

Four Noble Truths: *Paṭipadā* (1 of 5)

The Fourth Noble Truth

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With this talk, I will begin the five-part series on the fourth noble truth. We have already spent three weeks on the first four noble truths. In a sense, the fourth builds on and is a continuation of the first three.

I would like to begin with a metaphor of the mind being like water. Referring to the mind as if it is water is an ancient Buddhist custom. What's nice about water is that it is not ice or invisible gas (as the water evaporates). Clear water has a wonderful quality – you see the water, but you also can see through the water to what's in the water.

This is like the way we are in the mind, part of the mind, and we also have the ability to see through the clarity of awareness. We know we're aware, and in that clarity, we see what's there. In the ancient texts, this is expressed as a metaphor of a person standing on the edge of a lake. They have good eyesight and are able to look down into the clear lake. The water is so clear that deep down in the bottom of the lake, you can see pebbles, snails, and fish moving slowly around.

In the same way, when the mind is clear, it looks deep into our experience and sees the things that are stationary, like the pebbles, and the things that are moving, coming and going. Everything is seen in clarity.

The metaphor of looking into a clear lake and seeing the fish and other things in it is used for a mind that is prepared for full awakening. When the mind is calm and unagitated, when the mud of the hindrances has all settled down, the mind is ready for a very deep letting go and freedom, releasing the deepest forms of attachment that are there.

The Four Noble Truths are central aspects of the movement toward freedom and release. As I've been saying, there are different interpretations of what The Four Noble Truths are. But the earliest predominant

understanding found in the ancient teachings of the Buddha is different than those of us who've learned the four noble truths from modern teachers or modern books might expect.

Predominantly, The four Noble Truths are deep insights into seeing what is there – seeing its arising, seeing its ceasing, and really seeing the coming and going of phenomena. You can see this in ordinary life. The metaphor I like is that of being on the river bank, leaning against a tree, and just watching the river go by. Of course, you see the river flowing. That's what a river is – it's flowing. Some people get very relaxed and contented just watching a river flowing. One can do it for hours sometimes. There's something very captivating and relaxing about that.

But what we're talking about here is deep meditative experience. When we have done the inner work of clearing and settling the mind and settling our issues, when we have meditated long enough, the mind gets quiet and still enough that it becomes more and more like a clear lake. The mind becomes more and more able to see the details – the fish, the snails, and the pebbles of our mind, and at some point, we see that they're coming and going.

What we're seeing at this level is deeper than the experience of our stories and our concepts – the ways

in which we sew together our reality through desires, aversions, and wanting. Things are seen at the sense level, or at the pixel level of experience. We see the individual data points that arise and pass in experience.

This can be very pleasant, meaningful, and inspiring when the mind has that level of clarity and settledness and can see things come and go, and come and go. When the mind has that kind of openness and clarity, has room for things and leaves things alone, there's a sense of freedom in that. There's a sense that we're allowing things to be. We are granting everything its freedom. In a sense, rather than us becoming free, the deeper freedom of Buddhism is that we give everything else its freedom. Everything is allowed just to be as it is.

Now remember we're talking about a very deep state of meditation. At this point, we do not have to contend with the social complexities of life. In this very deep state, we can grant freedom to whatever comes – thoughts, feelings and sensations. That sense of freedom is there, without understanding the cause of our suffering, and without the stories about why things are. There is no need to ask the question why, or to have an explanation or an understanding of things, except that we understand that things are constantly flowing, moving, and developing.

In the ancient tradition, the way that this is expressed is that, in terms of suffering, “One understands suffering, one understands the arising of suffering, and one understands the ceasing of suffering.” The fourth statement is,
“One understands that this is the practice leading to the ceasing of suffering.”

This is the practice that leads to the ceasing of suffering. The practice points to seeing arising and ceasing. In the clarity of just seeing things come into the clear lake of the mind, and in the freedom that comes with leaving things alone, we see that things come and go without our involvement, without our engagement. We see that we're free of things and they are free of us. Here there is freedom. Here there is no involvement and entanglement. Here there is no greed or wanting. There is a very deep cessation, not only of the things that arise and cease, but there is also a cessation of our clinging, craving, and wanting. Here is where freedom is found.

This is the practice. This is the practice that we do over and over again. If we bring ourselves back to this level of practice and really experience it, letting ourselves be saturated by it, conditioned by it, and relaxed by it, the practice keeps opening and freeing us more and more. We discover the deeper holdings. The remaining places where we are still clinging and attached begin to

dissolve and let go, sometimes dramatically, and sometimes slowly.

At some point, when this process becomes deep enough, then the letting go happens in a very deep, very thorough way. At that point, these four liberating insights are no longer something we understand, but something we fully awaken to. So the language in the ancient texts goes from “understanding” to “becoming fully awakened to.”

When we're fully awakened to these truths, then the texts refer to them as: “the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the arising of suffering, the noble truth of the ceasing of suffering, and the noble truth of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.” This is what full awakening is – the deepest letting go, the deepest releasing of things is full awakening.

This is a very different understanding of the noble truths than the idea that the noble truths point to the *cause* of suffering, and that craving is the cause, and we let go of craving. I would say it is a deeper understanding. We will talk about the idea of the four noble truths as craving later. That is kind of a later interpretation of them. In the early tradition, at heart, the noble truths are talked about as a very deep experience of and insight into inconstancy, seen over and over again until it leads to awakening.

This is a two-step process. First, there is a very deep understanding, "Ah, this is the way. Now I know what the practice is." Sooner or later this understanding grows, develops, and matures into greater and greater release and freedom.

In this regard, the word "noble" that is talked about here does not refer to the truths. Rather, it refers to the people who have become ennobled with a certain kind of dignity or value. I don't know exactly how we translate "noble."

The ancient word is "*ariya*." What happened with this word in 20th-century Europe is a little bit unfortunate. But this is originally an ancient Indian word for a class of people who were considered the nobles or the conquerors of parts of India. The Buddha used the word to refer to a certain worthiness, fullness, or value of someone who was fully freed and awakened.

Technically Pali, the ancient language, doesn't really say "four noble truths," even though this is how we keep translating it into English over and over. The most likely meaning of the word is: "the truth of the noble ones." This is very important because Buddhism focuses on the transformation of *people*, not the idea of abstract truths.

Ariya means the truth, the insight, and the realization of those who are realized – the noble ones.

This is the background for going more deeply into the fourth noble truth this week. Tomorrow we will see how this relates to the Eightfold Path. In subsequent interpretations of the Four Noble Truths that go down through the centuries and come to us today, traditionally the fourth Noble Truth is commonly understood as the Eightfold Path.

But in the early tradition, the Eightfold Path is very different from how it has come to us. It is more intimately related to awakening itself than it has often been presented. It is often presented as the beginner's path – just do this and it leads to awakening.

But it is actually an expression of awakening itself. It is an expression of deep cessation – the deep fulfillment of seeing the arising and passing of phenomena, leaving things alone, where the mind becomes very clear and peaceful. In that great clarity, peacefulness, and ease of the mind, we find the Eightfold Path. Thank you very much.