

Four Noble Truths to One

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I have a student whose father is Hindu, and he complained to my student one time, “Why is it that Buddhism has four noble truths? Wouldn’t it be better if it had one *really* noble truth?”

Now, there is a sense in which we do have one really noble truth: nibbana. But we can’t get there without the four noble truths first, because we have a problem—the problem of suffering—along with the bewilderment that goes along with suffering together with a search for a way out.

To solve that problem, you have to divide reality into four categories: There’s the cause of the problem, and then the problem itself. Then there’s the solution to the problem, and the way to the solution. That gives you the four noble truths.

The problem, of course, is suffering. The cause is the craving that leads to suffering. It’s possible to put an end to that craving: That’s the third noble truth. And then the fourth noble truth, of course, is the way you go there.

We need four truths because there are four duties. For suffering, as with any problem, the duty is to comprehend it. That’s usually not our first reaction to suffering. As the Buddha says, our first reaction is bewilderment, followed by the desire for an escape. So we try to push it away, we try to run away from it, and the more we run away, of course, the more it chases us. We’re not going to really understand it until we stop and take time to look at it, to comprehend it, and to see exactly what it is.

Because, as the Buddha explains, it doesn’t go along with our preconceived notions about what it is. We tend to think it’s happening because of things outside, and the suffering itself is just the pain. But the Buddha says No: We suffer because of craving. Our craving. The cause is inside. We don’t suffer from what’s coming into the mind. We suffer from what’s coming out of the mind. That’s what you have to abandon.

But first you have to comprehend the suffering. As the Buddha says, aging, illness, and death are suffering. Not getting what you want; having to be with what you don’t like; having to be separated from what you do like: These are all forms of suffering that we recognize. But then he gives a summary as to what they all have in common, and that’s where his analysis gets

unfamiliar, at least in the terminology: the five clinging-aggregates of form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. The aggregates don't cling. We cling to them, and the clinging is the actual suffering.

Once we learn how to be with these things, to engage in these things without clinging, then there's no suffering around them. So you have to comprehend: How is that clinging suffering? We have to watch it, and we have to watch it carefully.

As for the craving, we have to abandon it. To do that, we have to figure out what causes the craving. What are the events that lead up to the craving? The Buddha said that the craving that leads to *becoming* is what causes us to suffer. Becoming is our sense of who we are in a world of experience. We can't disentangle ourselves from that sense of who we are in the world, or from the craving, until we see that the whole process is—just a process, made out of individual events, none of which are very solid, none of which are very lasting, not really the raw material for anything you could depend on.

The cessation of suffering is actually the completion of the duty with the second noble truth: You totally abandon any passion for the craving without trace. The duty there is to realize that: When craving ends, suffering ends as well.

As for the path in that direction, that's something you develop. You develop, basically the triple training of virtue, concentration, discernment.

In the beginning, these duties are four separate duties, but they're interconnected. After all, as you develop the path, you begin to abandon some of your passion for your craving as your right view begins to see through the things you used to crave. And particularly, as you develop right concentration, that gives you an alternative to sensual craving, which is one of the major causes of suffering. You see that there's another alternative to pain besides running around after sensual pleasures and sensual fantasies.

But on an even deeper level—as the duties progress, as you get better and better at them—they begin to converge. After all, as you comprehend suffering, comprehending the fact that the clinging *is* the suffering, you engage in a process that the Buddha describes in five steps.

In the beginning, you're focusing on the first two steps: You want to see the origination of the suffering and its passing away. That's the only way that you're going to be able to see that there's suffering and clinging at the same time. The "origination" here, of course, means cause. And the cause is craving. So as you're watching the clinging coming and going, you're watching the craving coming and going as well.

It's when you get to the next two steps that those two duties of comprehending the suffering and abandoning the cause begin to converge. You're looking to see the allure. What's the allure of the different aggregates? What's the allure of the mental events that lead up to those aggregates? What's the allure of the mental events that lead up to the clinging? What's the allure of the clinging itself? All of these things get very, very closely associated, but you have to tease them out.

Then you look at the drawbacks. That's the next step: To see that, yes, as you go for craving, as you go for clinging, there's going to be suffering. So in that case, the analysis leads to dispassion, both for the clinging and for the craving, it's simply that you start out with slightly different aims. You're trying to *understand* how it is that clinging is suffering. You're trying to *abandon* the craving; but as you get to know them better and better, you develop dispassion for both.

As for the path: As you're working on right view and on right concentration, you begin to see that your views are made out of perceptions and thought fabrications. Those, too, are aggregates.

Your concentration is made of all five aggregates: You have the sense of the form of the body as you're sitting here breathing; the feelings of pleasure you're able to give rise to; the perceptions of the breath, or whatever your object is, that hold the mind in place; the thought fabrications—the directed thought and evaluation as you try to get everything together, to get the breath snug with the body, and the mind snug with the breath. And then there's consciousness, awareness of all these things.

In the beginning you don't want to develop any dispassion for the factors of the path. In fact, you want to develop dispassion for anything that would pull you *away* from the path as you try to develop it. In Ajaan Fuang's words, "You have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well." And the Buddha talks many times about developing passion for the practice.

But as the factors of the path get more solid, and your attachments to things aside from the path get weaker, that's when you can actually turn this analysis on the path itself. You turn right view on itself. Right view looks at views, looks at all mental activities, in terms of action and result: "What is the act of holding to a view? What is the result of holding to the view?" There comes a point where it begins to apply that analysis to itself. There's stress even if the views you're holding on to are right.

The same with concentration: There's going to be stress in the aggregates that make up the concentration. So, as you analyze the things that lead up to clinging and craving, you begin to realize that they're the same things that lead to the factors of the path. You begin to develop some dispassion for the path itself. That's when the duties begin to converge: dispassion for suffering, dispassion for craving, dispassion for the path.

Then of course, the third noble truth is dispassion itself. But you have to be dispassionate for that too, as you realize it. If you get excited about it, that can get in the way of full awakening.

So this is where all the duties come together, and as the duties come together, that's when you get the one noble truth. First the truth that all things that arise and pass away has to be abandoned. That leads to a higher one truth, which is total liberation.

So we do have our one noble truth, but to get there requires that we recognize that we're coming with a problem, and we've got to take care of the problem first.

That will require four different duties to begin with. But as the duties get developed, as you get more and more skillful at them, they do converge. If you denied the dualities at the beginning, the problem would never get solved. It's when you admit the dualities and master the skills that go with them—that's when you can bring things to one.