



THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

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INTRODUCTION

In the last one and a half year you have been practicing Satipatthana-Vipassana meditation. That would get you a better base in understanding of the Four Noble Truths which we are going to discuss now. Many people are not interested in religion (Buddhism) but are interested in meditation. That is why I started with meditation and approach Buddhism only now. However, Vipassana meditation is the practical aspect of Buddhism; as such you have already known or experienced somewhat the Four Noble Truths although you are not aware of it on conceptual basis.

The Four Noble Truths are the essence of Buddhism, and that is what the Buddha discovered by himself, without any teacher and shared with the human race. The Buddha's first Discourse (sutta) to us is called The Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma (*Dhammacakkappavattana*). That is about the Four Noble Truths (*Cattari Ariya Saccani*) normally referred to as *Ariya Saccani*.

Why do we call this teaching "the Four Noble Truths"?

1. These are noble truths because they were perceived and penetrated by the noble ones.
2. These noble truths were discovered by the Buddha—(noblest of the Noble). These noble truths are not created, produced or manufactured by anybody or the Buddha, but are simply natural laws about mind and matter. These are always there in the universe but always hidden under a thick layer of cloud of ignorance (moha).

Anyone can become a Buddha if the mind is set and practiced for infinite number of lifetimes to perfect all aspects of humanity. After each Buddha passes away the teachings get gradually diluted and finally faded away and disappeared. It is said that the Buddha Gotama's teachings will last for 5,000 years after his death. Thus, in another 2,400 years, there will not be any Buddhism as he had taught. Like everything else, it will also pass away. Then the Four Noble

Truths will lie hidden for long time, till another Buddha arises the Four Noble Truths will be discovered again.

3. These are noble truths because when a person practices and experiences them by following the roadmap of practice given by the Buddha the person becomes a noble person. The Four Noble Truths make a person noble. Thus, these are “Noble-making Truths”.

4. These truths themselves are noble, because these are non-erroneous but real in the ultimate sense and are non-deceptive.

For forty-five years the Buddha taught these four Noble Truths, in many ways and forms. When he met a child, he explained so that the child could understand. When he met a farmer, he talked in a way the farmer could grasp; when he met an intellectual, he talked as such the intellectual could comprehend. Thus one can find a whole range of approaches to the Four Noble Truths in the Buddha’s teaching.

We’ll be talking about the Four Noble Truths for several weeks to come, starting with approach from Abhidhamma, i.e., in rather abstract form, without identifying with anything or anyone, but simply as mind and matter. After that, we’ll talk about in terms of the suttas as the Buddha had explained in *Dhammacakkappavattana* and *Maha Satipatthana* suttas.

Finally, I would like to make it clear that “the Four Noble Truths” are taught by the Buddha. Whatever I am talking about these is to the best of my understanding entirely based upon the teachings I have received from my teachers Chanmyay Sayadawgyi and late Sayadawgyi U Silananda. However, if there is any error in these talks are entirely of my own incompetency at which I sincerely beg forgiveness.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS ACCORDING TO ABHIDHAMMA

The Buddha's teachings in the Abhidhamma Pitaka of the Pali Canon contains the profound ethical, psychological and philosophical approach to mind (nama) and matter (rupa). In Abhidhamma, mind and matter are treated as a process, and explained logically in a non-personal manner. It is analytical, objective, unbiased and systematic. Everything is explained in terms of ultimate realities by categorising under characteristics, functions and manifestation. In contrast, in the Sutta Pitaka (Basket of Discourses) all things are explained on a personal level (conventional realities, e.g. you, me, man, woman).

1. The First Noble Truth: Dukkha Sacca or the Noble Truth of Suffering

Dukkha is often translated as "suffering", but it is preferable to use "dukkha" in its original word and sense, because there is no equivalent to it in English language. Just like the word "kamma" everyone is using it in its own original state without translating into English. By bringing the word "dukkha" into everyday English language will automatically conveys its own meaning and essence.

Dukkha = Du: Vile + **Kha:** empty = anything that is disgusting and empty; lack of happiness and lack of substance; anything which is impermanent

Characteristics: Affliction; making despair

Function: to "burn" you; to make you miserable

Manifestation: as a coming into being; as an occurrence

2. The Second Noble Truth: Samudaya Sacca or the Noble Truth of Origin of Suffering

Samudaya = Tanha = Craving = Sam: combined with other conditions such as ignorance, clinging, kamma + **Udaya:** arising + **Aya:** cause = craving arising together and supported by ignorance, kamma, clinging causes suffering + craving is the origin of suffering = craving causes the arising of suffering

Characteristics: "originating"; the origin; causing to begin something

Function: to prevent interruption; continues to cause indefinite origination and does not allow any interruption; i.e., to create an illusion of continuity or solidification; to create a sense of concreteness; to prevent in seeing segment by segment of a composite.

Manifestation: as an impediment, hindrance or obstruction. It impedes one to be from liberated from suffering.

3. The Third Noble Truth: Dukkha Nirodha Sacca or the Noble Truth of Cessation of Suffering (popularly known as Nibbana)

Nirodha = Ni: absence or not + **Rodha:** Prison = no prison of suffering; no prison of round of rebirth (samsara); it is free from all rebirths; condition for the cessation of suffering

Characteristics: “Peace” and “Peacefulness”, i.e. freedom from mental defilements- greed (Lobha), hatred (Dosa), delusion (Moha)

Function: neither to die nor to fade away; i.e., exists by itself unpolluted by mind and matter

Manifestation: It manifests as being sign less; can't be defined by size, shape, colour, time, attributes or qualities, i.e., it cannot be tracked or pigeonholed.

4. The Fourth Noble Truth: Dukkha Nirodha Gamini Patipada Sacca or the Noble Truth of Path which leads to the Cessation of Suffering

Dukkha Nirodha Gamini Patipada = Gamini: leads to + **Patipada:** road, path, way, practice; the means of reaching a goal or objective + **Dukkha Nirodha:** cessation of suffering = the path or practice which leads to the cessation of suffering

Characteristics: offering of a mean or way of escape from suffering

Function: to abandon mental defilements (lobha, dosa, moha)

Manifestation: manifests as release from round of rebirth (samsara)

The eight fold path is not the cause of arising of Nibbana but is the cause that leads to the attainment of Nibbana (the absence of dukkha; absence of mental defilements; absence of craving)

The Buddha had taught us four Dhammas in *Dhammacakkappavattana*:

- Parinneya Dhamma-- to thoroughly understand and realize (dukkha-suffering)
- Pahatabba Dhamma-- to abandon (tanha-craving)
- Sacchikatabba Dhamma-- to experience (Nibbana-liberation)
- Bhavetabba Dhamma-- to develop (Magga-path)

Four Dhammas Buddha taught us to understand abandon experience and develop are indeed the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths explained according to Abhidhamma

	Meaning	Characteristics	Function	Manifestation
1st noble Truth: Dukkha Sacca	Du: vile, empty, disgusting, anything impermanent, without substance.	Suffering afflicts being, so suffering is affliction	To burn; to make beings miserable	As an occurrence; as a coming into being
2nd Noble Truth: Samudaya Sacca	Samu: Craving, the cause of arising of Dukkha; together with and supported by other causes such as ignorance, clinging, kamma, etc., it is the origin of Dukkha.	Originating, i.e. always causing the beginning of something	To prevent interruption; it continues to cause indefinite origination and does not allow any interruption	As an impediment to liberation
3rd Noble Truth: Dukkha Nirodha Sacca	Ni: no prison of Dukkha or round of rebirth.	“Peace and Peacefulness”, i.e. freedom from mental defilements- greed, hatred, delusion	Neither to die nor fade away	As being signless; cannot be described in terms of time and space; has no attributes
4th Noble Truth: Dukkha Nirodha Gamini Patipada (Magga) Sacca	Mag: the way which leads to the cessation of suffering	Offering means or a way to escape	To abandon mental defilements	Release from the round of rebirth

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: DUKKHA SACCA

Note: *Although it does not convey the entire meaning, the commonly used term “suffering” has been used interchangeably with “dukkha”.*

What is dukkha?

As elaborated by the Buddha in *Dhammacakkappavattana*:

- Birth is dukkha
- Aging is dukkha
- Death is dukkha
- Sorrow is dukkha
- Lamentation is dukkha
- Physical pain is dukkha
- Mental pain (grief and excessive distress) is dukkha
- Association with the disliked is dukkha
- Separation from the liked is dukkha
- Not to get what one wishes is dukkha
- The five aggregates of clinging are dukkha

Why did the Buddha term all these aspects as dukkha? He has included the whole spectrum of life from very simple and obvious to very complicated and philosophical. It is because it is , and because different people are able to understand different specific aspects of dukkha in a very profound way.

Birth: Being born; conception; origination; belonging to this or that order of existence (deva realm, human realm, animal realm, etc.), the manifestation of the aggregates, the acquisition of sense bases, springing into existence. Birth is dukkha because it is the origin or basis for subsequent suffering one experiences of the entire life. Even one has a lot of past and present *kusala kamma* (wholesome merit and skillfulness), there still are some downturns in a life span.

Aging: It is also the ground for suffering. Nobody wants to get old but there is not a single moment one is not getting older. One can't escape the process of aging thus, suffering. Aging starts as soon as one is born and is part of any existence, be it deva, human, or animal. For humans, frequent aches and pains, wrinkles, falling of teeth and hair, etc. are signs of aging which cause unhappiness as such, dukkha.

Death: The departing and vanishing of beings from out of this or that order of beings; their destruction and disappearance; dying; death; the completion of one's life span; dissolution of the five aggregates; the discarding of the body; the destruction of the faculty to control the vital forces. Death is dukkha for obvious reason and because it is precursor to the next round of rebirth which is dukkha.

The Five Aggregates: This is the most important aspect of the definition of dukkha because the five aggregates (pancakhandas) cover anything and everything that we can comprehend. Before trying to understand as to why the five aggregates are dukkha, let us review them.

1. Rupa (form, matter): External and internal matter. Externally, *rupa* is the physical world. Internally, *rupa* includes the material body and the physical sense organs.
2. Vedana (feeling): could be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. These can be further divided into
 - Pleasant feeling: physical and mental (2)
 - Unpleasant feeling: physical and mental (2)
 - Neutral feeling (1)

In fact, it is the mind that experiences pleasant and unpleasant feelings, regardless of their source (physical or mental). If the four elements are not in balance, it results in physical pain. You experience the pain because you have awareness. If the physical and mental vitalities are dissolved (dead) the remaining body cannot feel pain. Why? Actually, on the physical level imbalanced of the four elements are going on (i.e. pain), but there is no mind to experience it. This is why vedana is a mental aspect.

3. Sañña (perception): registers whether an object is recognized through marks or characters (for instance, the sound of a bell or the shape of a tree). It can depend upon the cultural context also; eg: perceptions of a woman's beauty are different in North America and South Pacific.

4. Sankhara (mental formations): These include all types of mental habits, thoughts, ideas, opinions, prejudices, compulsions, and decisions triggered by an object. Whenever consciousness arises, other mental factors arise with it at the same time; when the consciousness disappears, they disappear with it. These are called mental associates or mental concomitants or mental factors. In all, there are 52 of them, e.g., anger, joy, hate, etc. are mental associates. All 52 of them do not arise along with the consciousness; only some of them arise depending upon the conditions. They only arise in a certain group, not randomly. For example, if love is arising, there is no trace of hate because love and hate cannot coexist. The environment or object that comes in contact with the mind control which mental factors arise and which do not if one is not mindful.

Vedana and sañña are also two of the 52 mental associates (cetasikas). The Buddha categorized them separately because of their significance in the operation of the mind. The remaining 50 mental associates are sankharakhandas.

5. Viññana (consciousness): Viññana is the ability to be aware, but does not have awareness. It is a series of rapidly changing interconnected discrete acts of cognizance. Bhavanga is a stream of life vibrations that vibrates from conception to death; when the final vibration of this life (death Consciousness) is dissolved, there is another birth consciousness in the next life that is different from death consciousness because the new one is the result of the past kamma. There are 89 types of consciousness.

These are the five aggregates of clinging because they have the power to make one cling, resulting in attachment and wrong view. Therefore, according to the First Noble Truth, these five aggregates of clinging are dukkha.

There are three kinds of dukkha:

1. **Dukkha Dukkha:** All unpleasant physical and mental sensations are dukkha.
2. **Viparinama Dukkha** (also called Sukkha Dukkha): Suffering based upon change. All pleasant physical and mental sensations are also dukkha because they always come to an end through change.
3. **Sankhara Dukkha:** Suffering due to conditioned phenomena (formations)

Let us discuss these three types of dukkha in detail.

DUKKHA DUKKHA

Let us try to understand dukkha better. Anything that is vile, disgusting, and empty is dukkha. Physical pain such as injury or illness is dukkha. Mental pain caused when someone backstabs you, bullies you, gossips about you, or abuses you is also dukkha. In other words, any physical or mental pain inflicted upon you is dukkha. This can be called “intrinsic suffering”; in Pali, it is called **Dukkha Dukkha**. These are very obvious things that we all are familiar with, and would agree that these are dukkha. However, the intensity of suffering would vary because of the individual physical and mental constructs. Some people have great tolerance to pain, some don't. The intensity of the physical force may be the same, but individuals will react differently according to their own mental states, resulting in different perception of pain. As previously discussed, our bodies are the result of previous kamma,; therefore, some people are susceptible to major illnesses even at a young age, whereas some people are in good health at the age of 95. Mental state or strength is also the result of past kamma.

However, Buddhism teaches us to be fully aware of what we are, and why we are what we are at this moment. If you are mindful and fully aware moment by moment, you don't become susceptible to the environmental conditioning of the present as well as the past. If you are truly mindful, the unwholesome workings of past and present are gradually peeled off and pushed away, and are replaced by wholesomeness.

Thus, Dukkha Dukkha is what everyone suffers in an obvious and undisputed way, but experiences and reacts differently to. With mindfulness, you are fully aware of the oncoming object that could hurt you, and you act skillfully and proactively.

VIPARINAMA DUKKHA (Sukkha Dukkha)

Everything we enjoy in life—good food, movie, vacation, etc.—is also dukkha. Why did Buddha call it dukkha? For example, suppose you are on a great vacation for a week or two, when it is over you missed it dissatisfaction and anguish because it is so short and over. If you have a

fantastic meal at a great restaurant, you are likely to forget all the details the very next day; perhaps you may describe somewhat of the experience to friends a few days later, but that is about it. Even in meditation, you may have a good rhythm or flow going, and the mind is calm and peaceful; but the yogi next to you changes positions noisily perhaps because of pain, and your calm and peace are gone! Alternatively, you could be in deep meditation, but suddenly the mind slips, and you get frustrated, and the nice feeling changes to not-so-nice feeling. These examples can be seen in all facets of life: at one moment, the feelings are great, but as soon as conditions change, the feelings also change.

Another example: suppose you get a promotion at work, and everyone is happy and excited for you for one evening. The next day, you go to work at the new position where everything is new, and you are not familiar with it. You try to fit in, you struggle, and you get stressed. You got what you wanted, but you are under stress because you have to keep trying to maintain the performance required for the new position. Is it a lasting pleasant feeling (sukha)?

Here is another story. A poor and old mat weaver who was struggling to survive, but was happy. A rich man felt sorry for him, and gave him a large sum of money. At first, the old man was excited and joyful with his new found fortune, but soon he realized that he needed to keep his money safe, and had to worry about it day and night. After several days of this stress, he went back to the rich man, and returned the money—just to get his peace back. Pleasant feeling or contentment which brings him peace?

We are always after something thinking and hoping that it will bring joy and happiness. However, once we get what we had always wanted, there is an enormous pressure to maintain it. Not only that, nothing lasts forever, and eventually, we lose everything starting with the pleasant feeling we achieved due to getting what we wanted. This is called suffering based upon change, or Viparinama Dukkha or sukha dukkha.

SANKHARA DUKKHA

Sankhara Dukkha is suffering due to formation. Formation is something that is conditioned or produced and having a cause. Whenever there is a set of conditions (cause), there is a result. Thus, Sankhara Dukkha is the result of a set of condition (causes). This includes anything and everything in this world—whether mind or matter, whether body or consciousness. Nothing arises without being conditioned or without a cause; nothing is produced without something. Thus, dukkha arises because of a condition or a cause, and this is called Sankhara Dukkha.

In this conditioned world of ours, everything is based upon conditions. If there is a result, one can be certain that it has been caused by something. This is why it is called Sankhara Loka, and refers to all physical and mental worlds because they are all produced due to conditions.

Now we know that everything that is conditioned is dukkha. In fact, the material world or mental world, material processes or mental processes, physical phenomena or mental phenomena—they are all conditioned as they all operate under the law of cause and effect. Everything that operates under cause and effect keeps changing all the time, and is dukkha. This would imply that Sankhara Dukkha includes both Dukkha Dukkha and Viparinama Dukkha. However, in

order to get a better understanding, the Buddha split Dukkha into three categories: Dukkha Dukkha, Viparinama Dukkha, and Sankhara Dukkha.

In terms of application in meditation, Dukkha Dukkha refers to the unpleasant feelings, and Viparinama Dukkha deals with pleasant feelings. Sankhara Dukkha covers everything, but it deals specifically with neutral feelings. In practice, the root is always feeling, because this is the base unit with which we communicate and experience everything. Feelings and sensations are crucial to the practice in order to penetrate to a deeper level. When the mind comes in contact with a physical or mental object, feeling (vedana) arises. This feeling can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. By categorizing dukkha in three kinds the Buddha is covering all three types of feelings:

- Dukkha Dukkha: Unpleasant feelings
- Viparinama Dukkha: Pleasant feelings
- Sankhara Dukkha: Neutral feelings

One of the basic criteria of dukkha is **impermanence** (anicca). What is impermanence? It means that everything arises and passes away. Anything that has a beginning has an end. Anything that is born must die. Cessation happens only when there is a beginning: if there is no beginning, there is no end, i.e., the phenomenon is permanent. However, in this conditioned world (sankhara loka), everything has a beginning and an end. Dukkha is anything that has a beginning and an end, or birth and death, or arising and dissolution.

All mental and physical phenomena are impermanent; in other words, they are oppressed by the law of impermanence. Any and all form of oppression is dukkha. Since all phenomena are oppressed by the law of impermanence, they are surely dukkha. In other words, everything is dukkha; In the Buddha's description of dukkha, the last sentence is: the five aggregates are dukkha—they are all oppressed by the law of impermanence. That is why Buddhists called life is dukkha, existence is dukkha.

The implication of the First Noble Truth that life is dukkha, existence is dukkha is difficult to accept for many religions, and even for many Buddhists who do not fully understand this truth. This is why many people think that Buddhist teachings are very pessimistic. Had the Buddha only declared that life is dukkha, then his teachings would indeed be pessimistic. However, the Buddha does not stop there. He also revealed the reason or the cause dukkha, and further more cessation of dukkha. Finally a path or means for cessation of dukkha. Just as a physician is not considered pessimistic for giving an accurate diagnosis—whatever it might be; in fact, he has the responsibility for telling the truth. Similarly, the Buddha was only declaring the fact of life—the fact that life is dukkha. Like a good physician, the Buddha is telling us that we are sick with dukkha. At the same time, he is giving the cause of sickness of dukkha, and how to get well and reach the state where dukkha ends. The prescription he gave for this is the Noble Eightfold Path. Just like a patient who has to follow the dietary regime, take medication, and exercise, we also have to follow the Buddha's prescription of the Noble Eightfold Path if we do not wish to stay afflicted with dukkha.

FIRST NOBLE TRUTH IN MEDITATION PRACTICE

One of the key points while practicing Satipatthana meditation is that one has to incline the mind to cessation of phenomenon (object). What is cessation? It is the ending of something, and by inclining the mind towards the cessation, it teaches the yogi to see impermanence (anicca).

One of the criteria of dukkha is impermanence. If one diligently practice as instructed, will see impermanence is operating at all times, it means that everything (related to body and mind) that arises is constantly oppressed by impermanence, and therefore, is dukkha. Thus, by inclining the mind towards cessation, we are trying to understand or realize what dukkha is.

After some time during the meditation session, when the physical pain or discomfort arises, the instruction is to keep watching it, and to face it with patience and tolerance until overcoming it. The pain we are observing it is, of course, Dukkha Dukkha.

Therefore, the body and the mind, and we ourselves are dukkha; even the existence of body and mind is dukkha. We are watching anicca as well as dukkha; when we see one, we see the other. By inclining the mind towards cessation, we are seeing dukkha through anicca; by facing and watching the pain, we are seeing dukkha directly, head-on (unpleasantness). This is how we understand The First Noble Truth. Seeing the First Noble Truth is built in the meditation technique; it is not by logic or intellectual process but by direct experience.

This is the First Noble Truth, the Noble Truth of Dukkha.

