



## Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

### Four Truths of the Noble Ones

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To understand and properly process this lecture we first should set the correct motivation. Our motivation determines how we deal with situations and what kind of result we will ultimately achieve.

We all know our own mind best, and for this reason we must bear witness to our personal way of thinking. Most of the time our thoughts are quite egotistical. For example we might think: *“I am attending this talk today because I want to understand how to deal with my difficulties. Maybe I will learn some methods to solve my problems.”* That is not an outright bad motivation, but it has a very limited scope. We can broaden it by including more people. As a Buddhist, I use the following as my basic contemplation: all sentient beings - from the smallest insect to the most enormous whale - want to experience well-being and happiness, and to avoid suffering. I also want to be happy. Thus, my subsequent thought is that I cannot achieve this entirely on my own, but only in conjunction with others. Therefore I should also engage in cultivating the happiness and comfort of all beings around me. This is the realistic approach to fostering a far-reaching attitude that will urge me to act for the benefit of all. Please listen today with the motivation of wishing that we may personally glimpse the nature of suffering and use this insight to both overcome our individual difficulties and to put our knowledge at the service of others.

The text I will use as the reference for my talk today is the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion.*<sup>1</sup> The beginning of every sutra establishes its historical context: where the teaching was given, who comprised the audience, and so on. The Buddha introduced this practice himself to verify the authenticity of every text. The first lines read:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.than.html> translated by Thanissaro Bikkhu

*I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Vārāṇasī in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks:*

These days more would be required to prove in a scientific or legal way that this really occurred, but during the Buddha's time this was enough.

The main part of the teaching follows. Its essence is the Buddhist view of interdependent origination. The framework is the Four Truths of the Noble Ones. Usually the term The Four Noble Truths is used, but when translated from Tibetan this is not precisely correct. These truths can only be fully comprehended by highly realised practitioners who have direct insight into the nature of reality. Such beings are called Noble Ones or Aryas.<sup>2</sup>

Interdependent origination means that no phenomena occur completely independently, but appear through a variety of causes and conditions. We can roughly distinguish two types. The first is interdependent origination based on relation - relational interdependent origination. Were we to say that this glass is light, the lightness is not a quality inherent to the glass so our claim must be in relation to something heavier. Likewise, as I am sitting in front of you, the windows are to my left. For me to say that the windows are on the left is correct, but only in relation to myself. For you they are on the right. In everyday usage, to express this idea we sometimes say 'everything is relative'.

The other kind of interdependent origination results from causal connections - causal interdependent origination. A flower, for example, develops from a seed, which is the main cause. However, contributing conditions like water, sunlight, the proper soil etc. are also needed. If we attribute certain qualities to the flower like beauty, large size etc. we are again referring to the relational interdependent origination. We use both kinds of interdependent origination to perceive most phenomena.

Interdependent origination comprises all perceptions, and also applies to the Four Truths I am teaching on today. The main topics in this context are suffering and how it comes into being - the first two Truths - then the cessation of suffering and the path leading to it - the last two Truths.

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<sup>2</sup> *The term Noble Ones or Aryas (Tibetan 'phags pa) applies to beings who have entered the Path of Seeing. They have direct insight into the nature of reality and therefore can immediately recognize the emptiness of all phenomena, as well as a phenomena's coming into being through interdependent origination. At this stage, therefore, fabricated and conceptual crutches are no longer needed to approximate the meaning of the nature of reality.*

The first two paragraphs of the main text provide an overview over the Four Truths. First is the Truth of Suffering.<sup>3</sup> This not directly mentioned at this point, but is the starting point and will be explained later in the text. Second is the Truth of the Origin of Suffering - the two extremes. Third is the Cessation of Suffering or a state devoid of suffering - Nirvana.<sup>4</sup> The Fourth Truth is the Truth of the Path leading to cessation - the Noble Eightfold Path.

*There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two? That which is devoted to sensual pleasure in connection with sensuality: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable; and that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathāgata—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.*

*And what is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that—producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding? Precisely this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the middle way realized by the Tathāgata that— producing vision, producing knowledge—leads to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.*

The two extremes producing suffering are *sensual pleasure in connection with sensuality* and *self-affliction*. To overcome them and reach nirvana we need to tread the Noble Eightfold Path. This completes the introduction.

Not long ago I watched a Youtube clip where in connection with the Four Truths someone said that life as such is suffering. I believe that this misinterprets the texts. That is not how it is written. Yes, the Four Truths state that life entails suffering, but these Truths also provide guidelines showing precisely how the nature of reality and our lives function. The moment we come to understand this functionality, we can use it as we use our legs and arms. Based on this understanding, we are free to choose behaviour which furthers our well-being or actions that further our suffering. A blanket statement that life is suffering is too superficial. That attitude completely dismisses life and denies any possibility for change. If we think this through, we could also consequently claim that cessation and the path are useless.

Now I will present a more detailed description of each truth, starting with the Truth of Suffering or, according to this translation, Stress.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Pali word Dhukka is most commonly translated with the word suffering, but it incorporates a variety of more subtle emotional states, like frustration, dissatisfaction, disease. In the text referred to here the word stress is used.*

<sup>4</sup> *The text uses the word 'unbinding' instead of nirvana.*

## Four Truths of the Noble Ones

*Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, ageing is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress & despair are stressful; association with the unloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging- aggregates are stressful.*

In the First Truth the Buddha describes painful situations that are inherent aspects of human life. The next step is to ask what causes these situations, so we can find solutions to end or overcome them. This investigation leads to the Second Truth - the Truth of the Origin of Suffering. We can liken this to having a stomach ache. The first step is to realise that we are in pain and that we want to get rid of it. To reach this goal, we need to discover the causes of discomfort to determine the appropriate cure and to prevent future sickness. Applying this to our lives, we find two sources of suffering - our actions and our afflictive emotions. The following paragraph discusses these.

*And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.*

We deal with a whole range of afflictions in our everyday lives: anger, pride, jealousy and as this text points out especially desire and greed. We can clearly observe how politicians and the media purposefully incite emotions in order to manipulate people and influence their behaviour. For example, we experience the instigation of fear towards foreigners or a certain group of people, claiming that they deprive us of something or pose an acute danger to us and our lifestyle. This fear can lead to harmful actions towards these people, which we would not normally commit. Contemplating this example allows us to easily understand how fear can destroy our inner peace and distort our sense of reality.

Action translated directly into Sanskrit means 'karma'. In Buddhism we often speak of the law of cause and effect: an action will result in an according outcome. When we behave aggressively, aggression will also govern the result, consequently leading to more suffering. The Second Truth concerns this dynamic. These Four Truths simply describe some fundamental principles of psychology. First, as in the stomachache example we observe that something is not right. That is the First Truth. We realise where the problem stems from - the Second Truth. Embarking on this search for a cause shows us something very important: first the wish to improve, and secondly the knowledge that a state free of this difficulty can be achieved. That is the Third Truth - the Truth of Cessation, described in the following paragraph:

*And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving.*

Most religions describe various places where beings may dwell: hell, heaven, life on earth etc. But in connection with the Four Truths we are not aiming to reach a certain place the moment we achieve cessation. We do not enter into some heavenly realm. We

### *Four Truths of the Noble Ones*

are concerned with purely psychological states. Our aim is to achieve a state free from any kind of suffering or mental discomfort. And to achieve this, we need to follow a path - the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the Truth of the Path.

As already stated, craving is the main cause of our problems. Therefore craving is what we must free ourselves from. The moment we eliminate craving, our mind stream is liberated. This state of mind is called nirvana.

The following example illustrates that this is a mental state. Let's imagine we are at a beautiful resort with a great flower-filled park, delicious food and a dream beach. If we are in a bad mood or grieving, however, even being in paradise cannot help us. We will remain miserable. On the other hand, if we are happy, surrounded by people we love, we do not mind even a mediocre place. So what helps us overcome suffering is not primarily changing our environment, but strengthening our mental qualities.

Wishing to achieve long-lasting well-being, we embark on the eightfold path. This is like being sick and wanting to recover. Before setting out on any path, however, we must determine that it is the correct one that will lead us to our desired destination. Do the methods really counteract my afflictive emotions? Do they encourage wholesome mental states and inner balance? We act like we do when checking a doctor's recommendations.

As soon as we are convinced that we are on the right path, we should act. This is the message of the Fourth Truth:

*And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.*

In this text the Buddha is advocating these Four Truths, but as previously explained, we need to examine their validity ourselves. In another sutra Buddha says not to automatically assume that his words are correct, but to check them for ourselves. Through self-examination we need to be convinced of the harm that certain emotions bring. Does a state free of suffering really exist? Is it possible for right view, right resolve etc. to lead me there? We must broaden this investigation to all parts of our life. The Buddha claims that our disturbed mind causes our unhappiness, and we can observe how we feel when we argue with others. Likewise, how do we feel when we exercise right understanding? What are the consequences of lying and stealing? What does implementing right livelihood look like? Reaching a point of utter conviction is crucial for deciding whether or not to follow the the Buddha's instructions wholeheartedly, or to reject them.

The text ends with a summary: The First Truth of Suffering is what we need to determine. The Second Truth of the Origin of Suffering is what we need to abandon. The Third Truth of Cessation is what we need to realise. The Fourth Truth of the Path is what we need to practice. As mentioned earlier, we absolutely must not feel that these truths

*Four Truths of the Noble Ones*

are unconnected to our everyday lives, far away and unreachable. These truths describe the natural reality of normal life. They introduce us to a simple organic process. Nothing extraordinary. We use this way of thinking all the time, as for example when we are sick. The moment we become aware that we are in pain or that something is wrong with us on some level and we are suffering, we search for a reason and a solution. Because we are familiar with a state of health and well-being, we look for the appropriate medicine and behaviour to help us heal. This sequence of the Four Truths of the Noble Ones can become an integral part of our lives. Please consider this carefully!

*Translated from Tibetan and transcribed by Daniela Hartmann*

*Edited by Judith and Wayne Amtzis*