

Four Realities

The Disease, the Cause, the Cure, the Medicine

What did the Buddha teach? The early sūtras present the Buddha's teaching as the solution to a problem. This problem is the fundamental problem of life. In Sanskrit and Pali the problem is termed *duhkha/dukkha*, which can be approximately translated as 'suffering'.

In a Nikāya passage the Buddha thus states that he has always made known just two things, namely suffering and the cessation of suffering (see *Majjhima Nikāya* i. 140).

This statement can be regarded as expressing the basic orientation of Buddhism for all times and all places. Its classic formulation is by way of 'four noble truths': the truth of the nature of suffering, the truth of the nature of its cause, the truth of the nature of its cessation, and the truth of the nature of the path leading to its cessation.

One of the earliest summary statements of the truths is as follows:

This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, dying is suffering, sorrow, grief, pain, unhappiness, and unease are suffering; being united with what is not liked is suffering, separation from what is liked is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering.

This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: the thirst for repeated existence which, associated with delight and greed, delights in this and that, namely the thirst for the objects of sense desire, the thirst for existence, and the thirst for non-existence.

This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the complete fading away and cessation of this very thirst—its abandoning, relinquishing, releasing, letting go.

This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: the noble eightfold path, namely right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration (*Samyutta Nikāya* v. 421-2).

The temptation to understand these four 'truths' as functioning as a kind of Buddhist creed should be resisted; they do not represent 'truth claims' that one must intellectually assent to on becoming a Buddhist.

Part of the problem here is the word 'truth'. The word *satya* (Pali *sacca*) can certainly mean truth, but it might equally be rendered as 'real' or 'actual thing'. That is, we are not dealing here with propositional truths with which we must either agree or disagree, but with four 'true things' or 'realities' whose nature, we are told, the Buddha finally understood on the night of his awakening.

The teachings of the Buddha thus state that suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation are realities which we fail to see as they are, and this is as true for the 'Buddhist' as the 'non-Buddhist'. The 'Buddhist' is simply one committed to trying to follow the Buddha's prescriptions for coming to see these realities as they are.

This is not to say that the Buddha's discourses do not contain theoretical statements of the nature of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation, but these descriptions function not so much as dogmas of the Buddhist faith as a convenient conceptual framework for making sense of Buddhist thought. Thus from one point of view any piece of Buddhist theory can be considered as to do with the analysis of one or other of the four truths.

Source: Excerpted, with minor edits for clarity, from Gethin, R. (1998) *The foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Pages 59-60.)