

Theme 3A The Four Noble Truths

Key concepts

- The Buddha's first sermon after his Awakening/Enlightenment is found in the Dhammacakkappavattana (setting in motion the wheel of dhamma) Sutta and in this the Four Noble Truths are outlined.
- These state that (1) there is dukkha, (2) samudaya (arising) of dukkha is caused by tanha (craving), (3) nirodha (stop/end) of tanha/dukkha is achievable, (4) the magga (path) realising the end of tanha/dukkha is set out.

- Three types of dukkha are identified in Buddhism: (1) dukkha-dukkha (painful experience) refers to physical and mental/emotional pain which is experienced by all people such as illness and sadness; (2) viparinama-dukkha (changing nature of existence) refers to suffering caused by change particularly when a person tries to cling to things being stable/happy and pleasant when in fact they are not and when the change is from things being happy and pleasant to them being unpleasant; (3) sankhara-dukkha (the contingent nature of existence) refers to suffering caused by the conditioned state of human beings whereby the continual rising and falling away of everything takes place outside of human control.

- The medical metaphor with regard to the Four Noble Truths understands the Buddha as the physician who (1) diagnoses the illness as dukkha, (2) identifies the cause as tanha, (3) advises that the illness can be brought to an end – nirodha and (4) provides the treatment which is following the magga.

- Tanha can be understood as attachment/craving/thirst and is linked to sensual desires/pleasures. Tanha is a result of the Three Poisons (ignorance, greed and hatred) and can be linked to a craving for existence (wanting a fixed identity through the accumulation of possessions which belong to 'me' and are 'mine') and to its opposite non-existence (wanting to escape all unhappiness in life which might lead to suicide).
- Nirodha can be understood as stopping all tanha through the removal of the Three Poisons, which will then help to lead to an end of rebirth, breaking out of samsara and achieving nibbana. Nibbana cannot be defined because it is outside the world of conditioned things in which humans live. It is neither nothing nor is it something; it can be described as a transcendent experience in which there is a radically transformed state of consciousness.

- The magga can be followed once a person has accepted the insights of the Buddha contained in the first three of the Noble Truths. The magga has to be followed by each person in their own way and it is important that the person does not cling to the magga as it is only like a raft that helps in crossing over the sea of samsara to nibbana.

Key quotes

'[The Buddha] called his first teaching the four truths for the noble (not 'the four noble truths', as the phrase has so often been mistranslated).' (Lopez)

'The four true realities taught by the Buddha are not as such things to 'believe' but to be open to, see and contemplate, and respond to appropriately.' (Harvey)

'One of the insights of the Enlightenment was that the Buddha could see in detail exactly how craving and karma lead to constant rebirth.' (Cush)

'Nibbana constitutes the highest and ultimate goal of all Buddhist aspirations, i.e., absolute extinction of that life-affirming will, manifested as Greed, Hatred and Delusion ... the ultimate and absolute deliverance from all future rebirth, old age, disease and death, from all suffering and misery.' (Nyanatiloka)

Key words

samudaya	nirodha	magga	Three Poisons
dukkha-dukkha	viparinama	sankhara	tanha metaphor

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on whether Buddhism puts too much focus on the concept of dukkha.

Others focus on the extent to the Four Noble Truths contain a practical plan for dealing with the complexity of human existence.

Key questions

To what extent are the Four Noble Truths designed for those following the Buddhist life to its fullest extent, i.e. the monastic sangha only?

How far can the Four Noble Truths be verified or falsified as an account of the cause of human suffering?

Could it be argued that the Four Noble Truths are specific to the Buddha's early experiences of life leading up to the Four Sights and are therefore limited in terms of usefulness for Buddhists today?