

Core Doctrine of Buddhism

The Four Noble Truths

- The Noble Truth of Suffering
- The Noble Truth of Arising of suffering
- The Noble Truth of Cessation of Suffering
- The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

The Goal

Kamma

Rebirth

May you all be well and happy!

The Noble Truth of Suffering

The First Noble Truth is about the existence of 'dukkha'. The word dukkha is commonly translated into English as suffering. Besides the meaning of suffering, the word dukkha also conveys the idea of unhappiness, non-satisfactoriness, pain, unpleasantness, imperfection, conflict, emptiness, non-substantiality and so on. The wide range of ideas expressed by the word dukkha covers both physical pain as well as mental conflict and pain. It should be noted that the word dukkha as used in the Four Noble Truths conveys more the feeling of mental conflict, pain and agony than mere physical pain.

This feeling of dukkha may be connected either to some physical or mental events or to both. These events themselves are not dukkha. What is meant by dukkha is the painful feeling an individual experiences due to the unenlightened way in which he reacts to numerous events he has to face while living. It is only the ordinary worldlyling (puthujjana) who, due to ignorance of the ups and downs he has to face in life, gets disturbed and experiences dukkha. The Noble Ones - the Arahants - are free from dukkha.

What is the Noble Truth of dukkha? Birth is dukkha; decay is dukkha; disease is dukkha; death is dukkha; to be joined with what is unpleasant is dukkha; to be separated from what is pleasant is dukkha; failure in getting what one wants is dukkha; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair are dukkha, in short the five groups or aggregates of grasping namely Form, Feeling, Perception, Mental Formations, Dynamic Process or Obsessions and Consciousness are dukkha. These five groups are interdependent on each other and conditioned by each other.

The Noble Truth of Arising of suffering

The second Noble Truth deals with the origin or arising of dukkha. According to the word of the Buddha dukkha arises due to craving, (tanha). This however does not mean that 'tanha' is either the first cause or the one and only cause for the arising of dukkha. Buddhism does not speak of a first cause. In this explanation craving is mentioned as the cause of arising of dukkha because it is the immediate cause that could be easily seen and understood.

The Buddha has clearly shown that everything is interrelated and interdependent. 'Tanha,' too, is so. It is dependent on feeling (vedana) and provides the condition for grasping (upadana). Both feeling and grasping are dependent on some other factors. Thus this inter-relation and interdependence goes on in a circle. And, therefore, there is no room for a first cause.

Similarly, the Buddha does not speak of a single cause. Instead, he points out that things arise due to causes and conditions (hetu-paccaya). Therefore, though tanha is here mentioned as the cause of arising of dukkha, elsewhere ignorance (avijja) is given as the cause of dukkha. Sometimes the belief in a permanent self (sakkayadiitthi) is cited as the cause of arising of dukkha.

All these are not totally different and unrelated causes. They are connected and interrelated in some way or the other.

Objects of craving are numerous. The eyes crave for forms, ears for sounds; nose craves for smells, tongue for tastes, body for touches, mind for concepts. Besides these very obvious objects of craving there are many other objects such as power, wealth, ideas, views, ideals, beliefs, opinions, theories etc. Whatever the object may be, craving for any of them only leads to conflict, to dukkha. The Buddha has pointed out that all troubles and conflicts among individuals, in families, in societies, in brief, in the whole world arise because of this craving.

The Noble Truth of Cessation of Suffering

The Buddha taught that dukkha which arises is also bound to cease. The Buddha teaches also that it is the responsibility of each individual to try to put an end to dukkha.

When the cause of its arising is known it becomes easy to put an end to its arising. As explained in the second Noble Truth, craving is the cause of dukkha. Therefore, to stop the arising of dukkha craving has to be removed.

To understand how to eliminate craving it is necessary to understand the arising of craving. For this one should first understand how the sense organs and sense objects function. All what we experience is the result of our sense perception.

All of us like pleasure and dislike pain. We begin to consider all our feelings from this personal point of view. We get attached to what we like, and we recoil from what we dislike. The more and more we think in terms of pleasure and pain attachment and recoiling develop, and finally they begin to control the process of our perception of the world. Then we fail to see things as they are and see only in the way our 'likes' and 'dislikes' want us to see them. We even fail to see that we are made up of five aggregates (pancakkhandha) which are constantly changing and impermanent. Instead, we think there is a permanent 'self' in us. We think that happiness we enjoy is everlasting, and fail to see that happiness turns into unhappiness.

But the true nature of things is quite different. So when we are faced with the true nature of life for example, gain and loss, fame and ill fame, pleasure and pain, we completely lose our mental balance.

With gain we feel happy, with loss we feel unhappy. Being caught in this fluctuating fortunes we undergo severe conflict or dukkha.

The only way to put an end to dukkha is to correct our perception and replace our ignorance with wisdom. How this could be done is explained in the Fourth Noble truth

The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

This Path is described as the Middle Path. It is so described because it avoids the two extreme paths that were taught by other religious teachers. One of these extreme paths is the indulgence in sensual pleasures. The other is self-torture. The Buddha completely rejected both these paths.

As this Middle Path consists of eight divisions, it is referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Atthangika Magga), discovered by the Buddha Himself, is the only way to Nibbana. or extinction of the fire of lust, hatred and delusion. It avoids the extreme of self-mortification that weakens one's intellect, and the extreme of self-indulgence that retards one's spiritual progress.

It consists of the following eight factors:-

- Right Understanding
- Right Thoughts
- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood
- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

Right Understanding is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. In other words it is the understanding of oneself as one really is.

The keynote of Buddhism is this Right Understanding. Buddhism as such is based on knowledge and not on unreasonable belief.

Right thoughts are threefold. They are the Thoughts of Renunciation - which are opposed to lustful desires. Benevolent Thoughts which are opposed to illwill, and Thoughts of Harmlessness which are opposed to cruelty. These tend to purify the mind.

Right speech deals with refraining from falsehood, slandering, harsh words, and frivolous talks.

Right Action deals with refraining from killing, stealing, and unchastity.

Right livelihood deals with the five kinds of trades which should be avoided by a lay disciple. They are trading in arms, human beings, flesh (that is, breeding animals for slaughter), intoxicating drinks, and poison. Hypocritical conduct is cited as wrong livelihood for monks.

Right Effort is fourfold - namely,

- 1.The endeavour to discard evil that has already arisen,
- 2.The endeavour to prevent the arising of unrisen evil,
- 3.The endeavour to develop unrisen good, and
- 4.The endeavour to promote that good which has already arisen.

Right Mindfulness is also fourfold. It is the mindfulness with regard to body, sensations, mind, and Dhamma (phenomena).

Right Concentration is the one-pointedness of the mind.

The first two are grouped in Wisdom, the second three in Morality and the last three in Concentration.

Morality --- Right speech/ Right Action/ Right Livelihood

Concentration --- Right Effort/ Right Mindfulness/ Right Concentration

Wisdom --- Right Understanding/ Right Thoughts

Strictly speaking these factors that comprise the Noble Eightfold Path signify eight mental properties (Cetasikas) collectively found in the four classes of Supramundane Consciousness whose object is Nibbana.

According to the order of development Morality, Concentration and Wisdom are the three stages of the Path.

The Goal

The Noble Eightfold Path leads to the end of greed, hatred and delusion. This is the Goal and we call it Nibbana.

The master never pretended that the Path was an easy one. The attainment of the goal requires both understanding and determination, but to say it is not easy does not mean that it is impossible to follow for an intelligent man or woman.

Buddhism, or the Buddhist way of life, may be described as good conduct brought about by mind development and training and leading to Perfect Peace.

The Buddha made an unsurpassed analysis of the evils and troubles of mankind. They were due, He said, to GREED,

ILL-WILL and DELUSION.

It would be difficult to find any man-made evil or tragedy which did not fall under one or more of these categories. Yet it is precisely the conquest, the overcoming, of greed, hatred and delusion which lifts us to realize Nibbana which is, " Tranquillity of the mind when the passions are brought under control and all attachment ceases".

The fruits of the Buddhist way of life are both immediate and ultimate. Results are very quickly observed by those who accept the Dhamma and begin to walk on the Path of the Master. If we do not realize Nibbana in this life the experiences and progress we have made, not only lead to a more rapid attainment in a successive birth, but will provide more favourable conditions to do so.

The more immediate fruits of happier living, contentment and peace of mind, are the priceless rewards of those who walk in the Light of the Buddha's Teaching.

Through greed, ill-will and delusion and through being overwhelmed by them, one aims at the ruin of oneself, of others, and of both parties, and mental pain and grief come about. But when greed, ill-will and delusion are overcome, one aims at neither the ruin of oneself, of others, or of either party, and mental pain and grief are not brought about.

This is Peace, this is the Sublime, this is the end of all rebirth producing kamma, the relinquishing of all the underlying causes of existence, the fading away of craving, the attainment of detachment, Nibbana.

The extinction of greed, the extinction of anger, and the extinction of delusion: this indeed is called Nibbana

Kamma

In the Buddha's teaching of the doctrine of kamma the term kamma is used as a technical term in a special religious meaning. In this usage it means volitional action or action done with a particular intention. According to the Buddha's teaching all volitional or intentional actions give rise to consequences. The correlation between such volitional actions and their consequences constitute the Buddhist doctrine of kamma.

There are three modes through which we perform all our actions. These three modes are the body, speech and mind. Thus these three-fold actions are bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions. These actions performed through body, speech and mind constitute a person's behaviour. Only 'intentional behaviour' is called kamma. Hence all unintentional actions are not considered kamma. such actions could be grouped under accidental or negligent actions.

In the final analysis, all factors that influence our actions could be traced to three root causes. These are craving, hatred and ignorance or their opposites namely, noncraving, non-hatred and non-ignorance. All acts motivated by craving, hatred and ignorance are morally bad or unwholesome. All acts motivated by their opposites are morally good or wholesome. All evil and good actions produce consequences for which the doer of actions is responsible.

This correlation between actions and consequences shows certain tendencies rather than inevitable consequences. Explaining this the Buddha says it is incorrect to say that "just as a man does a deed, so does he experience its consequences". If this was so this would be a deterministic doctrine. And if the law of kamma is deterministic doctrine, then the living of holy life by a person would be meaningless, for he would not be able to change his destiny.

The Buddha's teaching of kamma is not deterministic; nor is it indeterministic, for it operates according to a causal pattern. Therefore, if one wishes to explain the correlation between actions and consequences, then one should say ' just as a man does a deed whose consequences would be experienced in a certain way, so does he experience its consequences. It is clearly seen that the first statement is deterministic, while the second one is conditional, for it accepts the possibility of other factors influencing the correlation between actions and consequences.

The Buddha explained that the experiencing of consequences of one's actions depends on numerous other factors such as the circumstances under which the action is committed, the moral status of the doer of the action and so on. Explaining this further the Buddha said that, if a person who is not properly disciplined and who, therefore, is of mean character were to do even a trifling evil deed, that would lead him to serious adverse consequences. Yet, if the same trifling deed were to be done by a person who is virtuous, the consequences would not be so grave and severe. The reason for this is the difference between

moral status of the two doers of the same trifling deed. To illustrate this situation the Buddha presented a simile. He said that, if a man were to throw a pinch of salt into a small cup of water, the water in it would become salty and undrinkable. If he were to throw the same amount of salt into a river, the water in the river would not become salty and undrinkable. This is because unlike in the cup, the volume of water in the river is large, and the pinch of salt has little effect on the large volume of water in the river. Similarly, though the trifling act was the same, the moral status of the two people that committed the crime was different, and therefore, the way they experienced the consequences, too, was different.

Law of kamma is only one of the causal laws in nature that affects the life of an individual. There are five such causal laws in nature. They are physical laws (utuniyama), biological laws (bijaniyama), psychological laws (cittaniyama), kammic laws (kamma niyama) and spiritual laws (dhamma niyama). Therefore it is wrong to believe that the law of kamma is the only law that determines the life of a man, and that all pleasure and pain he experiences is strictly determined by his previous kamma.

This makes it clear that one should not attribute to kamma all ups and downs one experiences in life and give up striving to improve one's life. As man is supreme and as he has freedom of choice, ability to put forth effort, ability to persevere, he can control his kamma and shape his own destiny.

Rebirth

An individual's karma also plays a major role in deciding one's rebirth. In Buddhism rebirth is explained as the combining of two factors namely, consciousness(vinnana) and psycho-physical personality or what is simply called name and form(nama-rupa). Herein, name or(nama) means the three aggregates i.e. feeling (vedana), perception(sanna)and mental formations (samkhara). And form or rupa means the physical form (body), sex and seat of consciousness. This psycho- physical personality is the foetus or the embryo in the mother's womb. This becomes complete only when it is infused with a consciousness, surviving from the past. This surviving consciousness is sometimes referred to as Gandhabba. This is nothing other than the "death consciousness" (cuti-citta) of a person or the last consciousness in his death-bed which has turned into rebirth-consciousness (patisandhi-citta) at the moment of obtaining rebirth. The comprehensive term 'vinnana' is generally used to indicate this consciousness.

It has been already pointed out that it is the last thought at the moment of death that determines an individual's rebirth. The foetus formed by the union of mother and father, gets complete when it becomes infused with this rebirth-consciousness of an individual who had passed away. The arising of name and form and consciousness takes place simultaneously, and from that moment life begins to function.

In this rebirth-consciousness that survives from the past are latent all the past impressions, characteristics and tendencies of that particular individual who fares in 'samsara', going from birth to birth. Therefore, this consciousness, to a great extent, determines the nature and character of the new personality.

The connection between this surviving consciousness (vinnana) and the psycho-physical personality (nama-rupa) is well emphasised in the Twelve-fold formula of Dependent Co- origination. Therein, it is explained that 'on mental formations or dispositions (samkhara) depends consciousness (vinnana) and on consciousness depends psycho-physical personality (nama-rupa).'

This makes it clear that consciousness serves as a connecting link between two lives. This link does not show total identity of the personalities in two lives. Specially, as the changes in the physical form are more marked and as the physical aggregates get destroyed at death it is not possible to speak of physical identity. However, consciousness, while undergoing continuous change, survives death and gets linked with the next life, and therefore, there is 'mental- continuity.' This explains why, when it is asked whether it is the same individual who is reborn again, it is said that 'It is neither the same person nor a different person' (na ca so na ca anno).

This continuous flow of the consciousness also solves another question pertaining to action (karma) and consequences (vipaka). It is often asked, 'If there is no permanent entity or soul that transmigrates from one birth to another, is the person living in this life responsible in the next life for his actions done here?' As it is clear from the above explanation, he has to bear moral responsibility for all his action, because his two lives are linked by consciousness. Hence, though there is no physical identity there is definite continuity of mental events and consequently the doer of actions is responsible.