

Noble Truths and Illumination – The Jewel Essence of Buddhism

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Buddhism is a world religion with a long history, but it is not based on ideas about God. Buddhists are free to develop their own personal view of God. Some Buddhists believe in God, some are agnostics, some are atheists, and some people studying Buddhism belong to other religions. But the question of God as creator and ruler of the universe does NOT enter into Buddhist teaching.

Instead, Buddhism is a practical, spiritual science based on human nature and human potential. Buddhism has a set of ethical principles, spiritual tools, and methods of mental cultivation we can all use to make positive changes in ourselves, here and now.

Buddhist principles apply equally to everyone. We all have the pure diamond essence of Buddha nature within us. We all have the same potential for inner growth and personal transformation. It is a Buddhist principle that we all have free-will. We are responsible for all the choices we make. We are responsible for the consequences of our choices.

Buddhism is based on the teachings of the Buddha, who is NOT a God. The Buddha was a man named Siddhartha Gautama who was born two thousand five hundred years ago. Siddhartha was a crown prince; the heir to the throne of an ancient kingdom in present-day Nepal. Prince Siddhartha was well-educated, cultured, and famous for his athletic ability, especially for his archery. He married his cousin Yasodharā and had a son, Rāhula.

After Rāhula was born, Prince Siddhartha had the profound realization that wealth, power, and fame are ultimately insignificant when weighed against birth, old age, death, and suffering. At about the age of 30, Prince Siddhartha started a profound spiritual journey. He walked away from his royal status, the power, fame, wealth, and all his possessions.



Siddhartha Gautama dedicated his life to finding a way to free all of us from suffering. He made many discoveries about the potential of all human beings. His son, and other royal relatives, were so impressed by Siddhartha's insights that they joined him, and become monks and nuns.

Siddhartha was a wandering monk until his death at the age of 84. His profound insights and teachings inspired people of his time to call him "Buddha", which means "awakened or illuminated one".

Siddhartha discouraged people from calling him, or anyone else, a Buddha. He advised us to seek ONLY our own Buddha that is within each of us. A principle of Buddhism is that ALL of us have the potential to become a Buddha. As a mark of appreciation for what he provided to us, however, we still refer to Siddhartha as "THE Buddha".

Buddhism now has many different lineages, such as Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism. The Buddha's original teachings are still at the centre of all forms of Buddhism. What he discovered and taught was a process and methods we all can use to reduce our suffering and misery here on Earth.

The Buddha's main teachings are summarized in a synthesis called the Four Noble Truths, which states:

There is suffering.

There is a cause for suffering.

There is an end to suffering.

There is a path leading to the end of suffering.

The Buddha's First Noble Truth is "There is Suffering". What is suffering? Buddha used the word "Dukkha" which includes discomfort, unhappiness, unpleasantness, and frustration. Dukkha is our personal, internal experience of suffering that is triggered by inward and outward sources.



There are many sources of suffering in this world, including the natural processes of life. We are all easily damaged. Our bodies deteriorate when we get old. We all will die. This is part of the human condition. We are mortal and fragile. We all experience unpleasantness, injury, illness, discomfort, frustration, and unhappiness in our life. We have all suffered.

The second Noble truth is “There is a cause for suffering”. According to the Buddha, the primary cause of personal suffering is three different groups of deep-seated craving. These groups are the craving for sense pleasures, the craving for externalism, and the craving for annihilation.

Sense-pleasure cravings are fixated on sensations, sights, tastes, sounds, and feelings. Sense-pleasure cravings require constant stimulation and thrive on distraction. They dull the mind and also create the hopeless delusion that THINGS can make you happy.

Externalism is the craving for immortality, to remain just as you are now, living forever and forever unchanged.

Craving for Annihilation considers that extinction, of thought or feeling or life itself, is the only way to end suffering.

Blind craving wants everything and is never satisfied by anything. To crave something and not get it causes suffering. To have what you don't want causes suffering. To get what you crave also causes suffering, because craving always wants more. Craving also wants permanence. But nothing in the universe is permanent. Everything changes.

Craving has its roots in our survival reflexes. To stay alive we need to learn what supports life and what causes illness, injury, or death. Our senses continually gather data, and our minds help us sort out what is helpful from what is harmful. These basic life lessons develop instinctively into likes and dislikes. It is natural to like what supports and sustains life. It is natural to dislike what is harmful and destroys life.



Some forms of suffering are also survival mechanisms. The pain caused by illness or injury is a signal your body uses to warn you about physical damage. Fix the damage and the pain goes away. So it's natural to like being free from pain.

But the likes and dislikes that support our survival can expand into preferences that have nothing to do with basic life-support. Preferences develop into cravings, cravings form patterns, patterns become habits, habits can turn into personal hindrances. In Buddhism, the main hindrances are described as:

1. the mental hindrance of sensual desire;
2. the mental hindrance of ill will;
3. the mental hindrance of torpor,
with the physical hindrance of sloth;
4. the mental hindrance of worry,
with the physical hindrance of restlessness;
5. the mental hindrance of having a closed mind.

The Buddha's third Noble Truth is "There is an end to suffering". The Buddha discovered that ordinary people can free themselves from needless suffering. We can extinguish the inner, never-satisfied cravings and the suffering they cause. We can free ourselves from our personal hindrances.

The Fourth Noble Truth is "There is a path leading to the end of suffering". This is a detailed and practical process called the Noble Eight-Fold Path, which is grouped into three stages: Morality, Mental Cultivation, and Wisdom.

The Eight Fold Path can help you reduce personal suffering in this lifetime and can ultimately help you achieve Nirvana. Nirvana isn't a place. It is an inner condition you can develop and achieve here in this lifetime. Nirvana, which means "peace", is a degree of inner illumination and liberation that is permanently free from suffering.

The steps in the Noble Eight Fold Path are:

Right Speech.

Right Action.

Right Livelihood.

Right Effort.

Right Mindfulness.

Right Concentration.

Right View.

Right Purpose.

Morality is the first stage on the Path. The Buddha's word for Morality is "Sila", which means "cool consciousness". The blind addiction to craving is hot; it's an irritating fever. Morality helps cool and heal the feverish irritation.

Morality includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.

Right Speech means to refrain from lying, gossiping, and bad-mouthing. Right Speech means to avoid causing agitation and turbulence with words, so you become quieter and clearer. Right Speech is to speak honestly and kindly, and to discuss only meaningful subjects.

Right Action means to refrain from negative actions such as killing, cheating, and stealing. If you refrain from negative actions, you reduce negative repercussions, both internally and externally. You become clearer, and others respect you.

Right Action is to always act with honesty and integrity; and strive to cause no harm to yourself and others.



Right Livelihood means to avoid livelihoods that cause harm and suffering. Wrong livelihoods damage both the victims and the perpetrators. Wrong livelihoods include slavery, prostitution, selling drugs, and selling weapons. Right livelihoods do not cause suffering. A GOOD livelihood is one that is harmless AND also allows time, energy, and opportunity to do spiritual work.

In Buddhism, lay people can choose to follow five virtuous precepts to cultivate morality:

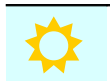
1. to refrain from taking life,
2. to refrain from taking that which is not given,
3. to refrain from false speech,
4. to refrain from taking intoxicants which dull the mind, and
5. to refrain from sexual misconduct.

In the beginning, Morality requires self-discipline. Morality becomes easier when you recognize that unethical and non-virtuous behaviour causes suffering. Much suffering in this world is due to people making harmful choices motivated by greed, hatred, and ignorance. Suffering would be greatly reduced if we all chose to live ethical and virtuous lives.

When Morality is established in you, Mental Cultivation can be undertaken. Mental Cultivation is the second stage on the Path. It includes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Right Effort means cultivating positive mental processes and eliminating negative mental processes. Right Effort strives to banish unwholesome mental processes; to cultivate wholesome mental processes; and to strengthen wholesome mental processes as they arise so they stabilize, gain clarity, and reach full development.

Right Mindfulness means to maintain a continuity of attention` and always act with full awareness. Whether you stay or go, stand or sit, are asleep or awake, speak or are silent, be always aware of what you are doing. Right Mindfulness enables you to accurately observe yourself.



You become aware of the arising and passing away of the flow of your thoughts and the flow of changes in your body. This training helps stabilize you, free you from craving, and free you from clinging to that which is impermanent.

Right Concentration means to fix your attention on a single wholesome object or idea. Concentration takes self-discipline and effort to establish, but once established concentration becomes effortless.

Meditation and prayer are forms of Right Concentration. Prayer means a wholesome idea with concentration driving it.

“Metta” is a Buddhist prayer in which you radiate kindness and friendliness out from your body in all directions with a wish that all sentient beings be well and happy. As you radiate out kindness, refresh your wish that all beings be well and happy, that all beings be free from harm, that they be free from anxiety and distress, and that they all guide themselves to happiness.

Mental Cultivation produces Wisdom. Wisdom is the third stage on the Path. It includes Right View and Right Purpose.

Right View means having the knowledge of suffering, knowledge of the origin of suffering, knowledge of the end of suffering, and knowledge of the path that leads to the end of suffering. In essence, Right View means you have gained experience and insight into the Four Noble Truths.

Right Purpose means strengthening and stabilizing your compassion, wisdom, and wholesome independence. Your further spiritual progress will then unfold easily.

That is the Eight Fold Path, the path leading to the end of suffering. The Eight Fold Path taught by the Buddha helps us, women and men, make wholesome choices to reduce suffering to ourselves and others. The ultimate goal of the Eight Fold Path is to liberate and illuminate the pure diamond essence of our inner Buddha nature.



In Buddhism, we are encouraged to investigate and test the teachings for ourselves. Testing the teaching, and other information we receive, helps us find what really works to improve us, reduce inner suffering, and reduce harm being caused to ourselves and others. Methods which help one person may not work for someone else.

In the Buddhist view, removing the suffering within us, eliminating Dukkha, can only be done by each person for themselves. We can support and encourage each other in the process. But we can't over-ride someone else's free-will. Everyone has to make their own choices for themselves.

Your experiences of suffering; your experiences of unhappiness, discomfort, unpleasantness, and frustration can sometimes seem overwhelming. But you are MUCH greater than your suffering.

You have the potential to achieve inner perfection and become a Buddha. That is YOUR ultimate true nature.

There is suffering.

There is a cause for suffering.

There is an END to suffering.

There is a path that leads to the end of suffering.

I would like to conclude with a sincere wish that all of you be well and happy, that all of you be free from anxiety and harm, and that all of you guide yourselves to liberation and happiness.

Thank you all very much.



METTA



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