

## Chapter 8

### The Four Noble Truths

There are the doctrines of “Four Noble Truths”<sup>1</sup> enunciated by the Buddha in his first sermon, the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma.

The first Noble Truth is “suffering”, which explains the impermanence and imperfection of human life that cause humans to experience pain and frustrations.

The second Noble Truth is “arising”, which refers to all kinds of desires as the cause of suffering.

The third Noble Truth is the “cessation of suffering”, which espouses that all sufferings eventually cease.

The fourth Noble Truth is the “path leading to the extinction of affliction”, which embraces the methods to remove afflictions.

The Buddha here has taught us the “Eight Correct Paths”, which will be discussed in the next chapter. In sum, the “Four Noble Truths” is the theoretical and practical foundation of Buddhist practice that assists us to escape suffering and attain happiness.

Hinayana Buddhism sees the “Four Noble Truths” as its fundamental guidance of cultivation. If we lack a deep

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<sup>1</sup> 四聖諦. The Four Noble Truths are referred to as four characters; each character represents one truth.

understanding of the “Four Noble Truths”, we will find it difficult to enter into Mahayana Buddhism.

In the *Nirvāṇa Sutra*, the Buddha offers an invaluable elucidation on suffering. Humans encounter various kinds of suffering in the world, including both corporeal and spiritual ones. In addition, there are afflictions during the cycles of life and death.

Sometimes, corporeal pains could be healed by medicine, whereas spiritual pains could only be alleviated or eradicated by our ability to know the Truth.

The “Four Noble Truths” teach us a principle, which was originally used to relieve individual sufferings, but could also be applied to resolve other problems, such as wars on Earth.

The “Four Noble Truths” refer to the four interrelated issues<sup>2</sup>, including:

1. Suffering - determines where things go wrong.
2. Arising - affirms the reasons of suffering.
3. Cessation - reveals that there is an end to all sufferings.
4. Path - looks for methods of terminating sufferings or paths of cultivation.

If we read through Buddhist textbooks written in English, we will usually find that the discussions around the Four Noble Truths and Eight Correct Paths (see Chapter 9 for details) occupy a remarkable status. Many writers are inclined to equal

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<sup>2</sup> 苦, 集, 滅, 道.

Buddhism with the Four Noble Truths, or to consider that the Four Noble Truths occupies an important position.

From the author's point of view, the Four Noble Truths is not equivalent to Buddhism. If we take the Four Noble Truths as the central theme of Buddhism without explaining the relevant theories, we will misguide students. If we ask any Chinese person the question of what is Buddhism, we will most likely receive the following answers: "Buddhism is about the principle of karmic retribution"<sup>3</sup> or "Goodness will have a good reward". Unless someone has already had some profound understanding of Buddhism, it is likely that no one will talk about the Four Noble Truths.

Anyone who has some basic knowledge about Buddhism will realize the importance of "enlightenment", which is to change delusion into awakening, and to escape suffering and attain happiness. It is also called the restoration of "intrinsic nature". Although some books in English about Buddhism have mentioned individual "intrinsic nature", its importance is often omitted. Besides, Buddhist learning is not merely confined to the "Four Noble Truths". We are not trying to criticize other writers for placing too heavy an emphasis on the Four Noble Truths. Unfortunately, however, if someone only reads modern books in English about of Buddhism, this will hardly be sufficient to learn the gist of Buddhism.

I call on readers to pay attention to the following aspects when dealing with the "Four Noble Truths".

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<sup>3</sup> Or "causes, conditions, and consequences."

First, we must know that Buddhism teaches us to be aware of the consequences of our own behaviours (the unavoidable cause and consequence).

Second, we must understand the existence of “intrinsic nature”, which is obstructed by craving, aversion, and ignorance. We also know that our “intrinsic nature” can be restored through the elimination of craving, aversion, ignorance, delusion, discrimination, and attachment. This is to see one's own nature and accomplish Buddhahood. As long as we restore our “intrinsic nature”, we will have the wisdom to recognize the Truth. This recognition will make all the sufferings disappear, which is the so-called “changing delusion into awakening, escaping suffering, and attaining happiness”. Our “intrinsic nature” is the same as the Buddha-nature. As long as we follow the Buddha’s teachings, we will be able to successfully restore the “intrinsic nature”, entering *nirvāṇa*, and become free from the sufferings of the cycles of life and death.

Third, we must know the relationships between suffering, origination, cessation, and path.

- 1) Suffering: There are all kinds of suffering in our lives, including the suffering of birth, age, sickness and death, the suffering of not-getting, and other forms of suffering.
- 2) Accumulation: This is to know the reasons for suffering. Buddhism considers that craving, aversion, and ignorance obstruct our “intrinsic nature”. All of these lead to our misunderstandings of facts, and make our life experience unbearable. If we possess the wisdom of understanding

things, we will be able to relieve our sufferings.

3) Cessation: We know that suffering will be terminated by the restoration of “intrinsic nature”. We will thus enter so-called *nirvāṇa*.

4) Path: We know the methods of relieving pains, as our sufferings can be alleviated through the reduction of craving, aversion, and ignorance. Medical and scientific knowledge are helpful in some circumstances. I suggest that we adhere to the Buddha’s teachings, including the Eight Correct Paths. In the end, we will attain *nirvāṇa*.

When you hear a teacher talking about the Four Noble Truths, you know that the teacher refers to the abovementioned four points. I would like to inform readers that, above all, we must understand and remember the first two points, as the Four Noble Truths, causation, and the restoration of “intrinsic nature” are interrelated. Detailed discussions will be laid out in Chapter 19, which will address differences between Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism.

Now that we have had a correct understanding of Buddhism and the Four Noble Truths. Let us take a look at the ways in which people deal with problems in the world today.

First of all, we must recognize all the sufferings existing in the world. If we cannot understand our sufferings, we will misdiagnose. Treating patients without an accurate diagnosis is surely futile. Now that the chaos and terror of the Middle East have spread globally, we would agree that terrorism is one of

the most serious and difficult problems in the world. Unquestionably we are all against terrorism, but terrorism itself is not the real problem. So-called terrorism is only a rhetorical expression to describe the terroristic impressions created by those criminals' monstrous crimes. They are even willing to make suicide-style attacks in order to gain compassion from others. However, they always accomplish the opposite, as civil society cannot possibly sympathize with atrocity.

Terrorism is seen as a matter of suffering from any perspective. While the real reason of this suffering is hatred, the terroristic crimes are triggered by aversion, ignorance, and craving. To terminate terrorism, we have to begin with eliminating craving, aversion, ignorance as well as ethnic hatred. The Four Noble Truths to some degree will help us resolve the problems in the world. People should appreciate the enlightenment offered by Buddhism.