



Selfing = Dukkha: The Four Noble Truths

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The Four Noble Truths form the core of the Buddha's teaching. Understanding and practicing these Truths is what defines Dharma practice, and distinguishes it from secular mindfulness. Today, the beneficial applications of mindfulness touch many aspects of life, from coping with anxiety and depression, to addressing chronic pain, to workplace and school stress and performance. Yet, this modern expression of mindfulness usually doesn't include the Four Noble Truths. From a Dharma perspective, the whole point of practicing mindfulness is to gain insight into the Four Noble Truths in a very direct and immediate level. This insight then transforms our very perspective and way of being in the world.

The Four Noble Truths are:

1. Dukkha
2. The arising or origin of Dukkha
3. The cessation of Dukkha
4. The way leading to the cessation of Dukkha (Eightfold Path)

The Pali word Dukkha has many dimensions and nuances. It can be translated as suffering, imperfection, impermanence, emptiness, or insubstantiality. While some suffering is unavoidable, such as physical pain and grief, much, if not most, of our suffering is emotional and mental reactivity. This "added-on" suffering is the realm of the Four Noble Truths.

To help understand the Four Noble Truths, we can see how the medical model of diagnosis and treatment mirrors this four part teaching:

1. Diagnosing a disease state (pathology)
2. Understanding the factors that lead to the disease state (etiology)
3. Understanding the normal, healthy state (physiology)
4. Course of treatment to restore health

Each of these four factors are essential for discovering, understanding, and treating a disease. If we don't recognize the presence of a disease, or misdiagnose it, treatment will be ineffective. If we do not understand what created the disease, we will not know how to treat it and return to health. In our Dharma practice, recognizing and understanding the presence and arising of dukkha brings clarity and direction. Our precious time and energy then becomes aligned with liberation and awakening.

We can distill the Four Noble Truths into a core formula. Orienting around that essence can help us not get lost in the complexity of the lists and sublists of the Theravada tradition and keep us focused during our practice. On an essential level, the Four Noble Truths can be reduced to:

When there is "this", then "that" arises.
When there is not "this", then "that" does not arise.

Buddha used this formula often in his teaching. Everything arises based on conditions and factors. When those conditions are present, certain things arise. When those conditions are absent, then certain things do not arise. This conditional nature of life is seen everywhere, from the growth of a plant to the arising of an emotion or reaction.

As Dharma practitioners, we seek to understand this conditionality in regards to suffering and the end of suffering. The formula becomes:

When there is “selfing”, then “dukkha” arises.

When there is not “selfing”, then “dukkha” doesn’t arise.

Again, by dukkha we are not meaning the unavoidable human experience of physical or emotional pain, but what arises immediately after, what is added on.

What is “selfing?” The process of establishing, moment by moment, a central locus that thought, emotions, and perception refers back toward. “This is my thought, my emotion, I am having this perception.” It is the unconscious assumption and belief of “I, me, mine.” Projected outward, it becomes “You, yours, them.” It ranges from a subtle sense of separation between known and knower to very strong, gripping expressions of fear, hatred, or desire.

We can see the commonality of a strong belief in self reflecting in times of intense emotional and mental suffering. When sense of self is invested and believed in as an unexamined core premise, dukkha will arise. This is unavoidable. When there is “this,” then “that” arises. This is seen in the first two Noble Truths.

“Waking-up” to a deeper, more fundamental perspective beyond the sense of self means dukkha doesn’t arise. There are layers and aspects of the sense of self, and layers and aspects of dukkha falling away. A partial seeing through the illusion of self means some aspects of dukkha will still arise. This process is the Third Noble Truth.

Finally, the Fourth Noble Truth establishes a roadmap in the Eightfold Noble Path. This path interweaves three elements: wisdom, ethical conduct, and meditative cultivation. Wisdom directs our actions so they are based in non-harm. Meditation practices nurtures a deeper wisdom which further informs our actions. When our actions are based in non-harm and kindness, our minds natural become quieter, allowing deeper meditative cultivation which deepens wisdom. The Eightfold Path becomes both a practice and the lived expression of the Four Noble Truths. Keeping the Four Noble Truths in the forefront of our dharma practice aligns our intentions and actions with liberation and awakening.