

What are the Four Noble Truths?

The Four Noble Truths are about "suffering," how it arises, and how it can be ceased.

Precepts

1) The Truth of Dukkha is that conditional phenomena and experiences are ultimately not satisfying, not bringing happiness;

2) The Truth of the Origin of Dukkha is that craving and clinging to what is pleasurable, and aversion to what is not pleasurable, results in unhappiness;

3) Liberation from Dukkha can be achieved as one follows the Noble Eightfold Path and behaves decently with discipline, practicing mindfulness and meditation with an objective to cease craving, clinging, becoming, and dissatisfaction.

The Four Noble Truths occupy the center of Buddhist teaching. Everyone knows the feeling of lack or loss or conflict in their lives: this is what the Buddha called **dukkha**, often translated as "suffering," but covering a whole range of meanings and nuances.

The main idea is that *dukkha*, or suffering, can be transcended by following the Noble Eightfold Path – right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

### **Twelve insights**

There are three stages in the understanding of each truth, for a total of twelve insights.

The three stages for understanding of each truth are:

sacca-ñāṇa - **knowing the nature of the truth** (e.g., acknowledgement, view, reflection)

kicca-ñāṇa - **knowing what needs to be done in connection with that truth** (e.g., practice; motivation; directly experiencing)

kata-ñāṇa - **accomplishing what needs to be done** (e.g., result, full understanding, knowing)

These three stages of understanding are emphasized particularly in the Theravada tradition, but they are also recognized by some contemporary Mahayana teachers.

The three insights for the first noble truth are:

**There is suffering.**

Ajahn Sumedho explains: "We don't need to make it into anything grand; it is just the recognition: 'There is suffering'. That is a basic insight. The ignorant person says, 'I'm suffering. I don't want to suffer. I meditate and I go on retreats to get out of suffering, but I'm still suffering and I don't want to suffer.... How can I get out of suffering? What can I do to get rid of it?' But that is not the First Noble Truth; it is not: 'I am suffering and I want to end it.' The insight is, 'There is suffering'."

**Suffering should be understood.**

Ajahn Sumedho explains: "The second insight or aspect of each of the Noble Truths has the word 'should' in it: 'It should be understood.' The second insight then, is that dukkha is something to understand. One should understand dukkha, not just try to get rid of it.

In Pali, 'understanding' means to really accept the suffering, stand under or embrace it rather than just react to it. With any form of suffering – physical or mental – we usually just react, but with understanding we can really look at suffering; really accept it, really hold it and embrace it. So that is the second aspect, 'We should understand suffering'."

**Suffering has been understood.**

Ajahn Sumedho explains: "When you have actually practised with suffering – looking at it, accepting it, knowing it and letting it be the way it is – then there is the third aspect, 'Suffering has been understood', or 'Dukkha has been understood.'

**The three insights for the second noble truth are:**

**There is the origin of suffering, which is attachment to desire (tanha)** Ajahn Sumedho emphasizes contemplating the three aspects of **tanha**:

kama-tanha (the desire for sense pleasures);

bhava-tanha (the desire to become something, such as seeking wealth or fame);

vibhava-tanha (the desire to get rid of things, e.g. to avoid suffering)

**Desire should be let go of**

Ajahn Sumedho states: "The more we contemplate and investigate grasping, the more the insight arises, 'Desire should be let go of.'"

**Desire has been let go of**

Ajahn Sumedho states: "Then through the actual practice and understanding of what letting go really is, we have the third insight into the Second Noble Truth, which is 'Desire has been let go of.' We actually know letting go. It is not a theoretical letting go, but a direct insight. You know letting go has been accomplished. This is what practice is all about."

### **Three insights for the third noble truth**

#### **There is the cessation of suffering, of "dukkha"**

Ajahn Sumedho emphasizes the importance of reflecting on impermanence. Everything that arises also ceases. He states: "Rather than just thinking about it, really contemplate: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.' Apply it to life in general, and to your own experience. Then you will understand. Just note: beginning...ending. Contemplate how things are. This sensory realm is all about arising and ceasing, beginning and ending; there can be perfect understanding in this lifetime.

#### **The cessation of dukkha should be realized**

Ajahn Sumedho states: "To allow this process of cessation to work, we must be willing to suffer. This is why I stress the importance of patience. We have to open our minds to suffering, because it is in embracing suffering that suffering ceases. When we find that we are suffering, physically or mentally, then we go to the actual suffering that is present. We open completely to it, welcome it, concentrate on it, allowing it to be what it is. That means we must be patient and bear with the unpleasantness of a particular condition. We have to endure boredom, despair, doubt and fear in order to understand that they cease rather than running away from them."

#### **The cessation of dukkha has been realized**

Ajahn Sumedho states: "[When craving] has ceased, you experience **nirodha** – cessation, emptiness, non-attachment. Nirodha is another word for **Nibbana**. When you have let something go and allowed it to cease, then what is left is peace."

### **Three insights for the fourth noble truth**

#### **There is a path to the cessation of suffering**

Phillip Moffitt introduces this insight as follows: "In the Tenth Insight the Buddha asks you to realize that there is a path to finding freedom from the angst of your life and experiencing more joy. Implicit is the authentic possibility that you have the power to change your inner experience of life, and there is a specific means for you to do so. The realization of this insight evokes in you the faith to undergo the discipline, hard work, and renunciation that are called for in the Eleventh Insight."

#### **This path should be cultivated (actualized)**

Phillip Moffitt introduces this insight as follows: "The Noble Eightfold Path is not a set of beliefs or laws but rather a practical, direct experience method for finding meaning and peace in your life. Think of it as an organic blueprint from which you organize and live your life. Each of the eight path factors defines one aspect of behavioral development needed for you to move from suffering to joy. Its eight factors function as an integrated system or matrix that supports and informs all parts of your life. By "cultivating" the Buddha means attending to, nourishing, and manifesting each of these factors of wisdom in your life."

#### **This path is realized**

Phillip Moffitt states: "As you begin working with the twelfth and final of the Buddha's insights, you are nearing the end of your search to know how to live wisely. In your journey you have utilized mindfulness to explore the experiences of your mind and body, which has allowed you to directly know the emotional, psychological, existential, and spiritual dilemmas of daily life. You are no longer deluded—you no longer have the mistaken belief that your mind has to be trapped in stress and reactivity for the rest of your life. You now know that freedom is truly possible, and you "know that you know" effective ways to respond to desire and difficulty when they arise in your life. You know that a path to cessation with its eight factors exists; you know its parts; you know you are capable of practicing it; and you know that it works for you!"