



The Four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold Path



The First Noble Truth: The Truth of Dissatisfaction and Suffering

The First Noble Truth describes the nature of life and our personal experience of this impermanent, ever-changing world. All beings desire happiness, safety, peace, and comfort. We desire what is satisfying, pleasurable, joyful, and permanent. However, the very nature of existence is impermanent, always changing, and therefore incapable of fully satisfying our desire. Inevitably, we experience frustration, anger, loss, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction. Life is in constant change, and changes such as birth, old age, sickness, and death can bring dissatisfaction or suffering. Suffering may arise from being associated with people or conditions that are unpleasant, from being separated from people we love or conditions we enjoy, from not getting what we desire, or from getting what we desire then losing it. Even our own thoughts and feelings are impermanent, constantly changing. Inevitably, all physical, emotional, and mental conditions will change. Insight into the First Noble Truth: To overcome dissatisfaction and suffering, it is essential that we understand and accept the ever-changing, impermanent nature of life; we acknowledge the presence of dissatisfaction and suffering; we understand the very nature of suffering and we embrace suffering compassionately, without fear or avoidance.

The Second Noble Truth: The Cause of Dissatisfaction and Suffering

The Second Noble Truth refers to the arising, origin, and cause of our dissatisfaction and suffering. We desire, crave, and thirst for happiness, security, and identity in this world of impermanence. Influenced by our misperception (ignorance/delusion), we want life to satisfy our every craving, need, and desire. We want from life what it can never provide: constant happiness, pleasure, and security undisturbed by change or loss. When life fails to satisfy our needs and desires, we experience fear, frustration, hurt, anger, pain, or suffering. Afflicted by such thoughts and emotions, we tend to speak and act in negative ways which cause further suffering. Therefore our dissatisfaction and suffering do not come from outside of ourselves. We cause our own suffering when we fail to realize that the impermanent nature of life is incapable of providing constant satisfaction for our craving, need, and desire. The origin and cause of dissatisfaction and suffering is our misperception of reality (ignorance/delusion), self-centered desire (greed), craving, grasping, attachment to things that do not last, and our negative behavior. Insight into the Second Noble Truth: To overcome dissatisfaction and suffering, it is essential that we clearly identify the causes of this experience; we deeply feel and fully understand these causes; finally, we choose to abandon, remove, and stop creating the causes of our suffering.

The Third Noble Truth: The End of Dissatisfaction and Suffering

The Third Noble Truth tells us there is an end to our dissatisfaction and suffering when we let go of, abandon, and liberate ourselves from the craving and attachment that causes it. Because our pain, confusion, and suffering have a cause, a beginning, they also have an end. Once we understand the nature of our illness, we can cure it with the right remedies. In this same way, once we see and understand what causes our suffering, we can bring an end to it by eliminating those causes and realizing well-being. Liberation from suffering, awakening, supreme peace, lasting happiness, and perfect wisdom are possible. These qualities are the very essence and nature of our being. They are always available within us, awaiting our realization. Insight into The Third Noble Truth: When our delusion, greed, craving, attachment, and negative behavior have been extinguished, what remains in this absence of suffering is the experience of Nirvana: the awakened quality of our true nature. It is essential, however, that this supreme peace and wisdom of our true nature be realized and made fully conscious by way of direct experience. For one liberated in this way, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been accomplished. This is the end of dissatisfaction and suffering—the realization of our true nature, Ultimate Reality, Nirvana.

The Fourth Noble Truth: The Path Leading to the End of Dissatisfaction and Suffering

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Way, the Path leading to the end of dissatisfaction and suffering. By following and practicing the Noble Eightfold Path—Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration—we will overcome our dissatisfaction and suffering. Following this Path, also known as the Noble Middle Path, we avoid the extremes of searching for happiness through a life of indulgence in desire and sensual pleasure, or the opposite extreme of trying to gain happiness or liberation by tormenting one's body and mind through unreasonable, unprofitable, and painful forms of spiritual austerity (self-mortification). The Noble Eightfold Path is the Way to the end of suffering; the Middle Way that leads to peace, discernment, supreme happiness, perfect wisdom, enlightenment, and Nirvana. Insight into the Fourth Noble Truth: No matter how profound our conceptual knowledge of the Path may be, this will not be sufficient for true accomplishment. It is essential that we *follow*, *cultivate*, and *practice* the Path with diligence, sincerity, and full confidence.

The Noble Eightfold Path

1) Right Understanding (or Right View) is the ability to understand the nature of things exactly as they are, without delusion or distortion. If we hold wrong views, misunderstanding the nature of reality, then our thoughts, speech, actions, and plans come forth from this misunderstanding, bringing unhappiness and suffering. If we cultivate the Right View of reality, our thoughts, speech, actions, and plans come forth from this Right Understanding, bringing happiness and freedom from suffering. Imposing our self-centered desires, needs, expectations, or fears onto life—being satisfied and happy when things go our way, and upset if they do not—is wrong understanding. With Right Understanding, we correctly perceive the interdependent, impermanent, ever-changing nature of life. We realize lasting happiness and satisfaction do not come from anything external. In addition, we understand the wholesome, life-affirming actions that bring benefit to all beings, as well as the unwholesome, negative actions which bring suffering. Right Understanding requires our full comprehension of the Four Noble Truths, which explain the nature of reality. Through Right Understanding we cultivate *wisdom*, an essential aspect of the Path.

2) Right Thought (or Right Intention) means our thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions are in complete harmony with the wisdom of life, in accordance with the way reality works. With Right Thought, our thoughts and intentions are completely free from selfish desire, hostility, and cruelty. Right Thought means our thinking, attitude, and motivation, are rightly aligned with love, kindness, compassion, wisdom, and harmlessness, and these noble qualities are extended to all living beings. Right Thought is directly related to Right Speech and Right Action; the way we think always influences our speech and actions. Therefore, our misunderstanding of reality causes wrong thinking, which gives rise to non virtuous speech and actions which cause harm. Right Thought gives rise to virtuous speech and actions which bring happiness and benefit. When our thought, desire, intention, and motivation are in harmony with Reality, the Way, the Dharma, this is Right Thought. Through Right Thought we cultivate *wisdom*, an essential aspect of the Path.

3) Right Speech is the ability to speak truthfully and harmlessly. Right Speech comes naturally from Right Thought, since our speech is a direct expression of our thoughts. Our speech should never be cruel or hurtful to others. Our words should not create hatred, misunderstanding, or suffering. Right speech means we do not lie, slander, or speak in ways that create resentment, conflict, division, or disharmony among individuals or groups. Right speech means not speaking in ways that are harsh, rude, impolite, abusive, or malicious. We refrain from idle, useless, and foolish talk or gossip. In this way, we cultivate the ability to speak the truth; we learn to use words that are friendly, gentle, benevolent, and meaningful. Right Speech means speaking kindly and wisely at the right time and place. When we are not able to speak in ways that are useful, kind, or uplifting, we may consider the wisdom of remaining in noble silence. We should understand that spiritual or religious conversation or truthfulness alone is not Right Speech. Abstinence from unwholesome speech is the essence of Right Speech. Through the practice of Right Speech we cultivate *ethical conduct* (personal integrity) and establish the essential foundation of the Path.

4) Right Action means that our behavior is ethical, honorable, and responsible. Right Action comes naturally from Right Thought, since our actions are a direct expression of our thoughts. Our physical actions are based upon our mental volition or will. When our minds and hearts are overwhelmed with greed (attachment), anger (aversion), or delusion (ignorance) we have the strong tendency to engage in unwholesome, non virtuous actions. Whenever these mental and emotional states arise, we should face them, observe them objectively, embrace them, and understand them as impermanent and being the cause of suffering. This brings insight, wisdom, and Right Action. Being in accord with Right Action, we are always compassionate, generous, nonviolent, and peaceful. We abstain from unwholesome behavior such as destroying life, taking what is not given (stealing), sexual misconduct, and dealing with others in hurtful or dishonest ways. We live a life of honesty, being always conscientious, with a heart full of sympathy, desiring the welfare of all living beings. To the best of our ability, we support others in leading a peaceful, nonviolent, and honorable life as well. Through Right Action we cultivate *ethical conduct* (personal integrity), and establish the essential foundation of the Path.

5) Right Livelihood suggests that we earn our living in an honorable and life-affirming way, free from deceit or dishonesty. We do not earn our livelihood in any way that involves harm, cruelty, or injustice to either human beings or animals, nor do we support those who harm other beings. For example, Right Livelihood means not selling or trading in arms and lethal weapons, not selling intoxicating drinks or poisons, not killing or mistreating animals, not cheating or deceiving others, and so forth. The dharma of a human being is to support and assist life, embracing our interconnection with all sentient beings. Being in accord with Right Livelihood means living in harmony and unity with all of life; living not just to satisfy our own personal desires, but to compassionately serve the welfare of all beings. Through Right Livelihood we cultivate *ethical conduct* (personal integrity), and establish the essential foundation of the Path.

6) Right Effort is the wholehearted, diligent, and energetic endeavor to train our mind and heart. We are to restrain or prevent unwholesome states of mind from arising. We are to make an effort to dispel and abandon those unwholesome states of mind that have already arisen in our awareness. In addition, we are to make an effort to cultivate positive, pure, loving, virtuous, and wholesome states of mind and heart which have not yet arisen or been developed within us. We are also to make an effort to maintain those positive, pure, loving, virtuous, and wholesome states of mind and heart which have already arisen and been cultivated within us. We should develop and bring these wholesome states to maturity and perfection. Right Effort means we put forth the diligent effort to be mindful and aware at each moment so we can prevent and eradicate unwholesome thoughts, speech, and actions. In this way, we are also able to avoid being carried away by distractions. We are to develop steady perseverance, making a firm, unshakable resolve to practice the dharma. We endeavor to express love, compassion, wisdom, and virtue in our thoughts, speech, and actions. If we truly want to awaken and attain liberation from suffering, we must practice with determination, diligence, and consistency. We must train the mind and heart by diligently applying the necessary effort. Through Right Effort we cultivate *mental discipline/concentration*, an essential aspect of the Path.

7) Right Mindfulness (or Right Attention) means being attentive, mindful, and aware of our bodily actions, sensations and feelings, and the activity of our mind. Right Mindfulness means giving our full attention to that which is positive, life affirming, and beneficial to other beings. We are also mindful of that which is negative, harmful, or destructive. In addition, we are to cultivate those states of mind conducive to our spiritual progress. In accord with Right Mindfulness, our awareness is where it should be, completely attentive to what is happening within us and around us in the present moment. We see things as they are, without distortion. When our attention is scattered, deluded, or placed on too many things at once, our thoughts, speech, or actions may become careless, which causes harm to ourselves or others. In these situations, we can practice Right Mindfulness by embracing the painful consequences of our actions with full awareness. As we practice Right Mindfulness, we are steady, open, aware, present, insightful, and serene in attitude; we think, speak, and act with loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom. Through Right Mindfulness we cultivate *mental discipline/concentration*, an essential aspect of the Path.

8) Right Concentration is the means for training and centering the mind. Through Right Concentration we bring our ordinarily restless, unconcentrated mind into a state of tranquility, one-pointedness, and unbroken attentiveness. By training the mind through Right Concentration, we extinguish the delusion, self-centered desire, and destructive thinking that rule the scattered, untrained mind. In this way, we develop serenity and mental/emotional stability, and we gain insight into the true nature of reality. Right Concentration leads one through the various stages of Dhyana (meditation) into equanimity, joy, purity of mind, and attainment of the highest wisdom. Right Concentration is a fully engaged means of training the mind and heart to be completely present in each moment, without cutting ourselves off from others or escaping the responsibilities of life. Through Right Concentration we cultivate *mental discipline/concentration*, an essential aspect of the Path.