

## *What's Noble about the Noble Truths?*

When people ask me this question, they often seem a little embarrassed, for fear that it's impolite or too obvious to ask. But it's well worth asking. After all, the end of suffering and the path to its end—the third and fourth noble truths—might be noble, but what's noble about the first and second noble truths: suffering and the craving that causes it? If anything, by attributing all suffering to craving, the truths seem to deny the possibility of noble suffering entirely. And what does it mean for a truth to be “noble” anyway?

A good place to start for an answer is with the Pali term for noble truth: *ariya-sacca*. This is a compound of two words: *ariya* (noble) and *sacca* (truth). The first word in any Pali compound, because it's stripped of its case ending, can function in many ways. This is one of the reasons that people fluent in the language liked to use compounds: Compounds can contain many layers of meaning that reward the person who tries to dig them out.

Ancient commentators specialized in the game of digging out these layers, and *ariya-sacca* is one of the compounds in which they liked to dig. Among the meanings they found in the word *ariya* is that the truths are *ennobling* because they take ordinary people to a noble attainment, a happiness that, because it's unconditioned, is reliable and blameless. The truths are also *of the nobles* in that noble—i.e., awakened—people have proven to themselves that these truths are true, and that they're the most important truths to teach to others. The commentators who dug out these meanings didn't see this sort of analysis as denying the fact that the truths themselves were noble. They simply saw it as adding resonance to their nobility.

For instance, even though the truths are true for noble people, they're not true *only* for noble people. They're classed as right view, part of the path that will take you from your not-yet-noble condition and lead you to a noble attainment. In other words, they're specifically *for* people who aren't yet fully awakened. They're part of the raft that takes you across the river. Once you're on the other side, you no longer need the raft. From that point on, the path of those who are fully awakened, like that of birds through space, can't be traced (Dhammapada 92–93). As the Buddha said, what he learned in the course of his awakening was like the leaves in the forest; the four noble truths are like just a handful of leaves (Samyutta Nikaya 56:31).

So these truths don't encompass all the views and knowledge of the awakened. They're taught by the awakened because they're part of the path to take unawakened people to awakening as well.

And the Buddha didn't save these truths only for those who are on the verge of awakening. Once, when quizzed by a newcomer to the Dhamma named Gandhabhaka, he taught the origination and cessation of suffering by using examples from Gandhabhaka's daily life: Why did he suffer over the death or imprisonment of some people and not of others? Gandhabhaka immediately grasped the basic principle—that all suffering comes from desire—and proceeded to apply those examples to understand the anxiety he felt over his absent son's safety (Samyutta Nikaya 42:11). The text doesn't say that Gandhabhaka gained awakening, but he did see—at least to some extent—how the noble truths are true. If he had taken these truths as a guide to his life, he would have found that they're ennobling as well.

But what makes the truths themselves noble? My dictionary says that among the various meanings of the word "noble" in common usage are these three: preeminent, highly virtuous, and deserving respect. "Noble" can also be used in a technical sense—as in the noble elements—meaning something that doesn't change with changing conditions. The noble truths are noble in all four of these senses.

The first sense—*preeminence*—relates to that handful of leaves. Of all the things the Buddha learned in his awakening, he realized that all the lessons with the potential to lead others to awakening were contained in these four truths. They are truths that should be given top priority in the mind. As Sariputta once said, all skillful dhammas fall under the four noble truths in the same way that the footprints of all land animals can fit into the footprint of the elephant (Majjhima Nikaya 28).

These truths not only provide the framework for understanding everything else that is skillful, but also give directions for how to deal skillfully with whatever arises in your experience. Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause is to be abandoned, its cessation is to be realized, and the path to its cessation is to be developed. In this way, the four noble truths are the Buddha's most overarching teaching—the teaching that puts every experience in its place and tells you the most skillful way to shape your experiences into a path.

This is what the Buddha meant when he noted that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. He did, of course, in his many years of teaching, touch on other topics as well, but he always did so within the overarching framework of how those topics related to an understanding of suffering and its end. Even when he dealt with such far-ranging subjects as how to make a marriage work or how to be reborn as a deva or naga, he treated them under the framework of karma, the principle underlying the fact that our actions can either cause suffering or end it. In other words, he was illustrating the principles of right view and at the same time showing both how far those principles can extend and how useful they are to know. If he was questioned about topics that would get in the way of gaining right view—as when he was

asked to take a stand on whether a fully awakened being does or doesn't exist after death (Samyutta Nikaya 22:86)—he'd refuse to answer on the grounds that doing so lay outside the range of his teaching. For him, any questions that didn't fall under these truths were a waste of time.

The noble truths are also noble in the second sense of the word: *highly virtuous*. This is because the act of seeing yourself in terms of these truths is a noble act. Take the first two truths as an example. The first truth isn't just "suffering." It's the truth that suffering boils down to clinging to the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness) around which we define our sense of who we are. To see your sense of self as inherently stressful is to give you some distance from it. Instead of simply following the dictates of what you think you are, you can step back from them and see how harmful they can be. In this way, you begin to comprehend them and, in gaining this objectivity, you're in a better position to act in less selfish ways. The willingness to view your sense of self in line with this truth is a virtuous act in and of itself.

The same point holds for the second noble truth. It's not just "craving." It's the truth that craving is the cause of suffering. To view your cravings in this way gives you some distance from them and puts you in a position where they're easier to drop when you see the stress and suffering they cause.

The noble truths are also noble in the sense that they *deserve respect*. This, in fact, is one of the meanings of "noble" that the Buddha himself explicitly used. He didn't reserve the term only for those who have already reached awakening. He also used it to describe the search that takes you there. Any search for a happiness in things subject to aging, illness, or death, he said, is ignoble. The search for a deathless happiness is the only noble search there is (Majjhima Nikaya 26). As part of the path to the deathless, the noble truths are noble in that they provide accurate directions for how to focus your search for happiness in a direction that genuinely deserves respect: toward a happiness that's harmless, lasting, and true.

Finally, several passages in the Canon describe the four noble truths in ways suggesting that "noble" here also means *universal* and *unchanging*. One passage Samyutta Nikaya 56:20 describes the truths as real and not otherwise: In other words, they describe the actual way things are and they don't change with changing conditions. Many other passages contrast the truths with a set of teachings that Anguttara Nikaya 10:20 describes as "personal (*pacceka*)" truths: statements that are partially true, or true only for people who have a partial view of reality. Noble truths are totally true, and true for everyone. Truths noble in this sense are like noble elements in chemistry. They don't change in line with their environment. This makes them even more worthy of respect, for they give reliable guidance whoever and wherever you may be.

So the noble truths are noble in all four senses of the word:

They're the preeminent teaching on skillfulness,  
the willingness to view yourself in light of them is a virtuous act,  
they're part of a path that deserves utmost respect, and  
they don't change with changing circumstances; they're universally true.

In my own experience, the people who have been most willing to regard the noble truths as noble in these ways have benefited the most from them, and are by far the happiest, most admirable people I have ever met.

—*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*