Fourth Noble Truth: The Path to the End of Dukkha

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 43:50

Tonight I want to talk about the fourth noble truth and how it relates to the law of karma.

The fourth truth states that there is a path leading to the end of suffering: the noble eightfold path. Our injunction is to follow that path.

There is a poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado that I find helpful in thinking about the eightfold path. Here is a very loose translation: "Wayfarer, there is no way. The way forms as you walk it."

So we can't look ahead and see where the eightfold path is taking us. We can't work out how long until we get to the end or the next milestone. We can only form the path step by step. We can think of the eight strands of the path as different parts to each step.

The path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality, and the cultivation of our mind and heart through meditation. Imagine trying to form a path through a thick jungle. The strands of wisdom cut through the thicket so we can see more clearly. We express our wisdom in the world by our speech, actions, and livelihood. This is our step into the clearing we have just hacked out. Rather than hacking away doggedly at the thicket in front of us, we rest to contemplate our new position, find the most promising route, the easiest branches to fell. This is the cultivation of heart and mind in meditation. These sharpen the sword of wisdom. And so we are ready to cut out the next step.

Each of the eight strands is described as "right." For example, the first section on wisdom has two subdivisions termed right understanding and right attitude. The word "right" can stir the judging mind, and I think the translations "straightened out" or "disentangled" give a better description of what happens as we follow the path. At first we get caught in tangles of thought when we try to work out how to live well. But the more we walk the path, the more we sense our thought processes straightening out, our emotional life disentangling. We become more straightforward in our dealings with others. In meditation, we can often feel ourselves getting into knots of tension as the hindrances show up, and then feel the relief as those knots loosen in the light of awareness.

Now, "straightened out" and "disentangled" are both a bit of a mouthful, so I'll follow the convention of calling each step "right this" or "right that." But bear in mind the gentler and more evocative sense that we disentangle ourselves from the binds of dukkha as we develop our path.

The first section of the path is right understanding. This is the polar opposite of avijjā, the ignorance that

forms the basis for the wheel of conditions ending up in dukkha. While avijjā implies not understanding what causes suffering and what prevents it, this first step in the path leading out of suffering implies understanding those very processes. Hearing about and reflecting on the Dhamma cultivates right understanding.

But if understanding is confined only to the cognitive level, it can tighten into absolute judgments. Rules become commands, and to break them is treachery. When cognitive understanding filters into the domain of will and emotion, we take the Dhamma to heart. This is what we mean by right attitude, the second strand of the eightfold path.

Wisdom thus has two strands: right understanding, which is mainly cognitive, and right attitude, which means a wise heart. We often use the word "attitude" to describe negativity. We say he or she "has an attitude" to mean that they go their own way without much consideration for others. But in fact one can have a friendly attitude, and that is what is meant in the second strand of wisdom. While cognitive understanding tends to tighten the mind, friendliness tends to soften it. Together they make for a balance: enough honest discernment to be able to tell right from wrong, enough friendliness to forgive mistakes.

Right attitude emerges naturally as we practice mindfulness, but we can accelerate the process by also practicing the four Brahma Viharas. The term Brahma Vihara translates as "the abode of the gods."

Mettā, usually translated as goodwill or loving-kindness, is the first of these. We wish ourselves and others to be well and happy. This undermines the aversive habits that cloud our mind—ill will, anger, coldness, fear. It doesn't uproot the seed in the same way that mindfulness does, but it nulls the aversive effect. In our gardening analogy, you could say it covers over the weeds, preventing them from getting any sunlight, so they can't thrive and sow more seeds. The combination of mettā and mindfulness is very powerful. Mettā suppresses aversion to help us be more friendly and live in accord with the Dhamma, while mindfulness weeds away at the hindrances.

The second Brahma Vihara is compassion. As we undermine our habitual aversion to suffering, our hearts show their capacity for compassion, and our speech and activities become more caring. We practice this Brahma Vihara by bringing to mind someone who is having a hard time—it could be ourselves—and wishing them to be free from suffering.

The third Brahma Vihara is muditā, often translated as appreciative joy.

As we undermine fear, jealousy, and other aspects of ill will, our hearts are more easily gladdened by good news. We're not so ready to dismiss our own achievements with a self-deprecating remark like "that was nothing, really," but instead learn to congratulate ourselves for the effort we made. And when we hear of another's success, we feel happy for them.

We cultivate this Brahma Vihara by bringing to mind someone who has had good news—again, this can be ourselves—and saying, "May your happiness continue. May your happiness increase." Or if you prefer,

"I am happy that you are happy." While compassion lets us bear the suffering in the world, mudita helps us acknowledge its joys. Metta forms the basis for both in its cultivation of friendliness.

All three of these Brahma Viharas need the support of the fourth: equanimity. Equanimity is one of the factors of enlightenment. Remember the bird with the wide wingspan, steadying the flock through the ups and downs of their journey.

Without equanimity, metta easily overshoots into attachment, and we become dependent on our friends for our sense of worth. With equanimity, we learn to accept that friends have separate lives, other responsibilities, other affections.

Without the balance of equanimity, compassion slides into pity. What's happening is that we're seeing ourselves as the stronger party caring for the weaker one. It can become an addiction—needing to be needed. Equanimity restores the balance, lets us see the strength at the core of the other's being, trust in their capacity to heal and recover. If the person is dying, equanimity helps us see this not as a tragedy but as part of the mystery of life, nothing to pity them for. After all, our own turn will come quickly enough.

Mudita escalates into excitement unless it is supported by equanimity. We latch on to the joy, identify with it, and believe life is going to be perfect from now on. When we inevitably fall from grace, we are shocked and confused, wondering what went wrong. Equanimity gives us the balance we need to recognise joy as a temporary gift, to enjoy it to the full and then let it go when the time is right.

What we let go into is equanimity—that peaceful balance of mind which knows better than to cling to the good stuff or struggle with the rotten stuff. The classic phrase used to cultivate equanimity is the reflection: "All beings are the owners of their kamma." This reminds us that we have no direct power over our own or others' happiness. It is designed as an antidote to the delusion of ourselves as a benign deity who can make people happy just by wishing this.

It sounds comical, but in fact it is a delusion easily stirred by practising with the Brahma Viharas. Even the term Brahma Vihara—abode of the gods—suggests this. It feels godlike to have our hearts filled with goodness, kindness, joy, friendliness, as if we are above and beyond the troubles of the world. In that sublime state, our thoughts of a person being well and happy are easily mistaken as the reality for that person.

The reflection "all beings are owners of their kamma" brings us down to earth. We realise our limitations. You may be able to find a phrase which carries the same meaning but resonates more easily in your heart. For example, I sometimes use the phrase "I trust you to find your own path to Nibbana." This helps me to see the other person more objectively and cultivates respect for their separate path in life.

Just as metta, compassion, and mudita need equanimity to balance them, equanimity needs the other Brahma Viharas for its own balance. Without them, equanimity easily slips into indifference. We let go of others to such an extent that we no longer feel anything for them. When this happens, it's time to start

practising with whichever of the other three is most appropriate.

Right understanding polishes one side of the sword of wisdom. The Brahma Viharas polish the other side. With this double-edged sword we cut our way through the jungle of hindrances, clearing another step along our Eightfold Path.

This brings us to the next section of the path: sila in Pali, usually translated as morality or ethics. Sila is the expression of wisdom in daily life. I'm going to use the Pali word sila because we often associate morality with a strict, joyless approach to life. Family photos from Victorian times illustrate this. No one smiles. The children look miserable in their heavy, awkward suits. An austere father towers over them while his wife sits demurely at his side, laced and buttoned within an inch of her life. Desire finds no expression in this picture of morality.

But we need to remember that desire can also be wise. The desire to be happy is perhaps our most basic drive in life. It only gets us into trouble because we don't rightly understand what allows for happiness, what causes suffering. The Buddha promises us that if we follow this path we will be content and therefore happy. Morality in this light is seen as a step towards happiness.

I want to touch on the law of kamma here to clarify the link between morality and happiness. Kamma is the Buddha's teaching on causality. He discovered that happiness and unhappiness are governed by the laws of kamma. When we hear of someone's good fortune, we might say, "Ah, that's your good kamma showing up," and we might think along the same lines for misfortune. But this is a mistake. The Buddha said that kamma was one of five laws operating in the universe.

The first are the laws that govern the physical world. These, rather than kamma, could be at the basis for many common misfortunes—infections, car crashes—as well as major events like earthquakes, drought, and hurricanes. Physical conditions and the laws governing them can also bring good fortune: health, strength, a good harvest, or favorable weather.

The second set of laws are the biological laws of heredity. We may inherit a parent's musical ear or a family gene for heart disease.

The third are the laws that govern our mind. We might develop Alzheimer's and no longer be able to think clearly, or we may be born with a very high IQ or a talent for languages.

The fourth is the law of kamma.

Finally, there are the laws of Dhamma—that all phenomena are subject to change, aging, and death. No matter how impeccable our kamma, we will die.

Thus, kamma is only one of five sets of laws governing events in our life. We cannot ascribe someone's handicap or poverty to bad kamma. Neither can we ascribe their musical genius or longevity to good kamma. What we can ascribe to their previous kamma is a person's happiness or unhappiness. These, the

Buddha discovered, operate under the law of kamma.

When we think, speak, or act motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion, we sow bad kamma which will eventually ripen to harm us and diminish our happiness. Similarly, thoughts of goodwill sow seeds of kamma that will ripen to benefit us and make us happier.

The harm we do ourselves from acting out of ill-will happens at the point of becoming, *bhava*, in the wheel of dependent origination that we spoke of last night. Remember the *sankhara* seeds, our habitual drives, that can germinate and then sprout through our senses to urge us to react to circumstances. At the point of *bhava*, our seed has blossomed into a sense of self who is now about to think, act, or speak under the influence of this habitual drive. At the moment the thought, deed, or act starts, a seed of that *sankhara* is sown, to sprout at some future time when the opportunity presents itself. For now, this *sankhara* has come out of potential into action, giving birth to a thought, an act, or an utterance that carries out its will.

How does this cause unhappiness? Say we were speaking out of ill-will. We say something nasty. We might feel powerful as a result, but since all things fall apart, sooner or later we feel vulnerable again. How do we get back to power? Find someone we can vent our anger on. So we get in the habit of nasty speech. Where does this lead us? We lose friends and gain enemies. Out of fear, some people might rally around us, but their suppressed feelings get in the way of real friendship, and most will be delighted to stab us in the back when they get the opportunity. A bully lives in a state of suppressed fear that his own deeds will be perpetrated on him.

Similarly for greed—the enjoyment is temporary while the stress of continually needing to consume is exhausting, and overconsumption itself can harm our bodies. Everything we consume has to be paid for, so we get stressed out with overwork. Satiating greed makes us feel needy rather than satisfied.

Delusion manifests in the myriad untested assumptions we make that let us ignore what doesn't serve our agenda. We might take our family and friends for granted, assume they will always be there for us. If one of them suddenly dies or emigrates, we might get quite a shock to find how much we needed them. We may have many regrets about how little we appreciated their company and support.

On the other hand, if we think, speak, or act out of generosity, goodwill, or wisdom, the law of kamma tells us that we will reap the benefits. There will be social benefits, as everyone prefers people who are generous rather than stingy, caring rather than unkind, wise rather than foolish. Also, the benefits go deep within us, as each kind word helps heal our own heart. Each act of generosity counters our sense of neediness. Each wise thought undermines our ignorance and delusion.

It is the motivation that matters for the law of kamma, not the act itself. If a doctor cares for his patients only because he gets well paid, he won't reap the benefits of kindness but will suffer the consequences of greed. Similarly, if our efforts to solve a conflict end up making it worse, we won't suffer any kammic harm, so long as our motivation was good.

Sila, the second stage of the Eightfold Path, is therefore not a simple matter of following rules for good behavior. We also need to examine our motivation. Often we are aware of mixed motives. We know we are angry, but we still feel it would be best to confront the person who angered us. Which seeds are we nourishing here—ill-will or wisdom? We can consciously make a suitable good wish, like "May this do more good than harm" or "May I learn from any mistakes I make," to help us move in the right direction.

The Buddha divides *sila* into three sections: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right speech has four aspects. It must be truthful, timely, and useful, as well as being said gently rather than harshly.

Truthfulness, in the long run, is easier on our psyche than lying. Probably the most usual way we lie is to exaggerate things for effect. If we lie or exaggerate, there's always a danger of being caught out, which leads to restlessness and worry. Apart from that, others come to distrust and disrespect us to some extent, which can limit their friendships.

Speech is useful from the point of view of Sila if it promotes happiness. Friendly greetings are useful, and small talk can also help us feel at ease. The main temptation towards unhelpful speech is gossiping. To gossip is to talk about the doings of third parties, often feeding on their misfortune. It can easily spread rumours and allow unchallenged backbiting.

I remember a neighbour telling me about a couple who had broken up. They had been building an extension to their house when the wife ran away with the builder. It might have been funny in a Hollywood movie, and the grin on her face told me she was seeing it in this light, not feeling for the family and the pain this would be causing.

Sometimes it can be difficult to draw the line between gossip, small talk, and the genuine need to discuss a third party's behaviour. During friendly chatter we often mention news of people we know in common. Ask yourself, how would I feel if this person was listening to our conversation? If you would feel any way embarrassed, it's likely that your talk has strayed into gossip.

On the other hand, if we've been hurt by someone, it often helps to discuss the matter with a third party. Keeping it all to ourselves for fear of generating the karma of wrong speech is not always the wisest course. We often need the help of a friend or counsellor to move towards forgiveness. The motivation here is not to gossip, but to clarify our thoughts and let our heart heal through sympathy. Basically we're asking our friend or therapist for help in bearing the difficulty.

We could see it as an extension of mindfulness practice. In mindfulness we let our angry thoughts crash through our psyche. He did this, she did that. I can't understand how they didn't notice. Eventually anger wears itself out. Letting these angry thoughts be heard by a friend or therapist brings the matter to a new level of consciousness. The shared awareness allows a bigger space for the anger to express itself and for the futility of anger to be acknowledged. Often the process can help turn our hearts towards understanding and forgiveness.

Timely speech is especially important when we have something difficult to say. Suppose we feel hurt by a friend's behaviour. If we see them despondent, harassed, or preoccupied by something else, best to hold back. It's so easy for negativity to spread like a virus. What was intended to restore friendship, despondency might translate into rejection, while harassment might be seen as yet another injustice. Best to ask them to meet to discuss something a bit sensitive, so that they will be more prepared for a genuine heart-to-heart conversation.

Harsh speech adds cutting words or a hurtful tone to whatever message we need to give. In the short term, this might make us feel more powerful, in control. But it often provokes the other into a riposte, and an argument can easily break out. Even if the other doesn't react but is crushed by our remark, we've lost some degree of their friendship. So in the long run, caring speech promotes our own happiness, while harsh speech leads us to the unhappiness and social isolation of the bully.

Right action has three components: to refrain from harming others, stealing their property, and misusing our sexuality. The greatest harm we can do to another is to take their life. The Buddha doesn't confine this precept to human life, and many Buddhists would be vegetarian for this reason. However, the Buddha didn't forbid his disciples to eat meat. This was probably pragmatic, for they had to survive on alms rounds and so had to accept whatever they were given.

While most of us would not want to kill or harm others, we can take this precept further by asking ourselves what we could do to promote others' welfare. Purchasing ethically produced goods would be one avenue; giving to charities which combat poverty would be another. We can also look after animal welfare as best we can, avoiding factory-farmed produce for example because of the horrendous suffering involved, or becoming vegetarians. Vegans take this a step further and avoid all animal products. This prevents much suffering—for example, the separation of calf from cow at the moment of birth, so that we can take the cow's milk for our dairy products.

Moving on to the second component of right action, not stealing. Few people who come on retreat would be involved in gross theft. But we can take this further to ask whether we are using more than our fair share of the earth's resources. Even governments now agree that human activities are adding to the problem of climate change. The effect is already being felt in many developing countries and threatens homes and livelihoods as well as food and water supplies.

Consumption of fossil fuel is a major component driving climate change. When we take a flight or drive rather than use public transport, we add to the problem. Every manufactured item we purchase adds to our carbon footprint. We need to regularly ask ourselves whether our energy consumption is justified, or whether we're frivolously frittering away the earth's resources and fuelling climate change.

The third component of right action is not to abuse our sexuality. Sexuality gives joy that can nourish and sustain a loving relationship. But if it is used frivolously or to gain power over another, it can lead to a great deal of suffering. Infidelity can cause enormous hurt and break up relationships. Abortion is surely

suffering from the fetus's point of view, and very often from the mother's as well. And we have the horrors of childhood sexual abuse and vulnerable people being forced into prostitution.

While many of us will not have to face the suffering of abortion, sexual abuse, or forced prostitution, we do have to face many challenges in maintaining this precept within a society where sex outside of committed relationship is quite common. The main questions to keep in mind are: Could this lead to hurt or other harm for myself or others? Will it lead to happiness for myself or others?

The final strand of morality in the Eightfold Path is right livelihood. We need to be sure our livelihood is not harming others. The livelihoods the Buddha listed as wrong were those dealing with weapons, poisons, slavery—including buying and selling children and prostitution—intoxicants, and meat. Weapons, poison, slavery, and butchery can obviously kill and harm, while intoxicants promote delusion.

Few people would argue with the advice not to have anything to do with slavery or forced prostitution. The harm these do is beyond question. But the other areas mentioned here are tolerated in our society, making this a very challenging aspect of the Eightfold Path for those already employed in one of these fields.

Although few poisons are sold legally nowadays, there is the tricky area of pest control. If your work involves dealing with these, see whether you could stock a compassionate alternative. For example, there are rat and mouse traps that do not kill the animal, and also alternatives for dealing with slugs.

Butchery obviously involves great suffering for animals, and very often there are long, frightening journeys involved before slaughter. To be directly involved in this must be an incredible challenge to a sensitive heart and can only foster cruelty and indifference. Rearing animals for slaughter is part of this same business. The Buddha's unequivocal advice is to get out of this aspect of farming, and anything else to do with the meat trade, for your own spiritual welfare as well as the welfare of animals.

Many people are employed in the weapons industry, from soldiers on the ground to scientists in the laboratory. So much war seems pointless and horrific when seen from a distance or with hindsight. Who, in hindsight, could justify the atrocities of the First World War or the Vietnamese War? But many would argue that it was justified in the Second World War in order to prevent the rise of Hitler. In 1995, over eight thousand people were massacred in Srebrenica as the UN stood by. Was the UN right not to attack the invading Serbs in order to defend these civilians?

These are hard questions. In war, each side justifies their action, seeing the enemy as the greater threat to humanity. But can you stand by as atrocities are committed? Would it be justified to kill the guards of a concentration camp in order to liberate those within? There are no easy answers here. It is a question of choosing the lesser of evils. Certainly a soldier's life is not to be envied from the point of view of karma. It would need the wisdom of a Buddha to choose the most compassionate response in such a situation.

Bhante has an essay, "Is Armed Intervention Ever Justified?", on the Satipanya website, which explores

this in more depth. He distinguishes between force and violence, which helps us clarify sīla in our response to the question of war. His essay also cites wonderful exemplars of the non-violent approach to conflict management. Great leaders like Nelson Mandela and Gandhi brokered peace for warlike situations. And figures like Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama inspire us to look only for a peaceful solution.

The injunction not to deal with intoxicants poses hard questions for many people, as almost every shop, restaurant, and hotel is expected to supply alcohol. If we can change job, then it is best to do this, but if not, do we make ourselves redundant to avoid this problem? What about the consequences for our family? Would the harm to them be justified? Our culture makes it easy for us to justify alcohol, and most of us know people who live good lives while drinking moderately. On the other hand, many road accidents are alcohol-related, as well as domestic and street violence and sexual abuse. Our cultural ease with alcohol also facilitates alcoholism with all its problems. And if we are interested in liberation, can it ever help to cloud our mind with alcohol?

As I think you will agree, sīla is not an easy matter. For each of us there will be difficult ethical questions to face at some stage in life. We need a clear mind to find the appropriate response in complex situations and a stout heart to meet the challenge.

The last section of the Eightfold Path concerns the cultivation of mind and heart in meditation practice. Let us first pause to review our progress. We hacked out a clearing using the sword of wisdom with its double blade—right understanding and right attitude. We stepped into the clearing as we brought wisdom into our speech, action, and livelihood. Now we need to rest a while, assess our new surroundings, and polish our sword of wisdom before we tackle the thicket again.

This section of the path also has three strands: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Right effort involves the factor of energy that we met among the factors of enlightenment. So here we have again the leading trio in our wild geese. To see their interrelation, we have the analogy of three children wanting to pick some flowers from a tree. None of them is tall enough to reach the flowers, so the strongest one, right effort, bends over to let the tallest one, right concentration, stand on his back, while the steadiest of the three, right mindfulness, provides a shoulder for him to lean on. Supported by right effort, balanced by mindfulness, concentration can then pluck the flowers.

Now this image isn't quite in accord with our image of the wild geese, which had mindfulness in the lead. But they can come together if we still see mindfulness as the leader, just not the tallest. Mindfulness tells concentration to draw back if he is overreaching, unbalancing the trio. When mindfulness is happy that the trio are well balanced, it is the ability of our minds to focus on whatever is taking our attention that lets the Dhamma clarify for us.

Right effort involves all the energy and resolution we bring to our meditation practice. The Buddha

delineates right effort into four components: to prevent unwholesome states from arising, to let go of those that have already arisen, to encourage new wholesome states, and to perfect those that have already arisen.

The effort we make to maintain moment-to-moment awareness prevents unwholesome states from arising. If we can maintain awareness at the level of sense contact and feeling, the hindrances don't get a chance to blossom and spread their seeds. This carries out the first component of right effort.

The second component involves the effort we make to hold attention steady on dukkha. This allows us to let go of hindrances that already cloud our consciousness. As we notice the transitory, uncontrollable nature of pleasure and pain, we undermine desire. Working with aversion brings us to the edge of our comfort zone. Right effort allows us to hold attention there until the boundary starts to dissolve, and we realize it was all illusion. Really, there was nothing to fear or hate. Our efforts to stir energy through physical exercise and mental resolution undermine dullness and lethargy, while the effort to center attention on some calming focus undermines restlessness. As we stir the factor of investigation, we clarify the Dhamma for ourselves, undermining doubt.

The third component of right effort involves encouraging wholesome states to manifest. This also results from the effort we make to maintain mindfulness in meditation. All seven of the factors of enlightenment are being developed and perfected, and these transmute into the five spiritual faculties to help us through daily life.

The final component involves the effort we make in practicing mettā and the other Brahma-vihāras. These bring our wholesome states to perfection.

We bring bare attention to our sensory experience, including the sixth sense of our mind with its feelings, emotions, and thoughts. We sense any reactions to these: desire trying to wrap us around pleasant feelings, aversion trying to push away unpleasant feelings, delusion trying to shut out physical sensations for the sake of a mental pleasure world. Sensing the pain of reactivity, wisdom persuades us to relax again, to let pleasant and unpleasant sensations be just as they are.

Concentration, the final strand of the Eightfold Path, describes the mind's ability to focus, like looking through a telescope. It brings stillness to the mind by unifying it with undistracted focus on whatever calls attention. Increasingly, what calls attention is dukkha and what causes it, as well as the opposite side of the coin—the absence of dukkha and the conditions that foster this. In other words, it is the Four Noble Truths that interest us, and their manifestation in our experience is what calls attention.

At times the hindrances are kept in check by the factors of enlightenment, and we sense a current of ease running underneath our usual sense of experience. Our being tiptoes towards the mystery. What is the experience of ease? What would be left of us if there was no urge driving us into action? We become more familiar with the seeming absence of our usual self, with the fluid, changing, unsatisfying nature of the

reality we inhabit, and the quiet mystery that runs beneath.

This focus is only possible on the back of right effort—our efforts not to grasp at the temporary pleasures of the world and to cultivate instead the qualities that sustain our meditation. And it needs the leadership of mindfulness, the reminder to relax our focus whenever mindfulness senses that new seeds of grasping or aversion are sprouting up. It's easy for these to sprout as we gaze beyond our usual boundaries. We get confused or frightened, restless or dull, or so deeply desiring the end of suffering that we cloud our minds with attachment to progress and aversion to whatever seems to be getting in our way.

The Buddha's promise is that one day the turmoil will end. We will satisfy our desire for the end of suffering. With that, we will know for ourselves what remains when all desire fades away.

A quick recap before finishing. The path starts with wisdom. Lost in the jungle of ignorance, we ponder the Buddha's teaching to get an inkling of what causes suffering and what relieves it. As the truth sinks into our heart, our attitude to the world grows friendlier. The jungle doesn't seem quite so impenetrable, and the sword of wisdom cuts through delusion to form a clearing. Here, sīla blossoms in the form of right speech, action, and livelihood, to be rewarded by the law of kamma, opening our hearts to happiness. We rest a while in the clearing to cultivate our heart and mind in meditation. We make the effort needed to maintain mindfulness. Supported by effort, led and balanced by mindfulness, our mind focuses on the Dhamma, and we learn the Four Noble Truths for ourselves. This sharpens the sword of wisdom, the first strands of the Eightfold Path. Step by step, the Eightfold Path leads us from the jungle of ignorance to the freedom of enlightenment.

I hope this reflection on the Fourth Noble Truth has been helpful.

May we and all beings follow the Eightfold Path to the end of suffering.

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