

## FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Imagine the scene: The Buddha had been enlightened for a month or so and had spent each of the last four weeks sitting under different trees with different names. Two things are important here. Shakyamuni has discovered something that had alluded humanity for eons, not by studying sacred texts, not by visiting masters, but by just sitting—shikantaza! Also, we see that he waits four weeks to digest what he had discovered before making any announcements. During this time he forges an intimate connection with the earth by sitting under trees. His teaching is not about heaven, it is of this earth. So, after a month he brushes himself off and decides to let the world know what he's discovered. He decides to tell the five ascetic monks that had rejected him after he drank the milk offered to him by a girl from the village. When they see him, they spontaneously bow in deep appreciation for what he has accomplished.

This first teaching is called the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma. The three turnings of the wheel of the dharma mark three historical points at which new developments in Buddhist thought emerged in India. Although the teachings of all three turnings are said to have been spoken by the historical Buddha, the second and third turnings, those characterized as Mahayana, were not publicly known until centuries after the passing of Shakyamuni Buddha. The second turning refers to the Heart of wisdom sutras and the third turning refers to the group of sutras made public by Asanga in the fourth century. These teachings are often referred to as “mind only,” as they express the emptiness of persons and phenomena.

The first thing that Shakyamuni tells the bikkhus is that they must avoid the extremes of seeking pleasure and of total self denial. He calls his way, the Middle Way. Another way of describing his teaching is as a way of life living in-between. Living in this way, you are always forging a relationship between forces and energies, between extremes. Each person's life is an expression of the relationship s/he has with life and death, form and emptiness, one and two.

After calling his teaching the Middle Way, the Buddha goes on to give the bikkhus the Four Noble truths, which contain the entirety of the Buddha's teaching. This simple teaching contains, or at least leads to, all of the ideas found in Buddhism in all its

forms. It tells us about how bad things are (*dukkha*), the cause of why things are the way they are (*samodaya*). It tells us that our suffering can end (*nirodha*) and it shows us how to end it (*magga*). After hearing this teaching, the venerable Kondanna told his fellow monks and the Buddha: “Whatever has the nature of arising, has the nature of ceasing. Kondananna’s realization becomes the first “commentary” on Buddha’s first teaching. From then on, he is known by the name, “Anna Knondanna”—Kondanna who realizes.

**The First Noble Truth** or *dukkha* is often translated as suffering, but it is better described as a sense of unease or dissatisfaction with our lives. Sometimes we can’t quite put a finger on what is bothering us. As Shakespeare said, *There is something rotten in the state of Denmark*. We may feel that we are missing something, but we have no idea what that “something” is. Sometimes our suffering is very obvious: we are hungry, thirsty or sick; we are lonely or poor. This is called the suffering of suffering. The second kind of suffering has to do with our reactions to change and impermanence. We see over and over again that nothing last forever. We are getting older and frailer. We lose friends and loved ones. The third type of suffering is called all-pervasive. It exists because of how we perceive ourselves in relation to the world. As long as we perceive ourselves as distinct from others we have the underlying sense that something is off, no matter what we do, no matter where we are. This aspect of suffering is the most profound. It is what brings us to a practice such as Zen.

**The Second Noble Truth** or *samodaya* says that the cause of our suffering is mental clinging or desire. The Buddha said that there are three kinds of desires: the desire for sense pleasure (*kama tanha*), the desire to become (*bhava tanha*) and the desire to get rid of (*vibhava tanha*). We continually search for something outside ourselves to make us happy, but no matter how successful we are, we never remain satisfied. Desire never ends, but only increases. We are always fighting and struggling with life as it is. If it is something we want, we try to hold onto it, and if it is something we don't want, we push it away. So we are always pushing or pulling instead of accepting. I have found it very interesting to try to get a sense of whether I am pushing or pulling, at any given moment of the day. The cause of our suffering is that we resist life as it is each moment.

**The Third Noble Truth** is that there is an end to suffering. There is a way to be free. We need to wake up and become who we truly are. We need to make contact with the part of ourselves that sees things as they are with wisdom, clarity and compassion, beyond the imprisoning effects of self-absorption. As we continue to practice, our suffering subsides as our experience shifts from ego-centeredness to interconnectedness.

**The Fourth Noble Truth** is that there is an eightfold path to liberation from suffering which contains guidelines for our viewpoint, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. The last three are specific to our meditation practice. When these last three are practiced properly, they lead to right understanding, which is the first of the eightfold path. Everything is interconnected, so a deeper understanding leads to deeper intention, which leads to deeper effort, and so on. Each of these points is equally important, supporting and reinforcing each other. The eight categories of practice can be divided into three subcategories: wisdom, morality, and practice.

*Wisdom:* Pursue an understanding of the way things are.

1. Right View: Experience reality as it truly is, using the key tenets of Buddhist teaching such as dependent origination, karma, impermanence, selflessness, and emptiness.
2. Right Intention: Always intend to be present in the moment, without any desire to change anything. There are three aspects to right intention: renunciation, lovingkindness, and harmlessness. Without renouncing desire, we can never free ourselves from its grasp. We continually desire something to get rid of another thing which then creates another desire. When we become fully aware of the suffering of everyone we meet, loving kindness and compassion flourishes. Our intentions are set in order as we try to help. Having right intention is, of course, dependent on having the right view. Right view and right intention form the wisdom aspect of the path.

*Morality:* Live in a way that supports your pursuit of wisdom. Always refrain from doing anything that might harm others.

3. Right Speech: Do not lie, gossip or speak in ways that may harm others. The Buddha said, *If you know anything that's hurtful and untrue, don't say it. If you know anything that's helpful and untrue, don't say it. If you*

*know anything that's hurtful and true, don't say it. If you know anything that is helpful and true, find the right time.*

4. Right Action: Action, like speech, is based on intention and view. Do that which promotes harmony and unity, not divisiveness and separation.
5. Right Livelihood: Choose a way of supporting yourself that does not harm yourself or others. You must refrain from doing anything that might transgress the five precepts: do not kill, steal, indulge in sexual misconduct, do not make false speech, do not take intoxicants.

*Practice:* As Dogen said, we must practice continually. The last three points are those from which all Buddhist methods derive.

6. Right Effort: Try to be present in every moment of your life. The Buddha said that there are four “supreme” efforts: *Not to let an unwholesome thought arise, which has not yet arisen. Not to let an unwholesome thought continue, which has already arisen. To make a wholesome thought arise, which has not yet arisen. To make a wholesome thought continue, which has already arisen.*
7. Right Mindfulness: Maintain an awareness of your body, speech, and mind always. Mindfulness is paying close attention to what is going on around you and within you—in your heart, mind, and body. It is not thinking about these things; it is about *seeing* what is happening without any judgment or interpretation. Mindfulness is being present and awake to our lives. As Suzuki Roshi said, “Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine.” It’s not about producing or doing anything; it’s just a matter of seeing what is already here. So, mindfulness is *seeing*.
8. Right Meditation: Traditionally, meditation is considered to be a mental exercise of concentration or method for training the mind to attain a state whereby all of one’s thoughts and delusions would disappear, leaving a person free and undisturbed. But Zen goes further. It says that there is no duality between meditation and realization. We don’t sit to get enlightened—we just sit. This is the secret of Zen practice. Sitting is an expression of our original nature, our original face, which is hidden from us by layers of delusion. In

“Bendowa,” Dogen says that a *beginner's whole-hearted practice of the Way is exactly the totality of original enlightenment. For this reason, in conveying the essential attitude for practice, it is taught not to wait for enlightenment outside practice. . . Since it is already the enlightenment of practice, enlightenment is endless; since it is the practice of enlightenment, practice is beginningless.* In “Zazengi,” he says, *Sit stably in samadhi. Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Beyond-thinking. This is the way of doing zazen in accord with the dharma. Zazen is not learning meditation. Rather zazen itself is the dharma-gate of great peace and joy. It is undefiled practice-realization.*

While the Four Noble Truths are the foundation of the entire Buddhist teaching, the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma, we should note that Mahayana Buddhism, especially Zen, changes everything with the idea of emptiness. In the Heart Sutra it says, *No suffering. No Origination. No stopping. No path.* While it is important to get a basic understanding of the Four Noble Truths, eventually we must let that go of that and just sit.