

# The Four Noble Truths

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## Introduction

The Four Noble Truths are the most fundamental teaching of the Buddha. Deceptively simple, they actually provide a profound explanation of human unhappiness, both gross and subtle, and how to attain increasingly positive states of mind, from stress relief in daily life to an unshakeable calm happiness and a selflessly compassionate heart.

With regard to the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha has been likened to a physician who diagnoses a condition, explains what causes it and what will end it, and then lays out in detail its cure.

## The Noble Truth of Suffering

The first Noble Truth is that life contains inevitable, unavoidable suffering. (Some translators use the word, "stress," to convey the broad meaning of the original word used by the Buddha in the Pali language: *dukkha*.)

This suffering encompasses the gross forms of pain, illness, and trauma we can all imagine, such as a broken leg, stomach flu, grappling with the devastation of a hurricane or the violent death of a loved one -- or getting the diagnosis of a terminal disease.

It also includes milder but common forms of discomfort and distress, like long hours of work, feeling let down by partner, a headache, feeling frustrated, disappointed, hurt, inadequate, depressed, upset, etc.

And it includes the subtlest qualities of tension in the mind, restlessness, sense of contraction, preoccupation, unease, boredom, blahness, ennui, sense of being an isolated self, something missing in life, something just not fulfilling, etc.

## What People Do with the Fact of Suffering

Because suffering is uncomfortable, we may suppress or minimize it in our own lives. And because it is unpleasant -- and sometimes guilt-provoking -- to see it in others, we sometimes turn away from it there, too.

We also live in a culture that tends to cast a veil over the everyday suffering of poverty, chronic illness, draining work conditions, aging, and dying while -- oddly --

pushing intense imagery of violence in everything from the evening news to children's TV. Simultaneously, our media present an endless parade of promises that you can avoid suffering through looking younger, upgrading your internet connection, drinking Bud Lite, getting Viagra, losing 10 pounds, etc.

It can almost make you feel like a failure for suffering!

### **Personal Reflections**

What are some of the kinds of suffering that exist in your life?

Can you accept the fact of your suffering? What gets in the way of doing that?

What happens inside you when you accept the *universal* truth of suffering, that *everyone* suffers? In a way, it becomes less personal then, and easier to handle. It's just suffering. It doesn't have to be a big deal that we suffer. It's just what is. It is indeed true that we and everyone else suffers.

You have opened up to a truth . . . a great truth . . . the First Noble Truth.

### **The Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering**

The Second Noble Truth describes the principal cause of suffering. It is *clinging* . . . to anything at all.

The bad news is that we suffer. The good news is that there is a prime cause - clinging - that we can address.

There are lots of words that get at different aspects of clinging. For example, the original Pali word is "*tanha*," the root meaning of which is thirst. Here are some related words, and you might like to pause briefly after each one to get a sense of the experience of it: Desire. Attachment. Striving. Wanting. Craving. Grasping. Stuck. Righteous. Positional. Searching. Seeking. Addicted. Obsessed. Needing. Hunger.

As a general statement, clinging causes suffering by causing it to arise in the first place or to increase further, and by blocking factors that would reduce or end it.

### **The inherent suffering of clinging**

For starters, any moment of clinging - in all of its forms, gross or subtle, and regardless of its objects - inherently contains suffering in two ways.

First, as you've probably noticed, the experience of clinging itself - in all of its forms - is unpleasant. It feels contracted, tense, uneasy, and at least a little stressful. And

this is true even if what we crave is enjoyable: the craving itself robs the enjoyable experience of some of its savor.

Second, as the Buddha observed, one of the three fundamental characteristics of existence is **impermanence**. Everything changes. Nothing of mind or matter lasts forever. Every single moment changes instantly into something else.

That's the absolutely universal nature of outer reality and of inner experience. But what is the nature of the human mind?

The mind evolved to help us survive, and it does so by trying to figure out stable patterns in the world, and in our life, and to develop lasting solutions to life's problems. As a result, our mind is forever chasing after moments of experience or moments of reality -- trying to hold on to them to understand them, to get a grip on them, to control them.

At the most basic, microscopic level, it is the nature of mind to cling. As a strategy for passing on genes, it has worked spectacularly well. But Mother Nature doesn't care if we suffer; she only cares about grandchildren!

**Because, unfortunately, by the time the mind has gotten mobilized to pursue a moment of experience in order to make sense of it and figure out a plan for dealing with it . . . . POOF! It's gone!!** Moment after moment . . .

Truly, we live life at the lip of a waterfall, with reality and experience rushing at us – experienced only and always NOW at the lip – and then, poof, zip, zap, it's over the edge and gone.

But our mind is forever trying to grab at what has already disappeared over the edge.

As the 8<sup>th</sup> century sage, Shantideva put it:

"Beings, brief, ephemeral,  
Who fiercely cling to what is also passing  
Will catch no glimpse of happiness  
[In this or any life]."

#### **Four objects of clinging**

In addition to the two ways that suffering is inherent within the very fabric of clinging, the Buddha described how suffering arises from the four main targets of clinging:

- To sense pleasures – which includes resisting unpleasant experiences

- To the notion or sense of self
- To views
- To routines and rituals

Systematically developing insight into your clinging in terms of these "targets" will really help reduce your suffering. As an extended example, let's explore the first one.

### **The suffering of clinging to sense pleasures**

First, life inevitably has lots of painful experiences. There is no way around them, no matter how much good fortune we have. Things like death, old age, illness, trips to the dentist, kids leaving home, traffic jams, etc.

Whenever we resist an unpleasant experience - including desiring a better experience - boom! right there our suffering increases. Let's say you're in the dentist's chair: wishing you were somewhere else just makes it worse.

In addition to what is happening *in the moment*, we resist painful experiences by fearing them before they begin, and by dwelling on them after they have occurred.

Of course, it's natural to have other preferences when you experience pain. But when you get attached to those preferences, that's when suffering begins.

Second, desires get awakened for pleasures we cannot or will not get to experience, and that's frustrating, disappointing, sense-of-futility-creating . . . in short, suffering.

Consider these common examples: success or fame or beauty . . . attractive people to be with . . . fabulous vacations . . . fame . . . promotions . . . hugs from surly teenagers . . . etc.

Shantideva again: "*O foolish and afflicted mind, you want, you crave for everything.*"

Third, even if we attain them, most pleasures are actually not that great. They're OK, but . . . Look closely at your experience: is the Oreo cookie really that mind-boggling? Was the vacation that outstanding? Was the satisfaction of the A paper that intense and long-lasting?

Fourth, even if we attain them and they're actually pretty great, many pleasures cost us much pain. Alcohol and drugs and certain sexual relationships may be good

examples here. But also consider the possible “collateral damage” of career ambitions, winning arguments, needing the house to be “just so,” and so on.

If you look closely: what is the cost/benefit ratio -- really?

Fifth, even if we attain a pleasure, and it’s actually pretty great, and it doesn’t cost too much – the gold standard – because of impermanence, even the most pleasant experiences inevitably change and end.

For example, one day we will be separated from everyone we love by their death or our own. Ouch: but no way around it. The cookie will be eaten: all gone! as the little kids say. We've got to get out of our warm and cozy bed for work. Time to leave the nice hot shower. You turn in the big report and the boss and everyone else sings your praises for a day or two and then it's over and on to the next thing. The orgasm lasts just a few seconds!

As the Buddha said, everything that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing. Period. No way around it.

Since pleasant facts and experiences will inevitably end, it's both doomed and painful to grasp after them.

*When the heart grasps what is painful, it is like being bitten by a snake. And when, through desire, it grasps what is pleasant, it is just grasping the tail of the snake. It only takes a little while longer for the head of the snake to come around and bite you.*

Ajahn Chah, *A Still Forest Pool*

Enjoy pleasant experiences, yes, as they pass through, as long as (A) you do not cling to them, and (B) your enjoyment does not fan the flames of desire for them – a possible but very challenging thing to do. You really have to be on top of your game for that, with lots of mindfulness.

Pretty grim, huh? But it's helpful to remember that the point of developing mindfulness of and insight into the causes of suffering is to become free of them - and thus relatively (and perhaps even absolutely) free of suffering itself.

To summarize, for all the reasons we've discussed, any experience is incapable of being completely satisfying. We have been looking for happiness, security, and fulfillment in all the wrong places.

So, what's the right place?

## The Noble Truth of the End of Suffering

The Third Noble Truth comes directly from the Second one: **The end of suffering comes with the end of clinging.**

As Achaan Chah said, *"If you let go a little, you'll have a little happiness. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of happiness. If you let go completely . . . you'll be completely happy."*

You can do this at the macro level, in letting go regarding lights turning green, or payments arriving, or your teenage children giving you a hug. Sure, you'd like things to turn out well, and that's fine. You take practical steps toward them turning out well, and that's also fine. But you can simultaneously have a peaceful, accepting attitude about however it turns out.

And you can let go – practicing non-clinging – most fundamentally at the micro level, with moment to moment experience.

For example, when you observe your experience, you will see that there is always a feeling tone automatically associated with it – a tone of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. That tone – called "feeling" in the Pali Canon (distinct from emotions) – usually triggers **craving**, which is the seed of **clinging**.

But if you can simply be mindful of the feeling tone without reacting to it – **then you can break the chain of suffering!**

In the short-term, we can't do much about the feeling tone. So you're not trying to change the feeling tone itself. But you are trying to not react to it via one form of clinging or another.

The epitome of non-clinging is equanimity -- which is not, according to a teacher, U Pandita, ". . . insensitivity, indifference, or apathy. It is simply nonpreferential. . . . One does not push aside the things one dislikes or grasp at the things one prefers."

He goes on to say: *"The way to bring about equanimity is wise attention: to be continually mindful from moment to moment, without a break, based on the intention to develop equanimity. . . ."*

*In the deepest forms of insight, we see that things change so quickly that we can't hold onto anything, and eventually the mind lets go of clinging. Letting go brings equanimity; the greater the letting go, the deeper the equanimity. . . .*

*Freedom comes when we begin to let go of our reactive tendencies. . . .*

*In Buddhist practice, we work to expand the range of life experiences in which we are free."*

When we do this, much of what we see is how we fall away from equanimity, from perfect balance, again and again. But seeing that ever more deeply and precisely . . . slowly but surely helps us tip over less often.

### **The Noble Truth of the Eightfold Path**

These are the elements of the Eightfold Path:

- Right View
- Right Resolve
- Right Action
- Right Speech
- Right Livelihood
- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

Please see the article on "The Noble Eightfold Path" in the Buddhist Wisdom section of this webpage: <http://www.wisebrain.org/articles.html>.