

Noble & True

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There are times when the Buddha was especially critical of the teachings of other teachers of his time. The teachings he criticized most heavily were things like fatalism, materialism, and agnosticism. And the terms he used to criticize them were pretty simple. He said these teachings give you no sense of what should and what shouldn't be done. As a result, they offer no protection.

It's interesting to think about these comments because they tell us, on the one hand, what the Buddha's ideas of a good teaching were, and also what we should look for in *his* teachings: clear ideas of what should be done and what shouldn't be done. And it's also interesting that *that*, in his eyes, is the sort of thing that gives you protection.

What does it protect you from? On the outer level, it protects you from the teachings of people who say that there really aren't any valid shoulds or shouldn'ts – that you're totally free to do whatever you want – or from people who have really weird ideas about what should and shouldn't be done. On the inner level, the Buddha's shoulds and shouldn'ts also protect us from ourselves because we have lots of different desires running off in lots of contradictory directions. It's helpful to have some wise advice on how to sort out through our desires to figure out which ones are worth following and which ones are not. After all, desire is a part of the path, and yet craving is the cause of suffering.

So you have to learn how to distinguish what kinds of desires are good and which ones are bad. Craving for sensuality, the Buddha said, is going to make you suffer. Craving to become this, to become that or, once you become something, to have that becoming destroyed: Those kinds of desires are going to make you suffer. The desires that are good for you are the ones that focus on trying to give rise to skillful qualities when they're not there, and to develop them when they are. Or the desires to abandon unskillful qualities and once you've abandoned them, try to keep them from coming up again. Those kinds of desires are worth fostering because they're part of the path, a part of right effort.

That's what the Buddha says in the four noble truths. When you look at the four noble truths it's important to note that they're truths in at

least two different senses of the word. In one sense they're true statements about facts, and in the other sense they're the actual facts themselves. The description of craving is one thing; the actual experience of craving is something else. But the description *points* to the actual experience. When the Buddha's talking about the truths being noble, it's not that craving is noble or suffering is noble, but the true statements about them are noble in the sense that they're true across the board.

One place where the Buddha talks about the noble truths in a way where you can see clearly what he means by "noble" is where he contrasts them with individual or factional truths: truths that are true only for some people, or true for people with a limited range of knowledge: Those he calls individual or factional truths. Then there are noble truths – truths that are true for everybody and carry the same task for everybody.

When he talks about the tasks to be applied to the truths, that's where he's talking about the actual experience. In other words, you don't abandon the teaching about craving, but you do try to abandon the craving itself. You don't develop the teaching about the path. You actually develop the path itself – the qualities that the statements about the path are pointing to.

So the truths function both as statements and as actualities. And the statements have their noble worth. They're noble because they're true for everybody, and they point us in a noble direction: to a happiness free from aging, illness, and death. They give us some idea of what should and shouldn't be done in pursuing that goal because, as I said, each truth-as-a-fact has a duty. You try to comprehend suffering, abandon the cause so you can realize the cessation of suffering, and you do this by developing the path. It's in the course of following these duties that you learn even more about what should and shouldn't be done—because, after all, the Buddha couldn't point out everything in the world. He gives you some general ideas about which actions are skillful and which ones are not – big, broad categories. It's only when you get down to actually following the duties for each of the four noble truths that you begin to realize that there are subtleties you have to observe for yourself.

This is where a third level of the truth comes in: the truth of your practice, the sincerity with which you really do try to develop the path and use the four noble truths as a guide. This requires a noble attitude

because the duties these truths entail involve abandoning a lot of the things you identify with, the things that you really like, the desires around which you create your sense of who you are. It takes something special in order to be able to abandon those things, where you make the four noble truths more important than yourself – or your sense of yourself. There will be times when the mind says, “I want X,” and you look at the four noble truths that say, “No, you don’t. You may want X but it’s not good for you. It’s not going to help put an end to suffering, and it’s not going to lead you to a happiness that’s harmless.” You have to keep in mind that your desires have an impact not only on you, but on people around you. And your search for happiness has an impact on people around you as well.

I’ve told you about the time I wrote a review about a book on positive psychology. I was asked to critique the book from a Buddhist point of view. And the thing I noticed was that the book said nothing about how your actions, or how your ideas about pursuing happiness, were going to have an impact on other people. It was all about how much happiness you were going to get for yourself, but there was no consideration of what your pursuit of happiness was going to do down the line in terms of the karmic consequences, in terms of the impact it would have on the people around you.

The author was actually trying to be—quote, unquote—“objective” in saying, “Well, we have to study even how thieves make themselves happy, so we can’t judge the morality of their actions.” In my review, I pointed out that from the Buddha’s point of view, this doesn’t work at all because that attitude doesn’t give you protection. If your pursuit of happiness doesn’t take into consideration how it’s going to affect other people, then it’s very shortsighted. I submitted the article, and the editors of the magazine were surprised that I had chosen to speak about karma in this context. Of course, I was surprised that they were surprised.

This is what the Buddha is having you think about all the time: Your actions have consequences, so you have to think about how this happiness you want – that by pursuing this particular desire, no matter how much you identify with it as *your* desire or what *you* want – if you give preference to the desire over finding a truly harmless happiness, then you’re not really sincere in the path.

So this a third level in which the truths are true. They're statements; they're facts; but they also *demand* certain qualities of the heart – a certain nobility, a certain truthfulness. This is where the truths are especially noble and especially true.

At the same time, when you develop these qualities, they give you real protection because in the process of having developed your sensitivity to what's really skillful, you've heightened your powers of observation. You've heightened your sensitivity to the effects of your actions. For example, as we're practicing concentration here, the basic desire to get the mind to settle down is a good desire. It's part of right effort. But as we all know, the desire on its own is not enough. There are times when the desire is too strong and others where it's too weak, or it's not focused properly. There's a lot more to desire than just saying, "I have good intentions." When you have the desire to be skillful, you have to be able to adjust it, as the Buddha said, so that it's not excessive and not too sluggish, and so that it's focused on the causes rather than on the effects. As you sort out all the different issues around the desires involved in getting the mind to settle down, you learn a lot. You become a more reliable observer, and you're in a better position to give yourself protection.

So we have the truths as outside guides to help strengthen our skillful desires and to help protect us against our unskillful ones. But it's only through following the tasks appropriate to the truths that we become protectors for ourselves. That statement where the Buddha said, "The self is it's own protector": This is where you realize the extent to which that can be true. And this is where you realize how true the truths are and how noble, in both senses of the word: noble in the sense that they're universal, and noble in the sense that they really do demand a nobility of character that makes them special.