

The Fourth Noble Truth — Right Understanding

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 20:14

Foundation Course 1, Talk 9, The Fourth Noble Truth, Right Understanding

So we come full circle, back to the problem of wisdom, which in Buddhist terms means the solution to the problem of suffering. If the Buddha had left just a philosophy or psychology, he would no doubt be considered these days to be one of the greatest thinkers of mankind. But what sets the Buddha apart from philosophers was that he also left a methodology, a systematic practice whereby each and every individual could make their own discovery of what he himself had discovered.

The fourth noble truth is the Noble Eightfold Path. It is divided into three sections: morality, mental development and wisdom, and it contains this practice, this methodology. Wisdom is what is gained in terms of our personal experience. These guidelines, called by the Buddha from his own experiential wisdom, act as guidelines directing the whole process of self-enlightenment.

There is the wisdom we gain through insight and the wisdom we gain through compassionate action or ordinary daily experience. Both of these are supported by what we learn from other sources, such as books, magazines, TV, and of course people, and by how we ourselves think.

I'm sure everyone has had the experience of buying a do-it-yourself furniture kit, an adult Lego. If you're like me, you take everything out, quickly work out in your head how it's supposed to go together and start fixing it up, only to come to the end of the labour to find one metal bracket or something left over. Because of this missing piece, the whole construction keeps falling over. So it all has to be dismantled and started again, only this time with a humbling and grudging read of the instructions. Others who do not suffer from such overweening self-confidence will carefully read the instructions or get a friend to instruct. Some, of course, will get a friend to do it, so that although they say they know how to do it, they haven't actually done it themselves.

In all these cases, one or more of the above types of understanding has been employed. But the Buddha would have us tackle even such mundane things as building a DIY stool by first of all reading the instructions, then thinking about it, so we've actually understood it for ourselves, and then construct it. In this way, we can say we truly know what it means to construct a DIY stool. Now we're in a position to help others. I'm sure everyone has a friend who can fix things, and it ends up costing twice the professional fees.

We can say that knowledge and wisdom is the more profound and authentic to the individual, the more it is discovered and experienced by that individual. So it's the same attitude the Buddha wants us to apply to

his teaching. When he explains to me that there is no lasting entity or soul to be found in the body and mind, I understand it, but I'm not convinced. Then I go away and ponder over it and check it out with my own logic, arguing with other beliefs I have within myself. If after all my thinking I understand it to be right, then it becomes almost my own argument, as it were. But as yet, it's all head stuff. I have not actually experienced the insubstantiality of my body and mind.

Scientists, for instance, tell us there is no difference between my body and the plaster on the walls in terms of subatomic particles. But I don't experience myself as subatomic activity. Through the meditation practice, I can experience the teaching of insubstantiality. I do begin to experience for myself the insubstantial nature of my body and mind. And when this happens, my knowledge is the wisdom of seeing things as they really are. Experiential knowledge. This is realisation, to realise the truth. According to the Buddha, this is the only true wisdom.

Herein lies the importance of different types of wisdom in Buddhist practice. The progression from received knowledge to one's own personal conclusions to realisation through actual experience is expressed by the Buddha like this: There are two conditions to the arising of right understanding, namely instruction by another and one's own wise consideration.

The importance of right understanding is that it is the first step. If our first step is wrong, we may very well get lost. The Buddha says it in a more poetic way: Just as the red morning sky is the forerunner and first indication of the rising of the sun, just so is right understanding the forerunner and first indication of karmically wholesome things.

So here expressed very clearly is the link between right understanding, *kamma*, and our destiny. Before we make any decision, we do it by way of understanding. If I'm going to buy one of these DIY kits, I'd be very foolish if I didn't understand what it entails. Once I understand, my decisions put ideas into force, into action.

Right intention, the second part of the wisdom division of this Noble Eightfold Path, is just that. It is the will putting force into ideas, plans, projects, which run along the lines laid down by right understanding. Having understood the meditation, what the actual practice and theory is, I then decide to sit. This decision is right intention.

Right understanding undercuts delusion, whereas right intention undercuts greed and hatred. In this way, right understanding and right intention destroy the roots of all unwholesome *kamma*, of all suffering. We will never intend to keep the three primary precepts or the five training rules. We will never intend to practice the perfections. We will never intend to meditate if we have no knowledge or understanding of them. Right understanding is the foundation of the middle path, the path of purification.

So what is right understanding? It is of course enshrined in the Four Noble Truths which were succinctly expressed in the Buddha's first talk, the Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Law. Here the first

distinction that he made is what should be avoided by one who has gone forth from the worldly life. This doesn't just refer to monks and nuns, but to anyone who is turning towards a spiritual dimension.

There are three paths: the path of sensual pleasure, the path of self-mortification, and the middle path. The whole of the Buddha's teachings can be seen as a destruction of sensual desire. Remember, this doesn't mean there's no tastiness to our food anymore. It means the end of greed. To end greed, we also need to end its twin, hatred.

Self-mortification, thinking that the body and mind are bad and evil and must somehow be destroyed, is wrong understanding. There is nothing evil in nature. Nature is perfect just as it is. It is our view of things that causes suffering, and there is no escape in self-hatred or repression or by means of self-mortification, such as long fasts and so on. The middle path is simply to understand the crucial point that our greed and hatred are the roots of our misery. Once we've understood that, we have gone a long way to destroying our delusions. Our wisdom is growing.

Over Christmas and New Year, for instance, everyone drinks and eats so much, we get fat. That's the path of sensual pleasure. Afterwards, we worry about cholesterol and heart attacks. We starve ourselves to eat less and cut out what we like. That's the path of mortification. The middle path is to eat when we are hungry and until the body has had enough.

The middle path is hedged, both by the thorny bush of moral laws which safeguard us from doing anything unwholesome, unskillful or harmful, and the flowering bushes of the perfections that perfume and beautify our journey. The path itself is our steps, our actions, what we do and how we do. It is the meditative life in which sitting meditation trains us to live in action in a mindful and careful way.

In the second of the Buddha's talks, given to the same five monks, he is concerned to extend their understanding of the underlying characteristics of human nature. Delusion causes us to identify with our pleasures. We think that's what we are. We think that's what life is about. This delusion is the theory upon which our greeds and hatreds are founded. To understand the nature of our delusion is paramount if we are going to achieve the right understanding without which all our intentions and all our actions will be leading us towards suffering, not away from it.

The Buddha converses with his disciples. What do you think? Is the body permanent or impermanent? Impermanent, Lord. And is this impermanence something that brings happiness or unhappiness? Unhappiness, Lord. And is it right to understand what is impermanent and what destroys happiness as mine, me or myself? No, Lord.

So he questions them concerning the whole mind, its feelings, thoughts, emotions and even consciousness. All are not permanent. Do not bring happiness and do not constitute a me or soul or a self. If we really understand this, that there is nothing in our body and minds that we can hold on to, since it is all arising and passing away, if we really understand that we can't call any of it a permanent me or ego or soul or

self, then, says the Buddha, understanding this, a wise noble disciple loses his passion for things of the body, his passion for feelings, for thoughts, for emotions, for consciousness. When he loses the passion for these things, his greeds and obsessions fade away. When greeds and obsessions fade away, the heart is liberated. When the heart is liberated, then he comes to know this is liberation. He understands this is the end of birth. The holy life has been completed. What needed to be done has been done. There is no more rebirth for me.

Please notice, the heart is not lost with the destruction of desire. It is liberated. This talk was so clear to the five disciples that they were all totally liberated as their new understanding coupled with their meditation practice came to fruition. There and then they were released from their delusions.

Becoming more and more aware of the changing nature of our lives will always undermine our attachment to it. When someone dear to us dies, it is extremely painful. Yet if the mourning process is successful, most of our sorrow will have passed within a year. Within five or ten years, there may not even be a sad memory. Instead, we will remember the person with warmth, joy and gratitude. Virtually all suffering caused by that separation will disappear.

This is what the Buddha taught. If we can accept that life is impermanent and uncertain, our attachment to it will be questioned. As we come to see that life is forever on the move, we won't hold on to anything. We expect things to change, be it for the better or the worse. It doesn't matter anymore. What matters is how we react to it, how we are affected by it. It is of no use to our dead loved ones if we spend the rest of our lives in misery at their passing away. It's hardly what they'd want. They'd want us to get on with living. That's what the Buddha taught. Don't hold on to life. Just get on with living here and now. But with right understanding and right intention, of course.

The path that Buddhists follow, the middle path, also contains different levels of commitment and insight. A person who experiences *Nibbāna* is known as a *sotāpanna* or stream entrant. It is said of a *sotāpanna* that her or his faith in the Buddha *Dhamma Saṅgha* is unshakeable. For now they know by their own experience the third noble truth, the end of suffering.

Unfortunately, however, this is not the end of training. Even though total liberation to such a person is assured, there are three further noble paths to be obtained. The second is called *sakadāgāmi*, and at this stage the bonds of attachment and hatred are only loosened. It is only on achieving the third path, *anāgāmi*, that these bonds that tie us to sensual pleasures are finally cut. Even so, the training must still go on. Final liberation is achieved when the attainment of the *arahat*, which literally means to have killed all enemies. The enemies, of course, are greed, hatred and delusion.

These four types of persons are known as the noble community, *Ariya Saṅgha*. They are the Buddhist saints. When a Buddhist bows three times towards a shrine, he's taking refuge in the Buddha, the historical personage, and the enlightenment, the *Dhamma*, the doctrine, and the *Saṅgha*, this community of saints. Taking refuge means to put one's trust in the triple gem, or the three jewels, as they are often

called. This act of refuge, plus the taking of the five training rules, is how a person becomes a Buddhist. But the formula is repeated by devout Buddhists every day, and it is common to make a special effort every quarter moon, approximately once a week. These four days, per lunar month, are known as *uposatha* days. Lay people often go to the monastery on these days to meditate, or just to spend a quiet, reflective day within monastic grounds.

For those who have not attained one of the paths, there is an understanding that if certain teachings are truly understood, development towards the first *ariya* path, *sotāpanna*, the stream entrant to intuit *Nibbāna*, is assured. That teaching is called the light of the analytical knowledge of causation.

There are three types of wrong understanding concerning the law of causation, the law of cause and effect, the law of *kamma*. The first is to say that existence, life, what we do, what happens to us, arises without a cause. Right understanding states that everything happens because of something else. Everything is caused. Everything is the effect of a cause.

The second is to say that existence, life, what we do, what happens to us, arises spontaneously or because of some deity. This is also wrong understanding. Every birth and action is conditioned by past actions.

Thirdly, to say that only past actions condition the present and future is not right understanding either. To believe this would be to believe in predestination, in sealed fate. In reality, the present moment and the future are also affected by our present decisions now. If this were not possible, we would not be able to affect any change within ourselves. We would simply be doomed by fate. It is knowing that we can take certain control, especially of our decision-making, that makes the whole process of purification and eventual liberation possible.

In other words, to have truly understood the law of *kamma* is to have the light which will lead meditators out of the dark. The Buddha talked of four kinds of persons: those going from dark to dark, from light to dark, the unfortunates, and those going from dark to light, and from light to light, the fortunates. Understanding that we can be in control of this process through our will means we have the ability to start moving in the right way.

Understanding that unwholesome thoughts, words and actions produce the same, and that wholesome thoughts, words and actions produce the same, means we can now see the light. At least, at this level, we're beginning to see the connection between what we think, say and do, and what happens to us. Even if the outer consequences of our actions are not immediately obvious, by our meditative practice we come to know their immediate effect on the mind and heart. If I'm angry with someone, maybe he'll try and get his own back. Of that I'm not sure. I don't know what the outer effect will be. But when I meditate and see how this anger affects me and myself, then at least I'm aware of its negative and unhealthy effects on me. I notice the effects are quite the opposite if I'm kind and gentle and helpful. Slowly, this analytical knowledge of causation begins to be our guiding light.

Then we can say such a person is a *chūla sotāpanna*, a lesser stream entrant. We can be sure that such a person will try to develop the perfections and practice meditation. The later commentaries on the scriptures assure us that such a person will not end up in situations where his training will not be able to continue. In other words, his mentality and actions will lead to situations conducive to training.

To guide such a person, the Buddha clearly laid out the Noble Eightfold Path. By following this, especially the *sīla* – right action, right speech and right livelihood – the fourth type of wisdom arises, wisdom in action, compassion. For this is also the aim of any meditation, to help other fellow beings towards the enlightenment. This doesn't mean to preach Buddhism, it means to help others in whatever capacity a person feels able. To guide a child in moral understanding, to feed a sick person and comfort them with encouraging words, to listen to the problems of some friend or colleague, to give to good causes. Whatever is compassionate is to practice the perfections.

It's a two-way stream. Learning to be patient with the angry child is to learn to be patient with our own internal worrying childish thoughts. Learning how to care for and comfort ourselves is to learn how to care for and comfort others. So this is it.

This is all the Buddha would have us do: to study ourselves, our lives, to make the connections, to decide to follow what is wise, to cease from harm, to do good, to purify the mind. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.

Like most things, easy to say, hard to do. But it's worth the effort, for the fruits of our labour are sweet. The middle path really does bring peace, joy, love and harmony, and in the end, liberation—an end to all suffering.

When the Buddha was asked, "What is the taste of the Dharma?" he said, "The taste of the Dharma was freedom."

Well, I hope you found this talk interesting and helpful. May all of you be happy and peaceful. May all of you attain the nirvanic peace within.

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