

## The 4 noble truths as meaning and purpose of life

Source: **Sabba,lahusa Sutta (A 8.40, SD 6.5)**, The fruits of breaking the precepts<sup>1</sup> translated by Piya Tan © 2003.

**2.0** In spiritual terms, our personal disadvantages and sufferings should not be taken merely as “bad karma” [1.2]. We should wisely apply **the 4 noble truths** to our situation. This may be said to be “situational spirituality,” that is, learning from a situation and acting on it.

### 2.1 IDENTIFYING THE SUFFERING

First of all, we ask what is **the meaning** of all this that I am going through or have to go through? It means that the **suffering** is real. Notice how we say that only “the suffering is real”: we do not say “my” suffering, or use “I” or “me”—we only *identify* the suffering, but we do not identify *with* it, that is, we do not own the suffering. This approach becomes clearer when we further reflect that “pain is natural, suffering is optional.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, we reflect, “There is **suffering**”—this is the first noble truth.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.2 WHY WE SUFFER

**2.2.1** Secondly, we ask again, “What is the **meaning** of this suffering?” Another way of asking this question—a more practical one—is, “**How did this suffering arise?**” When we carefully reflect on this question, we should begin to understand the difference between “pain” (*dukkha,dukkha*) and “suffering” (*saṅkhāra,dukkha*).<sup>4</sup> As we have said, “Pain is natural,” mainly because we have a body, and the body feels when stimulated by something unpleasant—so pain arises.

**2.2.2** Such pain can, however, be useful to us: it tells us that our body’s cells are being destroyed, or that a bodily situation needs adjustment or correction. So, we act to heal or improve our bodily condition. On the other hand, often enough, we are *not* happy with the pain: now this is suffering. It is the mental aspect of this pain. We have *internalized* an “external” condition by thinking about it.

**2.2.3** Often, thinking about it makes it worse, or even, thinking about it makes it so. We feel our pain, and we *hate* it; we *long* for a situation when this pain is gone, or when we can feel something pleasant, and so on.<sup>5</sup> We desire to get rid of the pain; we desire some kind of pleasure. In short, this is called **craving** (*taṇhā*), the second noble truth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sabba,lahusa Sutta (A 8.40, SD 6.5), <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/6.5-Sabbalahusa-S-a8.40-piya.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See SD 48.9 (6.2.4.5).

<sup>3</sup> On the nature of values, see SD 43.1 (3.5.1.3).

<sup>4</sup> (**Sāriputta**) **Dukkha S** (S 38.14) speaks of 3 kinds: “physical suffering” (*dukkha,dukkhatā*), “suffering due to change” (*vipariṇāma,dukkhatā*), and “suffering due to formations” (*saṅkhāra,dukkhatā*): S 38.14/4:259 (SD 1.1-(4.1)); also S 45.165/5:56; D 3:216.

<sup>5</sup> On the 2 kinds of pain, see **Sall’atthana S** (S 36.6/4:207-210), SD 5.5; see also **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20), SD 1.12.

<sup>6</sup> On craving (*taṇhā*), see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,6 n), SD 1.1. On craving for sensual pleasures, see **Kāma-c,chanda**, SD 32.2.

## 2.3 ENDING SUFFERING

**2.3.1** When we accept suffering to be what it is, nothing more, nothing less (as far as possible), we have grasped the venomous snake by its neck.<sup>7</sup> When we understand the difference between pain and suffering—that pain is natural, suffering optional—we understand that suffering is mind-made. Whatever is mind-made can be “unmade” by the mind, with the proper training.

**2.3.2** We now come to the **purpose** behind suffering—or, better, the purpose of life. Properly speaking, there is *no* purpose in suffering or life in itself. Purpose here refers to how we view life and its imperfections, and what we *can* do about it.

Actually, “how we view life” is the same as the meaning of suffering [2.2]. In other words, life has *no* purpose, but we put purpose into life. Each of us needs to understand and accept the first 2 noble truths [2.1+2.2] before we can effectively come to this stage. We will return to this point in our discussion on the 4<sup>th</sup> noble truth [2.4].

### 2.3.3 Unconditional happiness

**2.3.3.1** Let us return to the question: What is the purpose of life? Some people think that the purpose of life is to be *happy*. This may be true in a very short term—because happiness can never last. When the conditions that bring us happiness are gone, then we feel sorrow—happiness and sorrow are inseparable twins: we cannot know one without the other.<sup>8</sup>

**2.3.3.2** Surely, there must be some kind of **unconditional happiness**, one that does not depend on any conditions at all. If our happiness comes from having a lot of money, or pleasure, or power, then, when that condition is missing, we are unhappy. Even something as simple as being happy with our car, or our handphone, can bring us great suffering when something undesirable happens to that source of our happiness. So, it makes sense to think of the possibility of “unconditional happiness.”

**2.3.3.3** In fact, there is such a happiness: it is called **nirvana** (*nibbāna*).<sup>9</sup> We cannot really say much that is meaningful about nirvana: we must personally experience it for ourself. So we will leave it at that for the moment, and discuss what is more practical.

## 2.4 THE WAY TO END SUFFERING

**2.4.1** Earlier on [2.3.3], we asked, “**What is the purpose of life?**” and we discussed the problem of happiness. Perhaps, there is a better answer to this question, that is: the true purpose of life is to **grow**. We see growth in humans, animals, and plants. Science calls this “evolution.” We have all evolved *biologically*, that is, as a species, or humans as races and tribes. But, that is as far as biological evolution goes. After that, we are on our own.

### 2.4.2 The 3 trainings

**2.4.2.0** “On our own” refers to the evolution of **the true individual** (*sappurisa*). To be a true individual, according to early Buddhism, we need to go through **the 3 trainings** in moral virtue (*sīla, sikkhā*),

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<sup>7</sup> This parable of the water-snake, on the right approach to learning the truth, is from **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,23-29) + SD 3.13 (3.1.3).

<sup>8</sup> See the 8 worldly conditions: **Loka, dhamma S 1** (A 8.5), SD 42.2 & **Loka, dhamma S 2** (A 8.6), SD 42.3.

<sup>9</sup> On terms related to nirvana, see SD 1.1 (4.2.2).

mental development (*samādhī,sikkhā*) and insight wisdom (*paññā,sikkhā*). Those who diligently train themselves in this way are said to be walking the eightfold path<sup>10</sup> to end up as members of the noble sangha, the spiritual community of the awakening and the awakened.

**2.4.2.1 The 1<sup>st</sup> training**—that of moral virtue—is the understanding of the nature of our 5 physical senses and the mind. We train our senses not to be caught up and misled by their respective objects, and the mind by its own thoughts, especially on account of the unwholesome karmic roots of greed, hate and delusion.

Since our senses are what we really are, **our self-created world**, we need to refine them as sense-faculties, so that they are able to feel beauty and see truth.<sup>11</sup> In other words, our sense-faculties are capable to being trained not to be caught up with likes and dislikes, but to rise above such dichotomies, and prepare the mind to be unified, so that it is the basis for mental joy.

**2.4.2.2 The 2<sup>nd</sup> training** is that of mental cultivation, which is the beginning of the true path of spiritual evolution. We begin by learning to restrain the 5 physical senses so that they are *calm*, that is, not running after any sense-objects, so that the mind can focus on itself. As the mind stays focused on itself, it *clears* itself up like a peaceful lake high in the mountain wilds.

The mind calms itself with the stilling of the breath, and beautifies itself with lovingkindness. In fact, the mind can be calm and beautified with either breath or lovingkindness. But lovingkindness—a joyful and unconditional acceptance of self and others—is a divine emotion that also makes it easier for us to keep the precepts—that is, the 1<sup>st</sup> training [2.4.2.1]. So, moral virtue and mental cultivation help one another to *pari passu* spiral up the path of spiritual evolution.

**2.4.2.3** A well-cultivated body (*bhāvita,kāya*) and a well-cultivated mind (*bhāvita,citta*) are the foundations for **the 3<sup>rd</sup> training**, that of insight wisdom. This is the calm and clear mind happily at work, looking deep into our own being and the true nature of life. Looking deep, the mind sees a universal pattern of things, that is, all things in this universe go through the same cycle of impermanence, change and becoming other.

When we truly see the reality of this **impermanence**, we understand why there is no way that we can ever grasp at any thing, that even pain, pleasure, and neutral feeling, are all impermanent.<sup>12</sup> If we do try to grasp at any of these things, suffering arises. It is like a snake biting its own tail: it feels the pain. and thinks that someone else is biting its tail, so it bites harder, and suffers even more. Only when it stops biting, to let go of itself, it is relieved of its suffering. When we stop clinging to the world (after understanding what this means by way of the first 3 truths), then we begin to awaken to full liberation.

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<sup>10</sup> On the eightfold path (*aṭṭh'āṅika magga*) refers the proper practice of the 3 trainings. When the practitioner attains the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of awakening—as a streamwinner (*sotāpanna*)—then, he walks up the noble eightfold path (*ariya aṭṭh'āṅika magga*) as a noble saint, heading for full awakening: see **Sacca Vibhaṅga S** (M 141,23-31), SD 11.11; **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22,21), SD 13.2; **Mahā Cattārisaka S** (M 117), SD 6.10.

<sup>11</sup> On beauty and truth, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2); as aesthetics, see SD 46.5 (2.4.2); right livelihood SD 37.8 (2.3); see also (Reflection) No views frees, R255.

<sup>12</sup> On the recollection of impermanence and its benefits, see (**Anicca**) **Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.