

The 3rd and 4th Noble Truths

(modified excerpt from the book *Why Meditate?* by Khun Reinhard)

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1. Introduction

All of the Buddha's teaching is concerned with the unsatisfactory nature of human life. It is summarized in what are called the *Four Noble Truths*. These are:

1. There is suffering, discontentment in this life (the Buddha did not say that life is suffering).
2. There are causes for this suffering to arise (if there is no cause for suffering, then suffering will not arise).
3. There is a way out of suffering (by avoiding or eliminating the causes).
4. The way leading out of suffering (*The Noble Eightfold Path*).

The talks by Tan Dhammavidu, available for downloading from this website, cover the 1st and 2nd of the *Four Noble Truths*. This text will give some explanation about the 3rd and 4th *Noble Truths*.

The 2nd *Noble Truth* gives us the origin of our unsatisfactory states of mind, which is *Craving* as the near cause and *Ignorance* at the root of it. To reduce or eliminate our spiritual suffering we have to reduce or eliminate *Ignorance* by practising the *Noble Eightfold Path* or the 4th *Noble Truth*. Without developing the *Noble Eightfold Path* there would be no end to suffering.

The 3rd *Noble Truth*, the cessation of suffering, and the 4th *Noble Truth*, the way leading to the cessation of suffering, will be looked on simultaneously.

The complete cessation of suffering will lead to a mind which is peaceful and calm. This state of mind is called *Nibbana* (in Pali) and *Nirvana* (in Sanskrit). A mind in this condition is said to be unshakeable, it is not concocting thoughts any longer, is not subjected to any conditioning process, is said to be luminous, bright, clear, clean, and calm. The mind is without the functions of greed, hatred and delusion and their subdivisions, without fear, anxieties and doubts. There is no unnecessary thinking about this, thinking about that. The dedicated lay person may experience temporary forms of *Nibbana*, but it needs an enlightened person

to be in this state permanently.

Reaching lower levels of eliminating suffering is already beautiful and rewarding. We need not be discontented by not reaching the top of the mountain (*Nibbana*). We can enjoy what is to the right and left without losing direction. Having a mind which is more balanced and calm, which tries to take life as it is, which still gets happy and sad, which still has certain likes and dislikes, but which is content in the present moment more and more frequently and still aspires to perfect itself, is worth striving to achieve. There has to be some joy and happiness on the path, otherwise we will get disheartened or unbearable for everybody else.

Practising the *Noble Eightfold Path* is the means to reach the top of the mountain. To follow it is to live in harmony with the natural law, with others, with society, and with the environment. Another expression for the *Noble Eightfold Path* is the *Middle Way*, the middle way between self-indulgence and self-mortification; it is the mind in its original state. Walking the path means being balanced, doing the right thing in the right way at the right time.

2. The Noble Eightfold Path

The elements of the *Noble Eightfold Path* are usually grouped in three sections in the following order:

1. Wisdom (spiritual aspect, may be associated with the head)
 - Right Understanding or Right View
 - Right Aspiration or Right Intention
2. Morality (physical aspect, may be associated with the body)
 - Right Speech
 - Right Action
 - Right Livelihood
3. Concentration (mental aspect, may be associated with the heart)
 - Right Effort
 - Right Mindfulness
 - Right Concentration or Right Meditation

The fact that they are listed in the given order does not mean that they have to be developed in a linear way or in sequence. They have to be cultivated together, maybe with Wisdom and Morality at the base. In his talks Ajahn Buddhadasa used to refer to a rope made of eight strands when talking about the *Noble Eightfold Path*. Each strand alone would be too weak, but if woven together, they are strong enough to fulfil the task.

Ajahn Sumedho talks about the interconnectedness of the elements of the *Noble Eightfold Path*: “You can use your body as a kind of chart, a symbol of the Eightfold Path. We have Wisdom (the head), Morality (the body) and Concentration (the heart). These three are integrated, working together for realization and supporting each other like a triploid. One is not dominating the other. [...] There’s a sense of bliss, of serenity; there is perfect harmony between the intellect, the instincts and the emotions.”¹

All the elements of the *Noble Eightfold Path* start with ‘right’. This is to warn that the opposite is possible as well. A pickpocket for example, who is going to steal someone’s purse,

¹ Ajahn Sumedho, *The Four Noble Truths*, Amaravati Publications 1992, ISBN 1 870205 10 3, p. 62)

will be very concentrated, but this kind of concentration, meant to harm others, is not regarded as right but as wrong concentration. Right means correct according to its goal, which ultimately is *Nibbana*. To be 'right', the intention or action has to aim for beneficial results; it must lead towards the end of suffering.

2.1 Wisdom

With realizing that there are unsatisfactory experiences in life and having learned about the cause for their arising, we already have some right understanding. We have *Right Understanding* when we are able to see the truth of nature, its ever-changing, impermanent processes devoid of stability, devoid of self. It is only when we have come to a sufficient understanding of the truth of life that we can have the necessary aspiration to end its suffering. This is *Right Intention*, or right wanting; the intention to live life in a way that does not allow suffering to arise. It is the intention to be free of greed, to be free of ill will, to be free of harming or violence. According to Ajahn Buddhadasa one has to have (wise) craving in order to get rid of (ignorant) craving in the sense that one uses a thorn to remove another thorn stuck in one's foot.

Right Intention or *Right Aspiration* or 'wise' wanting should not be confused with 'wrong' intention or with the desire to get or to become something. The latter are also forms of wanting, but wanting that is ignorantly motivated, selfishly motivated, leading to suffering rather than away from it. 'Wrong' intention is based in delusion rather than right knowledge, *Right Understanding*.

Wisdom is the result of penetrating into the *Three characteristics of life*, into their true nature which are *Impermanence*, *Distress* and *Not-Self*. *Insight* - or *Vipassana* - meditation is the method to understand these characteristics.

2.2 Morality

Right Understanding and *Right Aspiration* will result in Wisdom or *Right Thinking*. These are the forerunners of *Right Speech*. *Right Speech* then will lead to *Right Action*. Together with *Right Livelihood* they form the moral aspect of the *Middle Way* and are indispensable for harmonious, peaceful human relationships and societies. This moral aspect is fulfilled when the five basic precepts are kept. These are:

- Abstain from killing (being completely non-violent, harmless).
- Abstain from stealing (not to take what is not given freely).
- Abstain from sexual misconduct (e.g. adultery, abuse, sex with minors).
- Abstain from false speech (from telling lies, from slander, from insult, from talking frivolously, from exaggerating).
- Abstain from intoxicating the mind (alcohol, drugs, overindulgence in TV and internet, wrong friends...)

People are quite conscious about what they take into their body; they look for a balanced diet, free from contaminations by chemicals. Looking for the proper 'food for the mind' is equally important. Put wholesome ideas into your mind and your mind will return beneficial ones. One could say: if one takes only rubbish into the mind, then only rubbish will come out of it.

Another, more detailed description of keeping moral virtues are the ten wholesome courses

of action. These are:

- Bodily actions
 1. Avoid destruction of life and be anxious for the welfare of others.
 2. Avoid stealing, violating the right to private property of others.
 3. Avoid sexual misconduct.

- Verbal actions
 4. Avoid lying, knowingly lying for the sake of advantage.
 5. Avoid malicious speech, slandering, back biting. Use speech that makes for harmony.
 6. Avoid harsh language, words of abuse. Speak gently, lovingly, and courteously.
 7. Avoid frivolous, fruitless talk. Speak at the right time, say what is useful.

- Mental actions
 8. Be without covetousness or envy, not wanting to possess others' belongings.
 9. Be free from ill will, malice and animosity, having good wishes for others.
 10. Have right views (right understanding).

Right Livelihood gives some basic guidelines of how to make a living without harming yourself or others. The Buddha recommended not to trade with

- Weapons, including instruments and devices for killing (not always easy to know e.g. with electronic parts).
- Human beings (slavery, prostitution, child labour).
- Animals to be killed for food.
- Alcohol, other drugs and poison.

While this gives us a guide, there is more to it. We need to know what is right in taking food (type, quality and quantity), being generous, doing everything to the best of one's ability, respecting the rights of others and the environment, and so forth.

The moral facet of the *Noble Eightfold Path* aims for a peaceful, calm and beneficial life without remorse or having to regret verbal or bodily actions or even thoughts and imaginings in the mind.

2.3 Concentration

We need effort in everyday life, we need effort to stay on the *Middle Way* and develop wholesome qualities, to ward off unwholesome ones. Buddhism speaks of *Four great efforts*. These are:

- The effort to prevent unwholesome qualities from arising.
- The effort to abandon unwholesome qualities already arisen.
- The effort to develop beneficial qualities.
- The effort to maintain beneficial qualities already arisen.

Especially the practise to develop the mind by means of meditation takes a lot of determination and effort.

Right mindfulness is to be always mindful before thinking, before speaking, and before acting. It is grounded in the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness* which means we should be aware in each moment of:

- Every activity of the body (e.g. posture, breathing, sensations, etc.).
- Our feelings (happy, unhappy, neutral).
- The conditions of the mind (e.g. lust, anger, love, delusion, concentration).
- Mental phenomena (e.g. *Five Hindrances*, *Five Aggregates*, sense-contacts).

Larry Rosenberg gives the following explanation about mindfulness: “Mindfulness is often likened to a mirror; it simply reflects what is there. It is not a process of thinking; it is preconceptual, before thought. There is all the difference in the world between thinking and knowing that thought is happening, as thoughts chase each other thorough the mind and the process is mirrored back to us. [...]

Mindfulness is unbiased. It is not for or against anything, just like a mirror which does not judge what it reflects. Mindfulness has no goal other than seeing itself. It doesn't try to add to what's happening or subtract from it, to improve it in any way.”²

Awareness in each moment is the key feature to reduce unhappy states of mind. The mind tends to wander all over the place and usually it will either go into the past, reliving and/or regretting experiences or it will worry about the future, imagining all kinds of situations that may occur. We can spend the whole day fantasizing, very often experiencing fear of situations which will never occur, getting excited about something that will never happen. The mind does not like to be in the present moment where it is most needed, e.g. to prevent so called ‘accidents’ many of which happen because we are not attentive and the mind is in a different place to the body. The body is always in the present moment, it cannot be in the past or future, and if the mind would stay with the body, being aware of its activities, all the fruitless and harmful fantasizing would not happen, and all the unnecessary fears and excitements would not be experienced. But many of us might even regard this as a drawback because we have made it a habit; we like to get away from the difficulties and boredom of the present moment by indulging in our pleasant thoughts rather than confront life as it really happens. The present moment is the only moment. The past is gone, the future beyond our reach and all our thinking about past or future can happen only now, in the present moment.

The last factor is Right or Perfect Concentration. It has three characteristics:

- Purity; the mind is pure and free from the contamination of the defilements.
- Stability; the mind is steady, buoyant.
- Alertness; the mind is active, refined, fast.

The concentrated mind is firmly established on a single (meditation) object. There are many levels (up to the 4th formless *jhana* (absorption, very deep levels of concentration) and many different objects (40 in Buddhism) in the development of concentration.

There is difference between mindfulness and concentration. To be mindful means to be aware of anything that happens to the body and the mind (see the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*), e.g. to be aware of the present sense-contact. The concentrated mind is only aware of its meditation object. In the higher *jhanas* it is absorbed in its object to an extent

² **Larry Rosenberg**, *Breath by Breath*, Shambala Classics, Boston 2004, ISBN 978-1-59030-136-4, p. 15)

that it is unaware of anything else.

3. TECHNIQUES AIMED AT ENDING SPIRITUAL SUFFERING

If we want to put an end to at least the crude forms of suffering, it is essential to define our goals in life. If we are not prepared to keep our lives reasonably calm, our meditation practise will not be very successful. Living life as a workaholic, being stressed out by all kinds of leisure activities, partying every second day and trying to balance this with 30 minutes of meditation every other day will lead nowhere. As a preliminary we have to feel the urge to live life in a calm, peaceful and balanced way. Then we may start with our spiritual development by taking the *Noble Eightfold Path* as our road map.

By developing the *Noble Eightfold Path* we gain mindfulness, concentration and wisdom by means of meditation. Without a moral foundation and without restraining the mind's habit to strive endlessly for sensual gratification, this would not be possible. Buddhism offers calmness or concentration meditation to develop concentration and *insight* or *vipassana* meditation to gain insight into the true nature of life and to develop inner wisdom.

With mindfulness, concentration and wisdom we can tackle suffering. According to the teaching of *Dependent Origination* (see the talks by Tan Dhammavidu about the 2nd *Noble Truth*) we have to apply these spiritual qualities at the moment of *Contact*. We have to guard the sense doors, being aware of the present sense-contact. We need to have a sufficient amount of mindfulness and concentration to be aware when a sense-organ meets the appropriate sense-object (this is why we practise concentration meditation) and we have to have sufficient mindfulness and wisdom to respond wisely to this contact (this is why we practise *vipassana* meditation). Wisdom applied in this way is called 'wisdom in action'.

If the *Contact* is 'wise' contact, then the *Feeling* arising is a 'wise' feeling. The mind will understand feeling correctly; it will see feeling as a natural phenomenon, which means that it will not go further into liking or disliking.

If we lack sufficient mindfulness and wisdom we will blindly react, on automatic pilot according to our habits, on a more or less subconscious level. This is called an 'ignorant' *Contact* leading to an 'ignorant' *Feeling*, consequently the mind will fall into liking or disliking. From this follows afterwards the birth of the notion of 'I', 'me', or 'mine' and suffering.

If we have missed the opportunity to deal wisely at *Contact* then we can try to solve the problem at *Feeling* which is much more difficult and we might even have a slight and difficult chance to avoid suffering when we catch ourselves at *Desire*.

When the defilements (greed, hatred, and delusion) or the *Five Hindrances* (desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, doubt) are in the mind, they can stay there for a long time, depending on the situation, and our habits and character. We have to try to get out of their grip; try to lessen or dissolve them. We need to let go of them, peacefully, to weaken our habits which again and again trap us into the same patterns of behaviour and lead us into unhappy states of mind.

According to the Dalai Lama³ the Buddha taught to apply antidotes to purify the mind from the defilements and hindrances.

Sensual lust and ill will are the ones that cause the main problems because we live in a world of good and bad, we do a lot of liking and disliking, experience a lot of positive and negative feelings, lust and aversion. These are positive and negative polarities, and we must

³ **Dalai Lama**, *Awakening the Mind, Lightening the Heart*, HarperSanFrancisco 1996, ISBN 0-06-061688-1, p. 18

be aware of them.

3.1 Delaying the response to sense experiences

We are living in a world which is full of what we think is 'good' and 'bad'. If we do not want this world to stir up the mind, we must restrain our responses to it.

As long as our minds are not sufficiently trained in guarding the sense doors, the best choice to avoid suffering is not to expose the mind to objects or situations which we know to be tempting for us. That is not always possible, especially in regard to memories, but in general we know our problems: cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, sweets, TV, internet, certain individuals or kinds of people or certain groups of people, specific situations... most of which we could avoid if we had the determination to do so.

If we cannot avoid problematic contacts, then we can try to delay our response to these sense-experiences. When we experience something we would normally instinctively respond to with desire, we can try to restrain that response. There is a delay. Craving will build, but it has to build. Sometimes it is a lightning flash but generally we will have time to recognize the process that is happening if we have good mindfulness. The mind needs to be steady, otherwise we will fail. The way to do it is to pay attention to the things we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and fantasize about. Do not let the fantasy develop, do not let the wrong thinking develop. If it is going to arise, we can try to deflect it by bringing the mind to our meditation object, the breath. If we can make watching the breathing the background of our lives, if we feel really comfortable with it, we can turn our attention away from the alluring object to our breathing – we calm down and relax. This is not easy, it needs mindfulness, willpower and determination, especially with pleasant experiences, and it will not work always, but more and more often it will, in every day life as well as during meditation sessions.

A sexual fantasy is very difficult to stop once we let it stir up the mind. It can easily be any other thing that stirs up the mind in a sensual way, food for example. At first we can recognize that what is taking place is not 'real'. Then it is less easy. But if we delay or restrain the mind's response to this kind of fantasizing, it diminishes. When we just deflect the mind for a while, we see how the desire drops down, the object loses its power to enthrall. In a choice between watching the breathing and thinking of sex or delicious food, breathing is always going to lose a lot at first but it will work more frequently with practise. In dealing with the defilements and hindrances, we really have to want to succeed.

In dealing with anger, we can apply deep breathing, and try to regain mindfulness before speaking or acting. This is well known.

If the disturbances of the mind are persistent and return again and again we need something stronger like the methods briefly described in the following.

3.2 Dealing with greed, desire, lust, attachment

The recommendation to deal with greed, desire, lust, attachment, etc., is to reflect not only on the attractive but also on the repulsive side of the person or object. The point is not to be repelled by what one sees or imagines but to reflect, for example on the ugliness of the human body as well as on the beauty, without developing a kind of repulsion, in this case towards the human form. This can be counterproductive and would not be the *Middle Way*. We need to dispel inappropriate lust towards persons or objects. The *Five Precepts* may be the guideline for what is regarded to be inappropriate. An amusing but nonetheless effective way

of dealing with lust towards an inappropriate person is to imagine the body of the lusted for person turned inside out, like a glove. You will not think: “Oh, what a beautiful liver” or “How nice these sinews are.” It is the same person and we do not have to reflect on all kind of impurities in the body as many monastic teachings recommend, but lust will diminish almost immediately. The goals of nuns and monks may be different from those of people ‘living in the world’ and therefore the applied means can be different as well.

3.3 Dealing with hatred, aversion, ill will

If negative states of mind arise frequently, if anger comes up repeatedly, then you may investigate what this anger is doing to you. Notice what negative states of mind are doing to your body. Your shoulders, even your whole body may tense, your stomach ache. *Loving kindness meditation* is the antidote of choice. First of all you will develop loving kindness towards yourself. You are suffering a lot due to your anger or aversion, the reaction of your body makes this very obvious. So have compassion with yourself first. Usually our resentment is directed against another person. Reflect that people cannot be any other than the way that they are in the moment that we meet them. What they are is the result of what they have been. What we are is the result of what we have been and the way we function, the way we respond to people and to the world is all about the conditioning that has gone into us throughout our life. We are all the same, we have all got twists and turns, we have all come round many corners and we have all got these deep rooted habit patterns. We have to learn to accept. Human beings, things, and situations are, in the first place, what or how they are and *loving kindness practise* is very much about this.

This practise is necessary for everyone because of the state of the world. We need to feel friendly towards each other otherwise there will be big problems in our relationships with others (starting on a personal level right up to international affairs) and with our ability to reduce our own suffering.

If we are feeling restless, deep long breathing will help, best when we are really familiar with our breathing, when we can find our comfortable, calming breathing pattern quickly.

Mental Dullness and Drowsiness can be dealt with by waking the mind up with a visualization technique like imagining some bright object (sun or moon for example) or with intentionally short breathing or with some brisk walking.

The best way to deal with the defilements is not to let them arise at all and that means developing mindfulness to such a pitch that it can always be right there in the moment of sense contact. If we could avoid our endless mental concoctions, we would take a big step towards ending *Dukkha*.

I guess many are familiar with experiences like this: We see, hear or experience something that keeps the mind captive for the rest of the day, perhaps for the rest of our lives. For example our ear picks up sound, words, but the mind cannot leave it as merely sound. Perception assigns a meaning to that sound, which is quite normal in first place, but then mental concoction builds it over and over again (“How could he/she say something like this. That’s not right. He/She should think of his/her behavior. I remember last year when he/she ...”), creating *Dukkha, Dukkha, Dukkha*. Mindfulness can alert us to this and wisdom, knowing how to stop this process, can help end it.

A sufficient amount of mindfulness and wisdom in action will keep the *Hindrances* quiet and the defilements under control. The benefits would be huge because the suffering that we

have normally to experience, the oscillation between pleasant and unpleasant, between happy and sad would be greatly reduced.

On the other hand, none of our senses will go away and so we can still enjoy the delicious taste of food, for example, but avoid chasing damaging sensations, like smoking and alcohol, and not need to pursue exciting but dangerous sports and situations - which we all do to escape Dukkha. Less Dukkha automatically will lead to a healthier body and mind.

The near cause of Dukkha is attachment or clinging and to the degree we stop chasing after things or running away from them, to that degree our problems in life will lessen.