THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS CONCEPT

The conceptual structure called The Four Noble Truths, the *Cattari Ariyasaccani* (kah-tah-ree ahr-yah-sah-chah-nee), is translated from Pali as *the Truths of the Noble Ones* or *the Realities of the Spiritually Worthy Ones*. It is considered to be a fundamental way to understand Buddhism, no matter what the institutional tradition is. A The term *Truth* can be understood to mean *The Way Reality Operates*, rather than indicating honesty. The term *Noble* involves redefining nobility as the way meditation makes spiritual aspirations realizable. Prior to the onset of Buddhism in that culture, nobility was reserved for those born into certain clans, namely the priestly and military/political ones. Understood from a Buddhist perspective, nobility was earned through the cultivation of an ethical lifestyle and the development of mental discipline, no matter which clan one was born into.

### It has been assumed that the Four Noble Truths originated from what has been traditionally understood as the first discourse of the Buddha after his Awakening. The Pali name for this teaching is *The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (dah-mah-chah-kah-pah-vah-tah-nah soo-tah), translated as the *Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dharma Discourse*. Several contemporary scholars of Buddhism propose that the full presentation of the basic concepts contained within the discourse were not actually uttered by the Buddha during his first teaching, but were compiled over time, perhaps even after the passing of the Buddha. Here is how the Four Noble Truths are described in the sutta, supposedly for the first time, as translated by Thanissaro:

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vārāṇasī in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks:

“There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure in connection with sensuality: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathagata—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.

“And what is the middle way realized by the Tathagata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding? Precisely this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the middle way realized by the Tathagata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Here are clarifications regarding some of the terms described above:

1. *Tathagata* (tah-tah-gah-tah) is how the Awakened Siddhartha described his “Buddhaness”; it can be translated as “Mastery of Suchness”, with suchness referring to direct experiential awareness of the absence of an enduring/autonomous self—total liberation from distress and confusion.
2. *The Middle Way* not only is a “middle ground” between sensual self-indulgence and sensual self-punishment; it also represents turning away from believing there is an enduring/autonomous self that is associated with either lifestyle. Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, grew up in a very self-indulgent environment, with all the sensual gratification and social privilege available in that part of the world. Apparently, he realized the “hollowness” of that way of living, and left it all behind, becoming a *sramana* (sah-mah-nah), *a religious renunciate*. During his time as a renunciate, he trained to experience very highly concentrated states of consciousness. Additionally, he practiced severely punitive routines, common in that group, hoping that extreme self-denial would lead to liberation from distress and confusion—it didn’t work. He then resumed moderate eating and other behaviors, and this became the middle way.
3. *Stressful* is Thanissaro’s translation of *dukkha* (doo-kah), rather than the traditional rendering as *suffering*. I prefer to describe this as *distress and confusion*. *Distress* points to the emotional imbalance, either wanting or not wanting an experience, while *confusion* refers to the way the brain naturally creates an internal narrative which is the belief there is an enduring/autonomous self.
4. *The Five Clinging-Aggregates* describe the various functions that comprise a personality: Form (sensory stimulation), Feeling (Instinctual, impulsive reactivity), perceptions, mind conditioning factors, and consciousness. These five functions are not inherently stressful, but, when affected by craving/clinging, create the subjective “delusional” belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self.

Later in the sutta, a transitional process is described from conceptual knowledge through direct realization to liberation from the mistaken identification—first, conceptual understanding regarding each of the truths, followed by subjective awareness of the experience described by the concept, but without craving/clinging, and finally the realization of liberation of subjective experience from distress and confusion, that is, nirvana, the unconditioned. Again, a quote from Thanissaro’s translation:

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended’ … ‘This noble truth of stress has been comprehended.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the origination of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned’ … ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress has been abandoned.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the cessation of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress is to be realized’ … ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress has been realized.’

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress’ … ‘This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress is to be developed’ … ‘This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress has been developed.’

The five stages mentioned above describe a progression that is intended to foster liberation from dukkha:

1. *Vision* represents a quality of aware attention that is not afflicted by craving. We can consider vision in the sense that there is a particular perspective, presented by the conceptual structure of the sutta—a goal that is recognizable because of the conceptual structure. This is the First Noble Truth.
2. *Insight* is an informed and non-reactive awareness regarding that vision. I can envision what liberation from distress and confusion about a situation might look like, followed by insight about the ways and means for achieving liberation. This requires the ability to recognize and renounce the effect of craving/clinging and is the Second Noble Truth.
3. *Discernment* is the ability to be clearly aware of the elements of attention and action that are either fostering liberation or not, skillfully rejecting unwholesome mind conditioning elements, thereby allowing for realizing the vision, the knowledge described below. The ultimate consequence of this realization is Nirvana, the unconditioned experience of reality.
4. *Knowledge* is direct, subjective affirmation of liberation—not just a conceptual vision, but rather the realization of the vision, *Illumination*, which is a quality of vivid clarity accompanied by tranquility. The mind becomes more buoyant and peaceful, free from craving and clinging. This is the Third Noble Truth

I have proposed the notion that the Buddha was the first “psychologist” in human history, as his analysis of the human condition and the ways and means to cultivate the development of a more advanced way of living are still applicable today. My practice as a psychotherapist was organized around helping clients objectively recognize the characteristics of their distress—anxiety, depression, addiction, relationship conflicts, etc., as conditioned by either an underlying physical condition or as the result of previous life experiences, not as an unalterable, self-defining fact. This analysis could support realizing the First and Second Noble Truths, but not expressly related to Buddhist concepts. The client could then “recondition” his or her self-identity in ways that contradicted the diagnosed condition and work toward a new “liberated” way of being in the world. If the person was amenable to mindfulness and/or lovingkindness meditation, perhaps along with appropriate medication, their ability to make beneficial changes would be enhanced.

I believe the principles and practices described in the very large accumulation of wisdom found in the various schools of Buddhism are a pathway for humanity to evolve beyond the ill-considered and impulsive reactivity that has dominated our history. We now have a much more sophisticated understanding regarding the complexity of the universe and our place within it. With this insight comes a heightened awareness of the negative consequences of ongoing greed, hatred and ignorance. My hope is that Buddhism can have an increasingly beneficial effect on how we understand our role on the planet from a scientific, sociocultural and spiritual perspective and then be able to apply the five stages described above.

This era is perhaps the most crucial time in human history. There is mounting tension within and among people and traditional social norms are becoming more disrupted. The environmental equilibrium of the planet is much more thoroughly understood as interdependent, and the principles and practices associated with socially engaged Buddhism can have a significant effect on these issues going forward. My personal practice will not avert the ongoing trajectory of the world, but social psychological research strongly suggests that when a person can develop a well-informed, ethical, insightful, disciplined, and purposeful lifestyle while contending with these challenging circumstances, she or he is more resilient to stress and is more creative and productive in adapting to the stresses. This internal transformation also beneficially affects all the interpersonal relationships such a person encounters. I hope this information is helpful for you in this regard.

The next several meetings will involve systematic reviews of the Four Noble Truths, with particular attention to the Fourth Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path.