana as a goal of our cultivation. As practitioners of mindfulness, we continuously reflect on our state of mind to see if it is in accord with the peace and tranquility of nirvana as we go about our

daily life. Whether in action or at rest, a bodhisattva's mind remains clear, awake, free of attachments and in command of itself at every moment. This state of mind is in accord with the nirvana of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

As we walk along the path, just as a bodhisattva does, and learn to keep a similar attitude, we will know how to no longer be afraid of hardships and challenges. We will be liberated from life's vicissitudes and suffering.

**Reflection:**

If nirvana is not a faraway land, what is nirvana? What are the things you can do to bring the state of nirvana into your life right now?

## 8. The Noble Eightfold Path: The Fourth Noble Truth

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The Path prescribes the essential practices to make nirvana a reality.

### The Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Eightfold Path: the path to the cessation of suffering. It teaches us the steps of how to put the Dharma into practice so as to make nirvana a reality and not just an abstract theory or an interesting topic of conversation.

There are different paths to nirvana, such as the twelve links of interdependence<sup>12</sup> and the six *paramitas*,<sup>13</sup> but the Noble Eightfold Path is the most fundamental of all the practices. In it are the primary disciplines for purifying our minds of afflictions and for the realization of enlightened states. The Path includes right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi. They can be viewed as eight sequential steps of the Path, but with each step also working as an important comprehensive practice in its own right.

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<sup>12</sup> The twelve links of interdependence: the chain of causes and conditions that lead to the cycle of rebirth, or repeated patterns of thought and behavior. This teaching will be taught in the Level 3 meditation class.

<sup>13</sup> The six paramitas: the six perfections that lead to buddhahood practiced by bodhisattvas—charity, moral conduct, tolerance, diligence, meditation, and prajna wisdom. The six paramitas will be taught in detail in the Level 2 meditation class.

## Right Understanding

Right understanding is the compass that points us in the right direction on our cultivation path. It means developing the right view about ourselves and the world, which essentially involves understanding the principle of causality, emptiness,<sup>14</sup> and the Middle Way.<sup>15</sup> With right understanding, we will be able to discern distorted views or futile speculations from the truth. For example, the following views reflect right understanding:

- seeking pleasures of the senses and the ego will lead to suffering instead of true, lasting happiness.
- being self-centered will eventually bring adversity into our lives, while benefiting others is to benefit ourselves, and vice versa.
- All phenomena are empty in nature; they do not have an independent existence or inherent, fixed characteristics.
- All things and all beings are interdependent and interconnected.
- All beings are essentially equal in their original nature.

## Right Thought

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<sup>14</sup> Emptiness: an important Buddhist teaching that sees all phenomena, including what we think of as our “self,” as without an independent existence or inherent, fixed characteristics; therefore, all things are impermanent, changing, and interdependent.

<sup>15</sup> The Middle Way: an important Buddhist teaching that describes reality as it is, free of dualistic views. Emptiness and the Middle Way will be discussed in more detail in the Level 3 meditation class.

Understanding what the right thing is is not the same as doing it. Right thought, right speech, and right action are needed to put right understanding into practice.

If we have the right understanding of a truth but seldom think about it, or speak and act accordingly, then we are still not practicing the path. Right thought means to contemplate and internalize the Dharma so that all our thoughts are in accord with the Buddhist principles of, for example, mindfulness, responsible action, compassion, tolerance, and equality. With frequent contemplation on these concepts, we will learn to respond to the events and situations in our daily life with the right perspective and understanding.

## **Right Speech**

Right thought will lead to right speech and right action; and through our actions and speech, we produce the corresponding outcomes, or karma, that affect our lives.

Right speech means (1) to speak kind and positive words that nourish the heart and uplift the spirit, as well as to encourage commitment to walking the path of enlightenment, and (2) to refrain from false speech, such as deceit, gossip, profanity, bullying, mockery, or slander. The most serious offense in speech is to falsely proclaim that one is enlightened or has achieved deep samadhi or possesses some kind of supernormal power in order to draw followers and profit from them.

In the digital age we currently live in, the words and ideas expressed in books, movies, media in general, and the internet easily and instantaneously reach millions of people. This is why it is important to be exceedingly cautious with the words and

the messages we send out and to practice right speech when communicating or using any form of social media.

### **Right Action**

Right action, in the broadest sense, is the practice of purifying our mental, physical, and verbal actions.<sup>16</sup> Here, it specifically pertains to right conduct or physical action: (1) to refrain from committing any harmful actions, such as killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, and (2) to sincerely practice wholesome deeds that benefit ourselves, others, and the world.

### **Right Livelihood**

Right livelihood refers to being conscientious about choosing our career or occupation. It asks practitioners to avoid making a living or obtaining wealth in ways that are (1) unlawful, e.g., theft, fraud, or drug trafficking, (2) legal but harmful to sentient beings, e.g., trading in weapons, fishing, poultry farming, or butchery, which involve causing fear, pain and death in other living beings, and (3) legal but unwholesome, e.g., selling liquor or nicotine, gambling, prostitution, and creating explicitly violent video games which can induce violent behavior, greed and hatred in video game players.

Right livelihood also means using our occupation as an opportunity to make positive contributions for the enlightenment of society and to serve the needs of others.

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<sup>16</sup> To purify our verbal action, we avoid false speech. To purify our mental action, we refrain from preoccupying our mind with thoughts of craving, anger, self-gratification, or misperception.

## Right Effort

Many people try very hard to eliminate dissatisfaction and achieve happiness in life but go about it the wrong way; for example, using dishonest tactics to get ahead or to hold on to power. When our effort is based on false views and applied through the wrong means, then all our hard work will eventually prove to be futile.

Right effort means putting all our effort toward eradicating afflictions, ending suffering, and attaining enlightenment through the right path. This means applying diligence in learning and understanding the Dharma such as attending Dharma lectures, meditating or putting the Dharma into practice in every moment of our day and persevering in our efforts until nirvana is attained.

## Right Mindfulness

Right mindfulness means freeing the mind from distraction, confusion, and false views, and maintaining a mind of clarity, tranquility and discernment in every moment. With right mindfulness, we can quickly detect and overcome thoughts of greed, anger, jealousy, and other afflictions. We are mindful to bring up only positive and wholesome thoughts. For example, we practice to always keep in mind the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha and what they embody.<sup>17</sup> In Unit 2, we were introduced to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and learned the meditation technique of mindfulness of breathing. This is one of the ways to begin a practice in right mindfulness.

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<sup>17</sup> The *Buddha* embodies the enlightened mind, our pure awareness. The *Dharma* embodies the truth. The *Sangha* represents our intrinsic purity and harmony.

Right mindfulness also means right remembrance, which means retaining the truth without lapse in memory. Specifically, right mindfulness is to continuously keep the truth or reality in mind. Grand Master Wei Chueh, the Founding Patriarch of Chung Tai Chan Monastery, taught us, “Wherever you are, that is where your mind is.” He gave us a clear outline of how to put right mindfulness into our daily lives: when walking, walk attentively; when eating, eat mindfully; when meditating, remain alert and lucid without the four problems encountered in meditation; when conversing, keep mindful and focused on what the other person is saying to avoid any misunderstanding. By practicing right mindfulness at every moment and in each step, we increase our concentration, strengthen our memory, and enhance peace in our everyday life.

With practice, furthermore, we will be mindful enough to do all kinds of good deeds without attachment and the notion of “self” and “others”—as in “I am benefiting others with my kindness.” Ultimately, we will be able to attain the state of “no-mind,” free of dualistic thoughts, attachments, and delusions.

### **Right Samadhi**

Samadhi means a deeply concentrated state of mind, a state of absolute stillness and illumination. It is achieved through the diligent practice of meditation.

Stillness means the mind is in absolute tranquility, unmoved or affected by any situation. Illumination means the mind is clear, lucid, and able to perceive the world truthfully as it is, free of illusion.

In right samadhi, the ego is shattered, all afflictions, attachments, greed and anger are extinguished. From this state,

we attain true liberation—nirvana—which is never separate from the mind itself.

## **The Noble Eightfold Path & the Three Learnings**

The Eightfold Path is also known as the Middle Way because, while in the search for liberation, we avoid the two extremes of: 1) indulgence in the pleasures of the mundane life, and 2) the practice of self-mortification or asceticism. In addition, the Eightfold Path helps practitioners develop the Three Learnings: morality, concentration, and wisdom. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood are associated with practicing morality. Right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi constitute concentration. Right understanding and right thought are included in the category of wisdom. These Three Learnings, just as the Four Noble Truths, guide practitioners onto the path of liberation.

## **The Truth of Causality**

The Four Noble Truths are based on the principle of causality. Let's recall this verse:

When this arises, that arises.

When this is extinguished, that is extinguished.

The First Noble Truth, *duhkha*, is the effect of *klesha*, or afflictions. The Second Noble Truth, the causes of suffering, explains what leads to suffering. The first two Noble Truths tell us that if we are ignorant of the causes of our suffering or

dissatisfaction, which are within ourselves, we will continue to plant and reap the seeds of more suffering in this mundane world. On the other hand, if we carefully examine the causes of suffering and are resolved to extinguishing them, then the result is the extinction of all suffering.

The Third Noble Truth, nirvana, is the effect, or the fruit, of practicing the path. And the Fourth Noble Truth is the path that leads to nirvana. The Third and Fourth Noble Truths tell us that if we do not diligently practice the path, then true peace and happiness will always elude us. Yet, if we sincerely practice the path to true peace and happiness in every moment of our life, then we will experience nirvana as the result.

**Reflection:**

Write down how you can put the Noble Eightfold Path into practice in your daily life, and practice these steps for a week, then sit down and reflect if it has made a difference in your life.

## 9. Group Discussion

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1. Share your understanding of the principle of causality as applied to the Four Noble Truths.
2. The Dharma helps us see and understand reality truthfully. Share your understanding and experience of how the Four Noble Truths help us understand ourselves better.
3. Share your experience in practicing right mindfulness at home and in the workplace. How has the practice made a difference in your life and outlook?