

Truths That Are Noble

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I know some people who wonder why the noble truths are called noble, especially with regard to the first two. The first one teaches that suffering is clinging. What's noble about clinging? Its cause is craving. What's noble about craving?

The nobility is not so much in the suffering itself, or the clinging, or the craving; it's in your willingness to see that that's what the truth is. In other words, you take responsibility for your suffering. You're willing to admit that some things you're very attached to—literally, in the case of the first noble truth—constitute suffering. You're not going to blame other people. You're not going to blame society at large. You realize that these are things you've been doing, things you've chosen to do. That's taking a noble attitude toward suffering and to its cause. This is what makes those truths noble.

Remember how the Buddha taught Rahula when Rahula was still a young boy. He told Rahula, "Look at your actions as you would look into a mirror." You're going to see your mind. It's through purifying your actions that you purify the mind. So your gaze is always reflected back inward. The Buddha himself, when he was searching for awakening, took that attitude. Whenever he found himself in a blind alley, the first question was: "What am I doing wrong? Why am I doing *x*? It's not getting good results. Why don't I try something else?"

This was a noble approach to the problem of suffering, and this noble approach was what enabled the Buddha to find the noble truths. As we practice, we're becoming more noble to the extent to which we're following in line with the noble truths. If we keep slipping back to our old ways, claiming that we're suffering because this person is misbehaving or that person is not quite right, we fall below the noble level. We're back to where everybody else is in the world, not taking responsibility for our own suffering.

So these truths are noble because they're responsible. They accept responsibility, and they also show the way out. You're not just stuck there. There are choices you can make.

That's the third and the fourth noble truth: things you're going to have give up and qualities you're going to have to work on developing. Those are the qualities of the path. There's a nobility in taking on this task. It shows that you really are accepting responsibility, and you aim your efforts at gaining some dispassion for your cravings—for the things you really like. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, "The

reason we suffer is because of the things we like.” We like the things we crave. We like our cravings. As the Buddha said, we go through life with craving as our companion and we seem to trust it implicitly.

Now we have to realize that we’ve chosen a false friend, and we’re going to have to dissolve the friendship because it never really was a friendship. Craving is the sort of friend who gets us to do something wrong. Then when the police come to catch us, the friend goes running off, and we’re the ones left, having to face the punishment. How much has your craving actually suffered? Not at all. You’re the one who’s suffering. You want to see that you don’t want to hang around craving anymore.

As for your clingings, you have to learn how to step back from them. This, too, is a noble act. Step back from sensuality—your fascination with thinking about and planning sensual pleasures. There’s a lot of gratification there, but you have to say No to it. You have to find something higher. You have to find a substitute. That’s one of the reasons why we’re practicing concentration: to give ourselves a pleasure that’s not as blind and intoxicated as sensuality.

Clinging to our ideas of how things should be done: That’s a huge suffering right there. You have to learn how to give that up, too. For a lot of people, that’s one of the hardest. Our clinging to our views about the world and our clinging to our ideas about who we are: These are all very intimate things. You have to learn how to reflect on them. See them as actions. See them as choices that you’re making, and be mature enough to admit that, Yes, they are causing suffering. So you work on the path. Whatever the factors of virtue, right speech, right action, or right livelihood say that you’ve got to give up, you’re willing to give up. Whatever right resolve says to give up, you give up.

Right mindfulness tells you to give up greed and distress with reference to the world. For a lot of us, that’s a huge part of our lives, especially now that news is available all the time. We have to overcome our fear of missing out and realize that what the news is telling us is that the big issues in the world are things that somebody else is doing someplace else, over which we have minimal control. It’s distracting you from what the Buddha said is that the most important thing for you in the world: what you’re doing right here, right now. You want to be alert to what you’re doing right now.

So there’s a lot of giving up in the course of the path.

Eventually, of course, it’s aimed at getting you to give up your passion for your cravings. Give up your passion, aversion, and delusion around your clinging. That’s a tall order, but the people who take it on are the ones who are being responsible.

This is one of the reasons why we don't have Buddhists out on the street corners, preaching to people, because what the Buddha's asking is that *you* take responsibility. As he says, all he does is point out the way. He's not going to do the work for us. We have to do the work for ourselves, which is taking a noble stance toward our suffering.

So when you look at the noble truths, realize why they're noble. They're asking you to take a noble stance toward the problem of your suffering and to take on noble duties.

As the Buddha said, what we have to do with suffering is to comprehend it. For a lot of people, that's the last thing that would occur to them. They either want to run away from it or push it away—wipe it out. But the Buddha's saying, one, you have to admit you have some passion for it and delusion around it. And two, you have to do something about it. Try to figure out exactly what the cravings are that make you cling. Even though they've been trusted companions for a long time, you have to realize you were foolish, hanging around with them, and you have to let them go.

You do this by developing the path, which as I said, involves a lot of letting go. Then you get to the noblest of the noble truths, which is actually developing dispassion and being aware of what you're doing at the same time. You're developing dispassion for the cause of suffering, dispassion for the suffering, ultimately even dispassion for the path.

It's in following these noble truths that you become noble. Your willingness to take them on is the beginning of this noble path. As you follow it through, you find the nobility that human beings are capable of.

This is why the Buddha said his path is admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, and admirable in the end, because it requires us to be responsible all the way through.