THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS CONCEPT

The conceptual structure called The Four Noble Truths, the *Cattari Ariyasaccani* (kah-tah-ree ahr-yah-sah-chah-nee) in Pali, is considered to be a fundamental way to understand Buddhism, no matter what the institutional school is. A translation from the Pali is *the Truths of the Noble Ones* or *the Realities of the Spiritually Worthy Ones*. 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, 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, 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 *samana* (sah-mah-nah), *a religious renunciate*. During his time as a renunciate, he practiced severely punitive routines, common in that group, hoping for 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 the rendering of *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* is an important conceptual view associated with how a personality is organized. The aggregates are Form (seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and tactile stimuli), Feeling, (a primary, emotional reaction to stimuli), Perception (a primary cognitive recognition associated with the feeling tone of the stimuli), Mental Fabrication (the way Feeling and Perception are associated with prior experience, creating a self-experience)—these processes are all reflected in the fifth aggregate, Consciousness (the flow of selfing experiences). The dukkha is created by identification with the flow as representing an enduring/autonomous self. The Tathagata’s personality structure was the ongoing manifestation of the five aggregates without that mistaken identification.

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, and finally the realization of liberation of subjective experience from distress and confusion, that is, nirvana, the unconditioned:

“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. 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.
2. *Insight* is an informed awareness regarding that vision. I can envision what liberation from distress and confusion about a situation, followed by insight about the ways and means for achieving liberation.
3. *Discernment* is the ability to be clearly aware of the elements of attention and action that are either fostering liberation or not, allowing for realizing the vision.
4. *Knowledge* is direct, subjective affirmation of liberation—not just a vision, but rather the realization of the vision.
5. *Illumination* is the liberated consciousness, vivid clarity accompanied by tranquility.

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.

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 have a much more sophisticated understanding of 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 increasing 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. My personal practice will not avert the ongoing trajectory of the world, but social psychological research strongly suggests that when a person is insightful, disciplined and purposeful while contending with the stresses of life, she or he is more resilient to stress and is more creative and productive in adapting to the stresses. 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.