

The Four Noble Truths

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Why on earth would anyone want to practice Buddhism? It sounds like the gloomiest religion ever. In fact, the way Buddhism is usually explained makes it sound like an oddly Calvinist religion of self-denial.

If there's one thing most people know about Buddhism, it's the phrase, "All life is suffering." How depressing! And what does it tell us to do with this information? We're supposed to "overcome desire!" And then what should we do? We should extinguish the self. That sounds even more extreme than the Calvinism of Puritan New England. Even though the Puritans thought the self was irredeemably corrupt, at least they let you keep it. And then what's the pay-off of eliminating your self? Nirvana! Eternal bliss – but with no one left to enjoy it.

The way the Buddha's story is usually told tends to support this odd mixture of gloom, self-denial, and absurdly unattainable joy.

As the story goes, the Buddha was a real person named Siddhartha Gautama, born a prince of a royal family in northern India around 563 B.C.E. His parents wanted him to feel safe and secure, so they shielded him from any encounter with the hardships of life. He lived in the palace and its extensive grounds with his every need provided for.

But then, at the age of 29, Siddhartha decided to leave the palace to meet his future subjects. Here he had his first encounter with the difficulties of life. He saw a very old man, gray-haired, gaunt, and unsteady. Confused, Siddhartha asked his charioteer, Channa, what that was. Channa explained that it was an old man, and that all people grew old eventually. On a subsequent trip he saw a diseased man, and on another he encountered a decaying corpse. Having been raised to expect nothing but vitality and security, these disturbed him deeply. Finally, he saw a man who seemed different from all others, wearing a simple

cloth with shaved head, who exuded a peaceful serenity Siddhartha had never before encountered. Channa explained that the man was an ascetic, devoted to overcoming the suffering of aging, sickness, and death.

More troubled than he had ever been, Siddhartha decided to dedicate himself to overcoming the trials of life, following the way of the ascetic. He slipped out of the palace in the dead of night and lived in the far forests, practicing meditation and severe self-denial. He spent more than five years practicing with a variety of teachers and disciplines, but he was disappointed with them all.

Siddhartha eventually starved himself so severely that he nearly died. Then he gave up. He decided to sit under a tree and not move until he was enlightened. And then, suddenly, everything became clear and wonderful and beautiful! Good for Siddhartha, but what a terrible story to emulate! Suffering, mortification, starvation, and then nirvana. At least the Calvinists had a savior to bail them out of their misery!

But this way of telling the story actually misses the point – and that’s the point I’m going to try to explain today. What the Buddha found wasn’t extreme at all. It was so non-extreme that he gave called it the least extreme thing he could: the middle way, the way of no extremes.

What the usual story often shortchanges or overlooks is what happened to Siddhartha as he sat under that tree after he gave up. A little girl came upon him in the woods. He was so gaunt looking that she went home and brought back some milk and rice pudding for him to eat. And as he continued to sit, she continued to feed him, giving him the strength he needed.

As his strength returned and his head cleared, Siddhartha finally realized that desire was an important part of life and that it was impossible ever to overcome completely without dying. Food was good, comfort was good. And it was in this light that he finally saw the way through, which he described as the four noble truths.

Simply put, they are: 1, suffering exists; 2, suffering has a cause; 3, suffering can be overcome by addressing its cause; and 4, there is a method by which this can be done.

I think the first noble truth needs a little work. The word, “suffering” sounds pretty melodramatic, and is probably a mistranslation anyway. The word the Buddha used, “dukkha,” is probably better rendered as “pervasive unsatisfactoriness.” My teacher, the Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh, describes it like this: “No matter how hard you try, there will be things you want that you won’t get, and there will be things you don’t want that you will get.”

He points out that, except for those very rare things in life to which we are completely indifferent, we will have feelings of either desire or aversion for everything we experience. In fact, we’ll probably have a mixture of both in most cases. And dukkha happens whenever we fail to either satisfy a desire or avoid an aversion. We don’t get what we want or we get what we don’t want. This is the first noble truth. And it’s a truth because we can’t escape it – this is the nature of life.

The popular author M. Scott Peck based his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, on the first noble truth.

“Life is difficult,” Peck opens.

“This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult – once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

“Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe,

their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning [Peck says] because I have done my share”

For Peck, suffering is what we do when we expect life to be easy and it isn't. Suffering is all the work we do to insist that things should be good for us.

It's not unreasonable to want life to be free of difficulties and problems – but it is unrealistic. That's the truth.

It's not just us – it's the way the universe works. Everything we know of exists as a balance between polarities. Positive and negative charges create the atomic, subatomic, and cosmic structures that we call reality.

Within our bodies, every process is a combination of positive and negative. For example, every nerve impulse exists of a combination of activating and limiting signals. It requires an activating signal to begin, but there are inhibitory signals as well, to keep the system from being overwhelmed, and eventually to end the activation processes. This is a kind of negative feedback system, where an impulse continues until it meets opposition (negative) that inhibits it.

In fact, every system in our bodies functions by means of negative feedback. In every case, whenever negative feedback fails, the process eventually leads to death. The only exception, childbirth, is such an extreme process that it tends to prove the point.

Just as positive and negative are always present and in balance in every biological system, desire and aversion are always present in our psychological systems. Suffering arises from our attempt to deny this truth. Suffering is wanting for there to be no aversion, no negative side to the equation.

We can build a rich fantasy life out of our thoughts and emotions concerning the way we feel about what we want but don't get and those things we get that we didn't want. In fact, much of our culture is based on this orientation to life: to get what we want and avoid what we don't. This fantasy life is based on the rejection of our direct experience, and it leads us to live in our thoughts and abstractions rather than the reality at hand. This then blocks us from being able to fully participate in the reality of our experience in the present moment.

Obviously, there's nothing wrong with wanting some things and not others, but for many of us in our culture, much of our subjective life is composed of our thoughts about desire and aversion. This inner world of thoughts and emotions can take on a life of its own – and can eventually feel like this is who and what we really are. So when we hear language in Buddhism about extinguishing the self, it is talking about this real-seeming cluster of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, resentments and frustrations about what we get or don't get. This false sense of self arising from our resistance to the first truth is what Buddhism wisely advises us to transcend, to extinguish, and to awaken from.

The truth is that living in the present always involves a balance between positive and negative forces. Some of them are neural, some are muscular, some are digestive, some are involved in blood chemistry and nutrient transport, and some of them are the psychological balance between desire and aversion. When we begin to perceive this more clearly, we tend to stop thinking of desire as winning and aversion as losing. We begin to monitor the relative balance of positive and negative elements in our experience, always present, always in dynamic flux. We don't cling to desire – although we enjoy it; and we don't flee from aversion – although we may not crave it. We simply accept both as they are, present in every moment.

As William Blake put it centuries ago, “He who binds himself to a joy doth the winged life destroy but he who kisses the joy as it flies lives in eternity's sunrise.”

You don't have to be a Buddhist to understand these great truths. You just have to pay attention and accept what you see. One thing that people discover is that something else emerges when we begin to awake from the habit of fighting against the duality of experience. When the drama of getting and avoiding ceases to be our primary focus of our energy, we find that there is an amazing, abundant joy waiting for us to discover, appreciate, and enjoy. It's so different from the good and bad feelings we derive from our struggle with duality that people have had a difficult time finding words for it. After all, most of our language is based on the very struggle that is the cause of our suffering.

This joy is so surprising and different from the rest of our experience that a different kind of language has arisen out of the attempt to describe it: religious language. This joy has been called many things – divine, ecstasy, love, and even God. But the Buddha would simply say that it is our true nature which we can see and experience clearly once we awaken from our delusions.

I'd like to share a visual image that came to me to for this. In the blank endless space of your imagination, I invite you to envision a net-like grid of fine strands, crossing one another at wide but regular intervals. These strands are made of a very strong, bright wire.

Then envision something else, a vast, balloon-like mass that is both warm and dark in color.

They are adjacent to one another. The balloon-like mass presses gently against the net-like grid, causing a pattern of convex bulges to form pushing through each square of the net.

The net-like grid represents all the limiting factors of life, and the balloon-like mass represents all the wonderful and good things of life.

If we press too hard on the net-like grid in our desire to attain the good things of life, the grid will cut us, hurt us, even as it prevents us from going further.

But if we accept the grid, there is a gracious abundance of the good things of life bulging through every square. Endless enjoyment is ours for the taking if we can only accept our limitations.

And not only enjoyment, but we can find we are wrapped in a pervasive joy beyond our wildest dreams of happiness.

And how does all this come about? How can we attain this? That's the fourth noble truth – there is a set of tools we can use to can help us get there.

So, the four noble truths: suffering exists; it has a cause; when the cause is addressed suffering ceases; and there is a clear set of instructions to follow. The Buddha called it the 8-fold path. I invite you to walk it with me.

May it be so.