

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Summary

In our first week, Prajnamati described the Buddha's difficulties in trying to communicate his enlightenment experience. He had sought enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, but recognised that the non-enlightened mind could not grasp the magnitude of his awakened mind.

He thought about this for several days and eventually decided to give his first teaching to his former colleagues, the five ascetics with whom he had practiced for many years. This discourse became known as The Four Noble Truths and in traditional terms, 'set the Wheel of the Dharma turning'. The importance of this teaching cannot be over-stated, as it is the bedrock upon which everything else follows.

There is *dukkha*

The Buddha taught that it is the nature of the human condition that we must inevitably experience suffering. From simply feeling that life is unsatisfactory, that it is not always the way we want it to be, to outright physical pain, sickness and ultimately, death. We may try hard to suppress or ignore *dukkha* by embracing the pleasurable, relishing the new, enjoying the exciting and romantic. We are reluctant to dwell on the uglier side of life; old age, sickness and death. This is all perfectly natural.

In this first discourse, the Buddha asked that we should look at our lives and recognise this truth. Perhaps in Northern India 2,500 years ago it would have been easier. There were no modern medicines, the aged, the sick, the dying, could be seen openly. Today they are largely hidden from view. We have to dig deeper into our experience so that we can acknowledge this first of the Noble Truths.

In week two, we reflected on our own experience of suffering, do we push *dukkha* aside or do we sometimes take time to reflect on why we feel suffering.

Prajnamati described how an understanding of *dukkha*, an emotional connection with the impermanent nature of all things is to place our foot upon the path of discovery, moving from *dukkha* and aversion to confidence and faith. We break free from a cycle of reactivity to start on to the 'spiral path' of the Buddha's teaching which he promised would ultimately enable us to encounter the enlightenment experience for ourselves.

Dukkha arises in dependence upon craving (*tanhā*)

In the second Noble Truth, the Buddha contended that craving was the root cause of all suffering. In week three, we explored the subtleties of craving, going beyond the desire for material things or sense pleasures. We considered how it was perfectly normal to want to 'do well' and live a comfortable life in good health. It was only when we believe that happiness and fulfilment is only achievable if these conditions are present, that dissatisfaction and suffering arises.

We debated whether there was anything we could imagine that would permanently enrich our lives, bringing lasting satisfaction that would never tarnish, fade or become commonplace.

Craving can be conquered and *dukkha* cease

There's bad news, and then there is good news. The good news of the Third Noble Truth is that there is a way that will lead us to overcome craving, moving away from suffering and ultimately to experience enlightenment.

In week four, Bāhiya encouraged us to imagine how it must have felt to be the Buddha on the morning following his 'awakening'. We discussed what we mean when we describe enlightenment as 'understanding the true nature of all things'. We debated whether enlightenment really existed and if it does, was it a reasonable aspiration for us to aim for or should we set our sights a little lower.

We considered 'insight' and Bāhiya suggested that when we experience insight, we glimpse for the tiniest moment, what it must be like to experience the universe as a Buddha.

The Truth of the Path

In week five, Prajnamati explored the eight limbs of the Noble Eightfold Path described by the newly enlightened Buddha. It was a 'middle way' steering between dogma that insists that our truth is the only truth, and the denial that there is an ultimate truth to be attained. Although we should practice with confidence in the Dharma, we are encouraged to question it in the light of our own experience. In doing so we develop a vision of what is really true and thereby avoid dogmatism.

The eight limbs of the path can be briefly described as:

Right Understanding: the path begins when you fully understand that suffering and dissatisfaction are present in the entirety of ordinary existence.

Right Thought: an aspiration to overcome our lack of understanding and to cultivate wisdom for benefit of all.

Right Speech: understanding the power of speech; aware of the effects of what we say. Replacing harsh speech with that is true and harmonious

Right Action: developing 'skilful' means, avoiding actions that may cause harm whilst developing ways to that are beneficial to others.

Right Livelihood: earning our living in a way that does not impinge upon our spiritual growth. Being aware of our motives and actions in the workplace.

Right Effort: the 'middle way' of balanced effort, not too tight, not too loose.

Right Mindfulness: through meditation, developing our ever-increasing awareness of the present moment.

Right Concentration: the development of a regular meditation practice so that you may develop insight into the true nature of all things

Prajnamati also referred to the Threefold Way of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom suggesting we consider why the Eightfold Path starts with vision and the Threefold Way ends in wisdom. He introduced the concept of the Spiral Path, describing how understanding and practice must be cultivated in balance, with each stage following in sequence from the one before. He cautioned that whilst we follow the Spiral Path we remain in our conditioned existence where suffering arises in dependence upon craving, but in doing so we gradually engage in a different mode of conditionality.

Prajnamati asked us to debate whether we thought there was any real or objective truth or if all truths and paths are culturally conditioned.

Question for reflection:

Last week, there was a challenging question and one that it is worth returning to in order to evaluate the topics we have explored over the past few weeks.

"Where do the Four Noble Truths take us; is it somewhere we want to go and if so, do we think the teaching we have explored over the past six weeks is an effective way to take us there?"

Recommended listening: Free Buddhist Audio: www.freebuddhistaudio.com

The Meaning of the Dharma – *Sangharakshita*

The Nature of Existence – *Sangharakshita*

Recommended reading: **Buddhism for Dummies** – *Jonathan Landaw & Stephan Bodian*