

# The Fourth Noble Truth

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 9 min read

---

The Fourth Noble Truth – The Way to the Cessation of Dukkha.

When we get a glimpse of the peace that comes with letting go of the dukkha-drama of our life, we want to steer our life towards Nibbana. This final truth clarifies the way we can do this. The way is also termed the ‘Noble Eight-fold Path’. The final week’s notes of the previous course spelled out each of the eight steps in detail, while this reflection considers the broad divisions of the path: Wisdom, Morality and Concentration.

Wisdom:

Buddhist path builds trust / faith based on our own experience one as opposed to requiring blind faith in the teacher / scriptures. We might start off with the willingness to give this path a fair try, to see whether it works. To the extent that we prove for ourselves that suffering comes from the desire that things be other than as they are right now, we build a faith in the Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings). But we can’t simply hold on to our present understanding! Try it for yourself: the next time you find yourself angry or afraid for example, bring to mind your belief that the desire that things be otherwise is the cause of this anger or fear? Does this belief allow you to come to peace? If it does, then your faith is deep enough to match the situation. But very often the thoughts prompting anger or fear don’t simply dissolve and we find ourselves justifying our anger, falling back into fear. The challenge then is to discover whether in this situation, the four noble truths apply. So far, this process has always taught me how to loosen up around habitual thoughts and attitudes. For example, meditating on the experience of fear might teach me to let go of persistent thoughts like ‘I can’t ...’ which are based on self doubt, or thoughts like ‘they won’t...’ which are based on distrust of others. After a while these thoughts might change to ‘Perhaps I can ...’ or ‘Maybe they would ...’ as fear edges its way towards courage. I find myself more willing to go beyond my comfort zone and discover what I can do or what others will accept. Similarly meditating on anger might teach me to loosen up around thoughts like ‘Its so unfair ...’ or ‘They shouldn’t have ...’ which are all based on the assumption that my beliefs are the true ones, that my wishes and needs and agenda are of greatest importance in the world. I then find myself more willing to see the broader perspective and work with the way things are. Although it’s humiliating to discover (yet again!) that it was my narrow perspective that was causing so much turmoil, there is always relief in coming back into harmony with the world. I discover again that turning towards the dukkha with curiosity,

to discover its cause, leads me to happiness. Thus my faith in the four noble truths is deepened with each challenge in life.

Wisdom also cultivates happiness within this world from an understanding of the law of kamma. Kamma is essentially an act of will which generates thought, speech or action. If we think, speak and act so as to promote harmony, then we ourselves grow more happy. If we think, speak or act so as to promote enmity and division, then we ourselves grow more hateful and divisive. It is the motive that matters as regards our future happiness. If we intend to do good, then even if harm comes of our action, we still promote our own happiness. What we are essentially cultivating is a mind that is tending in the direction of friendly good-will, and friendliness is a pleasant, happy mental state. On the other hand whenever we intentionally create enmity, we are cultivating in ourselves the tendency towards hatred. The mind filled with hate is not happy – it is tightly controlled, sees things only from its own view-point, and fearful of the enemy it perceives.

We can also reflect on the wisdom of various attitudes e.g. the attitude of letting go, or relinquishing. How much happier could life be if we were able to relax our grip on our wealth and possessions for example? Do we need every new fashion that comes on the market? Do we need the latest model of car? I remember hearing that the fastest any of us can go is at the pace of a bicycle! If we add up the time we put into earning enough money to pay for the car, its maintenance, insurance, petrol etc as well as the time spent driving, searching for a parking spot, washing the car etc we find we are actually driving at around 10 miles an hour! We put lots and lots of unacknowledged effort into holding on to our wealth and possessions. Are there any we could let go of in favour of a simpler life? How about other areas of over-indulgence e.g. alcohol, food, drugs? Would moderation bring more happiness into life?

Similarly we can reflect on the benefits of the attitudes of good will and compassion. Do I feel happier when I am wishing others well or when I am feeling enmity? Which would I prefer to cultivate as a habit? When I see someone in difficulty, does it feel better to ignore them or to see if I can find some way to help? Which would be better to cultivate as a response? Reflecting like this we can build up attitudes of good will and compassion to guide us through life. These are wise attitudes which bring about our own happiness and the happiness of others.

Thus wisdom forms the first division of the path. A form of happiness comes of understanding ourselves and the world better. It gives us the confidence to act out our part in life. This brings us to the next division of the path: morality.

Morality:

When we think of morality we usually think of obligation and constraint – perhaps even of punishment. We can see ourselves as inherently bad for having desires and lusts, and

the moral code as a form of well-deserved punishment for our badness. But in the Eightfold path morality is intended as a means towards deeper happiness.

The underlying idea is that we are happier when we are in harmony. There are many levels to this harmony. Within ourselves we achieve greater psychological harmony when we speak and act with kindness. On the other hand, if we habitually use violence to get our own way, or snap at others angrily or sneer sarcastically, we damage ourselves psychologically. Our inner harmony or disharmony is usually reflected in our social lives – habitual violence and anger breeds dysfunctional family and social relationships. In turn dysfunctional relationships feed into social unrest, street violence and crime. At the national and international level, distrust and greed can lead to war. On the other hand, kindness breeds happy, supportive relationships, which promote friendliness, co-operation and trust at the broader social level. Society works better when it is peopled by those who are motivated by good-will, and this good-will also generates international co-operation and willingness to share the world's resources.

The eight-fold path invites us to promote harmony in our speech, our actions, and our livelihoods. Do we ever lie for example? Lying disrupts social cohesion as we no longer know who or what to trust. Lies also tend to proliferate – what starts off as a small concealment can multiply into a labyrinth of deceit as we defend ourselves against accusations of false-hood. By contrast, a person who is known to be truthful is usually respected and trusted, and doesn't have the stress of concealment. Do we speak harshly or gently? Harsh speech tends to undermine others which usually means they are less able to perform well. This invites further harshness and so the knot of dukkha tightens.

Gentle, timely speech can bring out the best in others, and so the knot of dukkha unravels.

Our actions too can promote harmony or discord. At the most discordant we can kill another human being out of cruelty, hatred or greed. This has obvious repercussions for suffering. It also dismisses as irrelevant the Buddha's claim that all human beings have the potential for enlightenment in this very lifetime. Killing or harming animals for such motives is also immoral as animals feel suffering and wish to live. To promote harmony we act kindly and compassionately to other humans and to animals. We can be honest in our dealings and even generous. We can avoid the many interpersonal difficulties which come of sexual misconduct e.g. the deep misery that can result from child sexual abuse, or the jealousy and mistrust that can come of infidelity.

What value does our livelihood promote in the world? Does it contribute to a more just society, to joy, to education? Or does it promote greed, stupidity, or even hatred? Often the answer is somewhat mixed – e.g. even working with the health services where the principle is one of compassion, we might worry about the greed or aggression sometimes

evident in the health care sector or the pharmaceutical industry. In our complex society we cannot isolate ourselves completely from its less savoury aspects of e.g. material greed. However we can reflect deeply enough to see how we can minimise our contribution to suffering within our livelihood, and how we can maximise our contribution to well-being, joy and contentment.

When our speech, actions and livelihood are in harmony with our inner wisdom, then we can relax more easily, we can focus on the higher development of our mind in meditation. This brings us to the final division of the path: concentration.

Concentration:

Good concentration allows us to focus all our attention on the task at hand – whether this is reading, gardening, cooking or whatever. When our attention is thus focussed on the question of what causes dukkha, and what diminishes dukkha, we find the answer in our own experience. Concentration is one of the seven Factors of Enlightenment. These can be symbolised as a flock of wild geese. Mindfulness is always the lead goose. Then on one flank we have the factors which help to calm the mind – concentration, equanimity and tranquillity. On the other flank we have the factors which stimulate the mind – energy, investigation of Dhamma, and the joy of interest. They are all mutually supportive, so each time we develop any of these we are also strengthening our concentration.

Deep concentration is disturbed by the hindrances<sup>1</sup> and so concentration is strengthened every time we let go of a hindrance. Thus developing concentration needs a sustained effort - to cultivate the factors of enlightenment and let go of the hindrances. For example, the effort to let go of the wandering mind: Every time we find ourselves lost in thought we make a gentle yet determined resolution to stay focused on present experience. This develops mindfulness and concentration and lets go of whatever hindrance is driving the wandering mind. We give ourselves some calm focus for our attention e.g. the breath, thereby developing tranquillity and letting go of restlessness. If we find ourselves falling into rage we try to calm ourselves down before engaging with the difficulty, thereby developing equanimity as well as letting go of aversion. We can

1 Desire, aversion, sloth & torpor, restlessness and doubt.

read the Dhamma or go on retreat, thereby developing our interest in investigating the Dhamma and letting go of sceptical doubt. We can find some way of mindfully noting the experience of drowsiness rather than falling into sleep, thereby developing energy as well as letting go of sloth & torpor. All these are examples of efforts we can make to develop what is supportive and let go of what is disruptive for our concentration.

Mindfulness is particularly important here. Mindfulness involves an intimate, non judgemental knowing of whatever we are experiencing – knowing the feeling of the foot

on the ground for example. This increases our sensitivity to sensory experience as well as our own emotional life. When mindfulness is highly developed we become sensitive to the first signs of a hindrance which makes it easier to let go of. Similarly we recognize a slight imbalance between tranquillity and joy for example<sup>2</sup>, thereby preventing our mind from sinking into a peaceful stupor (too much tranquillity) or over-excitement (too much joy). When mindfulness is strong enough to keep the hindrances at bay, and keep the factors of enlightenment in balance, we can concentrate all our attention in present experience. This gives the conditions for insight – a first-hand experience of truth. We see for ourselves how dukkha arises and how it ceases. When we eventually see this at the deepest possible level, we access Nibbana. All sense of imperfection or discord in life will then be over and we will be in peaceful harmony with all things. Surely that is a worthy goal for life!

Thus the final division of the path cultivates wisdom – which brings us back to the first division. And so we can reflect more clearly on the way we want to live our life, which in turn affects our moral behaviour, which stabilizes our mind for concentration and so on. The eight-fold path turns and turns upon itself as our life evolves into deeper harmony with the truth that liberates us from all discord and brings us to peace within ourselves and with the world.

<sup>2</sup> The two flanks of the Factors of Enlightenment need to be in balance for mindfulness to be stable – e.g. too much energy and we tend towards restlessness, too much tranquillity and we lose interest in our ultimate goal which is to fully understand dukkha and thereby know how to escape from it.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*