

# What are the Four Noble Truths?

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## Introduction

The Four Noble Truths are perhaps the most fundamental of Buddhist teachings. The Buddha himself sometimes declared them to be like an elephant's footprint into which all other footprints fit — meaning that all of Buddhist teaching can be contained within the scheme of the Four Noble Truths.

For those who are afraid of big numbers, the good news is that these four truths have sometimes been simplified into just two: **suffering** and **the ending of suffering**. But in what follows, we will go with the fuller scheme.

## A Brief Overview

Before going into detail, let us first get a bird's-eye view of the four truths:

1. **The Noble Truth of Suffering** (*Dukkha*) — Life is full of suffering and imperfection.
2. **The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering** (*Samudaya*) — There is a chain of causes that gives rise to suffering.

3. **The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha)** — It is possible to transcend all suffering and imperfection.
4. **The Noble Truth of the Path (Magga)** — The Noble Eight-fold Path leads to that transcendence.

One important preliminary note: the original Pāli word *dukkha* does not simply mean "suffering." It actually covers the whole spectrum from coarse, tangible suffering up to the most subtle imperfections. This broader meaning is important to keep in mind throughout.

### **The First Noble Truth: Suffering and Imperfection**

The Buddha declared that perhaps the most fundamental fact to realise — in order to make any progress on a spiritual path, or even to start off on one — is that the world is full of imperfection and suffering, and that people are full of suffering.

This first basic level of understanding gives us a basic level of sanity, because it is no longer about my suffering. Suffering is something universal. Everyone has some degree of it. People have different sufferings, and everyone encounters many imperfections every day, both within and without.

### **The Arc of a Life**

A good starting point may be the beginning of life itself. You might not remember, but your mother almost certainly will: **birth is suffering** — both for yourself and for your mother.

It starts right there, and then it continues. You have to learn to adapt to this body. You have to get used to eating, to the toilet, to the environment you are in, to the various noises, to the people you will deal with every day. We usually forget it, but this is all work. It all implies exertion, and it is not fun for a baby.

Then slowly you have to learn to walk, to talk — and all of this involves some degree of suffering. At some point you have to go to school, and many of us remember that school is not always just fun. You have to learn to deal with the people in your class, to solve tasks, to handle assignments, to deal with teachers. All of this involves quite some degree of suffering.

Life moves further on. You enter puberty — not fun for most people. Then perhaps university, or you directly have to earn a living. Earning a living also is not easy: you deal with bosses, competitors, the demands of your profession. It involves quite some amount of exertion.

Around that time, perhaps you feel you have to find a partner, later get married, then have children — and all of this involves effort, struggle, and painful experiences.

Further on, the older you get, the more often you tend to get sick. Some people are sick almost from the very beginning. Then slowly you grow old, and old age is full of suffering. Your body doesn't have that much vitality anymore. It becomes difficult to move, difficult to remember things. The burden of the body becomes more and more evident. And at some point, you have to die.

All of this is included in the Noble Truth of Suffering.

## **The Inner Dimension**

But this is, in a sense, mostly only the outer part — the external, material aspect of life. Apart from all of this, you also have a **mind**, and that mind often gets in the way.

Many times you think you could manage — do your work, learn what you need to learn — if not for the mind getting in the way all the time. You have some task at hand, and it might not even appear so difficult. But then all these feelings arise, and you start to think about what other people have done to you, or what you have done. Slowly you might realise that **the mind is itself a condition of much suffering**.

Body, mind, feeling — your consciousness too. You try to direct your consciousness towards whatever you think is important, and then you realise you have very little control over your consciousness and your attention. Even consciousness can be said to be suffering.

## **The Second Noble Truth: The Origin of Suffering**

All of this has an origin. There is a reason for all this suffering, and the Buddha formalised it into a chain of twelve links — the famous **Law of Dependent Origination** (*Paṭicca Samuppāda*). It is not just one cause, but a chain of causal links, and along this chain the suffering grows and becomes more far-reaching.

### **1. Ignorance (Avijjā)**

In Buddhism, the first cause is not God. The first cause of all suffering is our own **spiritual blindness** — our ignorance, our lack of

understanding of existence. This is why Buddhists usually don't try to get to heaven, but try to become enlightened.

## **2. Karmic Formations (Saṅkhārā)**

Based on this ignorance, every moment we have thoughts, emotions, and feelings bubbling up within ourselves. These are usually called *mental formations* or *karmic formations* — what we in modern times might call unconscious processes, including habits that push and pull us around, and instinctual impulses. They all arise from ignorance and spiritual blindness.

## **3. Consciousness (Viññāṇa)**

Based on these unconscious processes and impulses, our consciousness arises. In Buddhism, consciousness always arises in relation to something — it is not just a blank slate. We perceive in accordance with our kamma, in accordance with who we are. And the deepest part of who we are can be said to be these unconscious processes.

## **4. Mind and Matter (Nāma-Rūpa)**

Based on these unconscious processes, our personality forms. And based on our personality will be the world that we perceive around us — in the sense that we perceive only that part of reality which corresponds with our own personality. There is a whole world around us, but we always only perceive a small portion of it that corresponds to our own inner inclinations.

## **5. The Senses (Saḷāyatana)**

Based on our individuality, somewhere in the past we have developed senses in order to perceive more properly that portion of the world we are inclined to perceive.

## **6. Contact (Phassa)**

Once we have senses that perceive an external world, we are all the time hit by that world, in a sense. The outside world all the time impresses itself upon us.

## **7. Feeling (Vedanā)**

Based on these impressions that arise from contact between the outside world and our senses, different feelings arise — sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant, and sometimes neutral.

## **8. Craving (Taṇhā)**

When we experience pleasant feelings, we want more of them. When we experience unpleasant feelings, we want to get away from them. And so desire arises — desire for more pleasure, and desire to escape the unpleasant.

## **9. Attachment (Upādāna)**

Based on these desires, we develop deeper habits, deeper cravings, deeper attachments — both to the world around us, as well as to our habits, our mental preconceptions, and our sense of who we are.

## **10. Becoming (Bhava)**

Based on this, a stream of becoming develops. We become. This is not merely a linear process, because the tendencies involved were there basically at the beginning as karmic formations. They are in turn fed by sense experience, by feelings, by the desires we have in response to those feelings. It is a whole cycle — a bundle of conditioning.

## **11–12. Birth, Ageing, and Death (Jāti, Jarāmaraṇa)**

All of this strengthens our sense of who we are. Based on our attachments and habits, we become more and more *something*. And when in the end our body dies, this accumulated energy does not die with it. It will seek a new base. Even when we die, this energy finds another body, an appropriate place to start off again.

This is a further-reaching effect that is often not talked about in Western Buddhism. It is not just the tangible and coarse suffering we experience throughout one life, but **the fact of rebirth itself is full of dangers and potential sufferings** — because once we are born, we have to start all over again, and the whole process of accumulating suffering and imperfection continues.

Such is the chain of the origination of further and further suffering and imperfection.

## **The Third Noble Truth: The Possibility of Transcendence**

But as stated before, there is also a light. There is the possibility of transcending all of this — and that is the Third Noble Truth.

Sometimes Buddhism has been accused of being pessimistic, but that is usually by people who forget that there are two more truths to the Four Noble Truths. The Third Noble Truth states plainly: **it is possible to transcend suffering and to overcome all imperfections.**

The mere fact that there is a possibility of transcendence — of going beyond all suffering — is itself a noble truth.

## **The Fourth Noble Truth: The Noble Eightfold Path**

The path to that transcendence is the Noble Eightfold Path, and it constitutes the Fourth Noble Truth.

One important note at the outset: although the Noble Eightfold Path is often presented as a sequence, in practice the different factors are often present simultaneously, or need to be developed in parallel. Sometimes one begins somewhere in the middle; sometimes the second factor helps to develop the first. It is not a rigid, step-by-step procedure.

### **1. Noble Perspective (*Sammā Diṭṭhi*)**

The path begins — at least in terms of presentation — with noble perspective (often rendered as "right view"). And what does this constitute? It is in fact the first three truths we have already talked about: an understanding that life is full of suffering and imperfection, an understanding that there is an origin to suffering, and an understanding that these can be transcended.

So the first three Noble Truths are, in a sense, included within the Fourth Noble Truth. The realisation of the first three truths constitutes the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

## **2. Noble Thinking (Sammā Saṅkappa)**

When we have a noble perspective in life, we begin to think more nobly. We begin to think about how we can do good in the world, how we can help, how we can benefit others, and how we can make the best of our own lives. And of course, proper and noble thinking equally conditions our noble perspective in return.

## **3. Noble Speech (Sammā Vācā)**

Based on a noble perspective and more noble thoughts, we begin to speak better — more nobly, more compassionately. When we talk with people, we begin to speak with greater depth and wisdom, in a manner that is most beneficial for us and for others.

## **4. Noble Action (Sammā Kammanta)**

Parallel with this, we also develop a more noble way of acting. We begin to act more compassionately, in ways that are beneficial both for ourselves and for others. This includes also mental action — it does not necessarily mean only helping others or doing physical work. Even when we learn something that is likely to make us a better or more useful person, this is included in noble action.

## 5. Noble Livelihood (**Sammā Ājīva**)

Based on noble action and noble speech, we cultivate more noble ways of living. Gradually we will see to it that we do not earn a living in a manner that harms others — such as through killing living beings, selling weapons, selling drugs, cheating people, and so on. These are all ignoble ways of making a living, and they are ways that we naturally abandon when we progress on the Noble Eightfold Path.

## 6. Noble Effort (**Sammā Vāyāma**)

Based on and parallel with the preceding factors, we begin to look more often into our mind, and there we start to cultivate four kinds of noble effort:

1. The effort to **remove** unwholesome ways of thinking from our mind.
2. The effort to **prevent** unwholesome thoughts from arising in the first place.
3. The effort to **invite** wholesome thoughts and wholesome states of mind.
4. The effort to **maintain** wholesome mind states so that they remain longer and longer within ourselves.

## 7. Noble Clarity (**Sammā Sati**)

Based on these efforts, we develop clarity of mind — what is usually called "mindfulness," a word that is sometimes not entirely satisfactory. Clarity is a good word. In the past, some have

used the term *self-remembering*, which is also quite apt. It is about developing clarity about who we are and about our present experience.

The Buddha spoke of four domains in which to develop this clarity:

1. **Body** — We develop an understanding of how our body feels, how it is positioned in life right now.
2. **Feeling** — We develop an understanding of how we feel at the present moment, because this will condition how clear our mind will be and how we interact with the world.
3. **Mind states** — We develop an understanding of our current mental states: do I feel happy or unhappy? Concentrated or scattered?
4. **Dhamma** — We relate what we are experiencing to the noble task of becoming enlightened. We don't just note "now I'm angry" or "now I'm greedy"; we understand whether something is a hindrance on the spiritual path or a factor of the spiritual path. There is a value judgement about what we are experiencing and how it relates to our goal of becoming a more noble person and transcending suffering.

## **8. Noble Samādhi (Sammā Samādhi)**

Based on all of the foregoing, we can develop the last factor of the Eightfold Path: noble Samādhi — the development of meditative depth, greater calm, expanded states of consciousness, and greater experience of enlightenment.

In order to understand this factor properly, it is useful to think about a simplified version of the **five jhāna factors**:

1. **Mental Application (Vitakka)** — When we sit down to meditate, we choose some subject to apply our mind to. It can be a Dhamma topic, the breath, the elements within and around us, or even the good qualities of higher beings such as devas. In Buddhism, meditation on the good qualities of celestial beings is actually encouraged. Whenever we apply our mind to such subjects, we develop this first factor of Samādhi.
2. **Sustainment (Vicāra)** — Whenever we are able to sustain our meditation — sustain our experience of the breath, or our connection with the Dhamma, or our perception of the path we are on — this sustainment of mind is the second factor.
3. **Joy (Pīti)** — Based on sustained meditation, sometimes we experience greater joy, certain signs of meditation, experiences of light, a greater lightness of body, and so on. These naturally arise from sustainment of meditation and constitute the third factor — joy, curiosity, exaltation.
4. **Equanimous Pleasure (Sukha)** — When the exaltation becomes more balanced, we begin to feel less elated but more stable — more enlightened, in a sense. More like floating above the world. This is the fourth jhāna factor.
5. **Oneness of Mind (Ekaggatā)** — This gives way to a unification of mind. This oneness of mind can then be used for directing the mind towards becoming enlightened, towards

finding the right answers in life, towards understanding ourselves more deeply. For some, this might include perceiving past lives; for others, it might not. But this oneness of mind can be used in various ways to make further progress on the path.

### **Beyond the Eight: Knowledge and Liberation**

Sometimes these eight factors are extended to ten, which then include **Right Knowledge** and **Right Liberation**. Based on noble Samādhi, we develop certain knowledge of how things are, how existence works, and who we are. And this knowledge leads us onwards towards liberation and transcendence.

### **Conclusion**

Such is a brief overview of the Four Noble Truths: **suffering and the ending of suffering**. Or, in their fuller form:

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering and Imperfection
2. The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering
3. The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering — the Transcendence of Suffering and Imperfection
4. The Noble Truth of the Path to the Transcendence of Suffering and Imperfection

*Namo Buddhāya*