

7 Buddha

1. The Four Noble Truths (Pali Canon)

Buddha presents human life using a medical model: disease, cause, cure, treatment.

1.1 The First Noble Truth: There is Suffering (Dukkha)

- Claim: Life inevitably involves dukkha.
- Dukkha includes:
 - Obvious suffering: pain, grief, illness, aging, death.
 - Dissatisfaction: frustration, restlessness, anxiety.
 - The fact that everything we enjoy is fragile, changing, and cannot be held onto.

Not saying “everything is awful all the time.”

Instead: recurring forms of suffering are inevitable as long as we live in the ordinary way.

Why internalizing this can reduce suffering: - Lowers unrealistic expectations that life “should” be smooth. - Reduces shock/resentment when difficulties arise. - Creates a sense of shared human condition (“not just me”), which can soften self-pity and isolation. - Encourages acceptance instead of constant inner protest (“this must not be happening”).

Exam skill: Be able to explain how accepting that life contains suffering can paradoxically make it easier to bear.

1.2 The Second Noble Truth: Suffering is Caused by Desire (Craving / Clinging)

- Central claim: The main mental source of suffering is desire understood as craving or attachment (clinging), not just wanting in a neutral sense.
- We suffer when:
 - We want something we don’t have (status, relationship, object, success).
 - We have something but cling to it and fear losing it.
 - We crave certain feelings (pleasure, admiration) and resist their ending.

Objection: “It’s not the wanting, it’s the not having.”

Response (Buddhist-style): - Getting what you want often: - Produces only short-lived satisfaction. - Leads quickly to new desires and new dissatisfaction. - Generates anxiety about losing the thing gained. - So the structure of craving itself (never being satisfied, always needing more) is the deeper problem, not just “not having” right now.

You are encouraged (in this course) to: - Treat this as an empirical hypothesis. - Run your own experiments: Notice what happens after a desire is fulfilled. Does deep contentment last, or does the mind quickly move on to the next craving?

Objection: "Not all suffering comes from desire – what about physical pain?"

Buddhist reply: The Two Darts

- First dart:
 - The raw, unavoidable physical or emotional pain (e.g., illness, injury, loss).
 - This is part of human life; Buddhism does not deny it.
- Second dart:
 - The extra suffering we add through our mental reactions:
 - * "This is unbearable, this shouldn't be happening to me."
 - * Fear, resentment, self-blame, catastrophizing.
 - * Clinging to how things should have been.
 - This second dart is largely driven by craving and aversion.

Key idea:

We may not control the first dart, but we can greatly reduce the second dart by working with our desires, expectations, and reactions.

1.3 The Third Noble Truth: To Eliminate Suffering, Eliminate Desire

- Claim: If craving/attachment is the main cause of our suffering, then weakening and finally ending craving is the way to end that suffering.
- This is about ending clinging, not ending all forms of motivation or interest.

Objection: "If I eliminate desire, I'll just sit and do nothing and die."

Response using a key distinction:

- Attachment / Craving (clinging):
 - "I MUST have X; I can't be okay without it."
 - Tightly bound to identity, self-worth, and fear.
 - Produces anxiety, anger, jealousy, desperation.
- Mere Preference / Project:
 - "I would like X; I care about X; I'll work for X."
 - But: "If X doesn't happen, I can still be fundamentally okay."
 - Motivates action and care without obsession or despair.

Ending suffering means ending attachment (craving), not ending all preferences, values, or projects.

1.4 The Fourth Noble Truth: The Eightfold Path as the Way to Eliminate Desire

- Very brief for this exam:
The Eightfold Path is the practical training (in wisdom, ethics, and mental discipline) designed to weaken and eventually uproot craving.
 - For this course, the most relevant part is the mental discipline component: mindfulness and meditation practices that train non-clinging awareness.
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2. Preference vs Attachment (Clinging/Craving)

This distinction is crucial for understanding how to live an active life without generating unnecessary suffering.

2.1 Preference (Healthy Wanting)

- A preference is:
 - A calm inclination toward certain outcomes.
 - Compatible with flexibility and acceptance.
- Examples:
 - “I want to do well on this exam, so I’ll study hard. If I don’t get the grade I hope for, I’ll be disappointed, but I’ll be okay.”
 - “I’d like people to like me, but I can survive and still be basically content if some don’t.”

Signs you are operating from preference: - You take action, but your sense of worth doesn't collapse if things go badly. - You can adjust plans when circumstances change. - Emotional reactions are present but not overwhelming or long-lasting.

2.2 Attachment / Clinging / Craving

- An attachment or craving is:
 - A rigid, emotionally charged “must.”
 - Often tied to identity (“If I don’t get this, I am a failure / unlovable / meaningless”).
- Examples:
 - “I **MUST** get into this specific program; otherwise life is ruined.”
 - “My partner **MUST** never leave me; I couldn’t live without them.”
 - “People **MUST** respect me; any criticism is unbearable.”

Signs of attachment: - Obsessive thinking and rumination. - Strong fear, anxiety, or anger when the desired object is threatened. - Inability to let go even when the pursuit is clearly harmful.

2.3 Why the Distinction Matters

- Attachment is the kind of desire identified in the Second Noble Truth as the main cause of dukkha.
- Preference allows:

- Energetic action,
- Compassion,
- Commitment to projects,
- Without the heavy burden of constant anxiety and despair.

Exam skill: Be able to: - Define preference vs attachment. - Explain why eliminating attachment does not equal apathy or death. - Give a concrete example showing you can care deeply about something from a place of preference rather than clinging.

3. Practicing Letting Go (Non-Clinging) and the Lake Metaphor

The third noble truth is made practical through non-clinging: learning to “hold lightly” all experiences, thoughts, and emotions.

3.1 Basic Practice: Letting Go

Two core steps:

1. Notice

- Become aware of what is happening in your mind and body right now:
 - Thoughts (“He insulted me,” “I’m going to fail”).
 - Emotions (anger, fear, envy).
 - Bodily sensations (tight chest, clenched jaw).
- You can silently label: “worrying,” “anger,” “planning,” “remembering.”

2. Release (Let Go)

- Instead of feeding the thought with more stories, gently drop it.
- You don’t push it away with force; you simply stop holding on.
- It’s like relaxing a tight grip on an object and letting it fall from your hand.
- You allow the emotion to move through without acting it out or amplifying it.

Key point:

Letting go is not suppression. You aren’t pretending the feeling isn’t there; you are just not clinging to it or building elaborate narratives around it.

You are encouraged to experiment: - Start with small annoyances (a slow line, minor criticism). - Notice the urge to replay the story (“He wronged me!”). - Practice releasing the thoughts and see whether the suffering decreases.

3.2 Resistance and Aversion

- Non-clinging includes not only releasing craving but also releasing resistance:
 - Craving: grasping what is pleasant.
 - Aversion: pushing away what is unpleasant with anger, fear, or hatred.
- Both are forms of attachment:
 - Clinging to pleasure.
 - Clinging to the idea that pain or difficulty “must not exist.”

Practice: - When unpleasant experiences arise (pain, embarrassment, sadness): - Notice the impulse to fight, tense up, or mentally scream "No!" - Soften around the experience instead. - Let it be present without either feeding it or suppressing it.

3.3 The Lake Metaphor

Ideal: The mind like a calm, still lake.

- When the mind is calm:
 - Thoughts and emotions are like ripples or waves.
 - They arise and pass without disturbing the depth of the lake.
 - The lake doesn't cling to pleasant ripples or try to push away unpleasant ones.

Applied: - Hatred, injustice, fear, and anxiety will still arise. - But the calm mind: - Sees them clearly, - Doesn't dwell on them unnecessarily, - Doesn't keep re-stirring the water with repetitive stories.

Connection to the Dhammapada: - Continually thinking "He abused me, he struck me, he wronged me" keeps hatred alive. - Letting go of those thoughts allows hatred to settle, like waves dying down on a lake.

Exam skill: Be able to: - Describe the lake metaphor. - Explain how it illustrates non-clinging and the reduction of suffering.

4. Awareness without Resistance:

"Don't Cling, Don't Push Away, Don't Ignore"

This is a meditation instruction for cultivating a particular kind of awareness.

4.1 Awareness without Resistance

- Awareness: Clearly noticing what is happening in your mind and body right now.
- Without resistance: Not fighting, grasping, or turning away from what you notice.

This involves training three attitudes:

4.2 Don't Cling (No Grasping of Pleasant Experiences)

- When something feels good (pleasure, praise, success), notice:
 - The urge to hold on: "This must last," "I need more of this," "I can't lose this."
- Practice:
 - Enjoy the pleasant experience fully while it is present.
 - At the same time, recognize its impermanent nature.
 - Let it pass without chasing it or mentally replaying it over and over.

Why this helps: - Reduces anxiety about losing good things. - Weakens craving and dependency on specific conditions for happiness.

4.3 Don't Push Away (No Aversion to Unpleasant Experiences)

- When something is painful or uncomfortable, notice:
 - Tension, resistance, and mental protest ("This is awful; it must stop now").
- Practice:
 - Allow the discomfort to be there in your awareness.
 - Stay with the raw sensation (tightness, heat, heaviness) without adding extra commentary.
 - This directly reduces the "second dart" of suffering.

Example: - Physical pain: Notice the pure sensations (pressure, throbbing) and breathe with them, instead of adding "This is unbearable, I'll never cope." - Emotional pain: Allow sadness or fear to be felt in the body without rejecting it.

4.4 Don't Ignore (No Numbing or Distraction)

- A third common strategy is to ignore discomfort:
 - Constant distraction (scrolling, noise, overwork).
 - Numbing (overuse of substances, compulsive entertainment).
- This may give short-term relief but:
 - Leaves underlying patterns untouched.
 - Allows craving and fear to continue shaping your life unconsciously.

Practice: - When you notice the impulse to distract yourself immediately: - Pause. - Turn toward the experience for a moment: - "What am I actually feeling right now?" - "Where do I feel this in my body?" - Give it some gentle, non-judging attention.

4.5 Meditation Experiments: Applying "Don't Cling, Don't Push Away, Don't Ignore"

In formal meditation (e.g., sitting quietly focusing on the breath):

- When pleasant experiences arise (relaxation, calm):
 - Notice them.
 - Don't cling: enjoy them but allow them to change or fade.
- When unpleasant experiences arise (restlessness, boredom, pain):
 - Notice them.
 - Don't push away: stay with them gently; let them come and go.
- When you feel like spacing out or distracting yourself:
 - Notice the urge to "check out."
 - Don't ignore: stay present with what is happening, even if subtle or dull.

Over time: - This trains the mind to be like the calm lake. - It undermines the habits of craving, aversion, and ignorance that fuel suffering.

What You Should Be Able to Do for the Exam

1. Four Noble Truths

- State and briefly explain each.
- Explain how internalizing “there is suffering” can reduce suffering.
- Explain “suffering is caused by desire” and the “two darts” idea.

2. Preference vs Attachment

- Define each clearly.
- Explain why eliminating attachment is not apathy.
- Give your own example of acting from preference rather than clinging.

3. Practicing Letting Go & Lake Metaphor

- Describe the two-step practice: notice, release.
- Explain the role of resistance and how letting go addresses it.
- Explain the lake metaphor and how it illustrates non-clinging.

4. Awareness without Resistance

- Explain the instruction: “Don’t cling, don’t push away, don’t ignore.”
- Show how each of the three (clinging, pushing away, ignoring) contributes to suffering.
- Describe how meditation experiments embody this approach.