

The Significance of the Four Noble Truths

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Contents

Introduction	3
General Nature of the Truths	3
The First Noble Truth	5
The Second Noble Truth	9
The Third Noble Truth	11
The Fourth Noble Truth	16
Conclusion	20

Introduction

I am happy to be able to speak to you this evening on a subject which forms the very heart and core of Buddhism. It is the realization of the eternal verities of life which the Buddha had gained by attainment to Enlightenment beneath the spreading branches of the Bodhi tree in Gayā, that he proclaimed over 2,500 years ago to a suffering world, in just four formulae or enunciations, which he himself called the “Four Noble Truths.” These Truths were made known by him in his very first sermon¹ delivered seven weeks after his Enlightenment, and they constitute the essence of the Dhamma pervading every aspect and every part of it.

There is first the Noble Truth of *Dukkha* (suffering). Secondly, there is the Noble Truth of the Cause of Dukkha. Thirdly, there is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha, and fourthly there is the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Dukkha.

In this lecture I propose first to dwell on the general nature of these Four Noble Truths as distinguished from their specific contents, and, thereafter, to proceed to consider their contents and their significance.

General Nature of the Truths

At the outset, one may be tempted to ask why these Truths are called Noble (the Pali word is *ariya*), and why they are only four in number, not less, not more. The well-known commentator Venerable Buddhaghosa in his *Visuddhimagga* has answered both these questions. They are called “Noble” Truths for three reasons—because they have been discovered by the Noble One—the Buddha, because they can be fully realized only by the Noble Ones such as the Buddhas, the *Pacceka Buddhas* and the *Arahants*, and also because they are real and not unreal; they deal with reality.

As regards the reason why there are only Four Truths, not less, not more, the explanation is that no other Truth can harmoniously exist side by side with these Four Truths, and not one of these Truths can be eliminated without loss of meaning. If one of these Truths is eliminated, the sequence suffers, the chain of reasoning breaks and the meaning in its fullness is lost. If one more Truth is added, that Truth is bound to be of a different significance and different type covering a different field, and will not fit in with the existing Truths. Hence it is not possible to conceive of either supplementing them or reducing their number. Dukkha, dukkha’s cause, dukkha’s cessation and the path leading to this cessation—so constitute a certain totality, a definite unity of logical considerations, that they must remain at four, not less, not more.

Not only do these Four Truths form the heart and core of Buddhism, these Truths are also so far-reaching—touching life at every point, so encompassing, taking in every aspect of life, that no amount of thinking on them can ever be deemed sufficient or complete until such thinking reaches the level of a definite spiritual experience, as distinguished from a mere theoretical understanding of them. One has only to glance through the pages of the 12th part of the Saṃyutta Nikāya known as the Sacca Saṃyutta or Kindred Sayings about the Truths, to realize the importance of repeatedly pondering on these Truths. Here, these Four Noble Truths are regarded as the topic of all topics, the one topic which appertains to Reality and leads to the awakening of the highest wisdom, the one topic for the complete realization of which

¹ *Dhamma Cakka Pavattana Sutta, Kindred Sayings*. V. p. 356

“householders in the past have rightly gone forth from home to the homeless life².” This is the one line of thought worth cultivating, worth meditating on. “All other thoughts,” says the Buddha, “are not concerned with real profit; they are not the rudiments of the Holy life; they conduce not to revulsion, to cessation, to tranquility, to full understanding, to perfect wisdom. They conduce not to Nibbāna³.”

How very vital these Four Truths are to man’s spiritual development can be gauged from this significant remark of the Buddha appearing in the Sacca Saṃyutta.

“O monks, if there are any for whom you have any fellow feeling, if there are any who may deem you worth listening to your friends and colleagues, your kinsmen and blood-relations, it is your duty to rouse them, admonish them, and establish them in the comprehension of the Four Noble Truths.⁴” Hence, every occasion for hearing these Truths should be regarded as an additional aid, a further approach to the process of realizing the wisdom of these inestimable Truths.

Those who have intently contemplated these Truths will tell you that a wonderful feature about these Truths is that each time you ponder deeply on them some new aspect of these Truths, some new feature, some new point of view will present itself before you. In short, you will know that you have learnt something new. This is so because it takes time to comprehend fully these Truths; they are so vast, so wide, so full and so profound, while man’s ability to comprehend them and realize them is so weak and so poor.

It is said that nothing is more interesting to man than the study of man. Viewed in this light a study of the Four Noble Truths should be of the deepest interest to us since they are all about us, they concern us, and are dependent on us. These Truths involve a consideration, of not so much the external world as the internal world of mind. Actually, the external is a reflection of the internal. There is no external world to be viewed, if there is no internal world which can view it. The physical is always a manifestation of the mental. Hence it is that the Buddha in the Rohitassa Sutta said, “In this one fathom long body along with its perceptions and thoughts do I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world and the path leading to the cessation of the world⁵. The word “world” here means the world of dukkha (suffering) and dukkha is an experience of the internal world of self. It should therefore be our aim, meditating on these Truths, to be able to see in ourselves, in the everyday affairs of our lives, in every event and circumstance connected with ourselves, an exemplification of these Four Noble Truths until they become a definite living experience—a spiritual experience which is quite different from a theoretical understanding of these Truths.

Another feature about these Truths, which those who contemplate them intently will tell you, is that when the First Noble Truth is comprehended by anyone, the Second Noble Truth suggests itself to him, and when the Second Noble Truth is comprehended, the Third Noble Truth suggests itself, and similarly the Fourth. The Buddha is reported to have mentioned this, as stated by the Monk Gavampati in the Sacca Saṃyutta.⁶ These Truths thus constitute a progressive series, each Truth leading up to the next and each throwing light on the next.

It is the failure to understand these Truths that is responsible for the distressing position in

² *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 352

³ *Ibid* p. 354, p. 355, p. 378

⁴ *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 368

⁵ *Kindred Sayings* I. p. 86

⁶ *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 369

which man finds himself, tossed about as he is in a state of conflicting emotions, passions and desires. In the *Koṭigāma Vagga* of the Saṃyutta Nikāya the Buddha has said: “O Monks, it is through not understanding, not penetrating these Four Noble Truths that we have run on, wandered on, this long, long road, both you and I.”⁷

One feature about these Truths, which needs special mention and which for practical purposes is perhaps the most important, is the urgency of understanding and realizing them. Many are the illustrations employed by the Buddha to emphasize this urgency. I shall content myself with mentioning just one. It is recorded in the *Sacca Saṃyutta* that the Buddha on one occasion asked this question: “O Monks, when one’s turban is ablaze or one’s head is ablaze what should be done?” The monks answered “Lord, when one’s turban is ablaze or head is ablaze, for the extinguishing thereof, one must put forth extra desire, extra effort, extra endeavour, extra impulse, extra attention.” “Monks,” rejoined the Buddha, “It is just such an extra desire, effort, endeavour, impulse, mindfulness and attention that one should put forth for the comprehension of the Four Noble Truths.”⁸ Can the urgency of realizing these Truths be brought home more forcefully and more vividly?

The First Noble Truth

Now that we have considered from several angles the nature of the Four Noble Truths, let us proceed to consider the contents of these Truths and their significance.

The first Noble Truth deals with the indisputable fact of dukkha, that ever present feature of existence, and rightly therefore, the starting point of the Dhamma. I say it is rightly the starting point, because the one aim of the Dhamma of the Buddha is to show a way of escape from dukkha. Hence he has said:

“Dukkhañ c’eva paññapemi
Dukkhaṃ ca nirodham”⁹

“One thing only do I teach
Sorrow and its end to reach”

Let us understand this Truth in the way enunciated by the Buddha. “This, O Monks,” said the Buddha, “is the Noble Truth of Dukkha: Birth is dukkha, Decay is dukkha, Death is dukkha. Sorrow, Lamentation, Pain, Grief and Despair are dukkha. Association with the unloved, separation from the loved—that is also dukkha. Not to get what one desires—that is also dukkha. In a word, this five-fold mass which is based on grasping—that is dukkha.”¹⁰ Except the last example just mentioned, to which reference will be made later, the others are examples of the obvious manifestations of dukkha.

Now what exactly is dukkha? The word *dukkha* is made up of two words *du* and *kha*. *Du* is a prefix meaning bad, low, mean, base or vulgar. *Kha* means empty or hollow. The two words taken together therefore refer to that which is bad because it is empty, unsubstantial, unsatisfactory or illusory. It refers to a state of unsatisfactoriness if one may use the expression. The popular rendering of dukkha as “suffering” is not quite satisfactory since the word “suffering” is likely to convey the idea of pain only and does not introduce the idea of

⁷ *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 565

⁸ *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 372

⁹ MI 180

¹⁰ *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 357

insubstantiality or illusoriness. The word *dukkha* must awaken in our minds not only thoughts of pain and distress, but also all those thoughts about the unsatisfactory and illusory nature of the things of this world, their insubstantiality, their failure to satisfy completely, and their inevitable ending in disappointment, sorrow and disharmony. Dukkha consists of that state of unbalance, that continued agitation and disturbance to which all beings are subject by reason of the absence of stability and permanence in this world, by reason of the never ending rise and fall of things leading to a universal “unsatisfactoriness” or disharmony. Perhaps the word “Disharmony” can be regarded as the closest equivalent of dukkha. If however we prefer to use the word “suffering,” we still may do so giving it however a wider connotation, so as to include the other shades of meaning to which I have just referred.

However obvious the fact of universal dukkha may be, there are many among us who refuse to believe that this world is a world of disharmony and suffering, and are quick to condemn Buddhism as a doctrine of pessimism. Nor is this to be wondered at. The Buddha himself hesitated to preach these Truths to an ignorant and doubting world, for he knew that they cannot be easily grasped. There is present in the human mind, a tendency to resent the intrusion of a thought or idea which is likely to upset its own comforting view of things to which it has been long accustomed. It is for a similar reason that one might refuse to test one’s temperature with a thermometer, or refuse to be medically checked up, for there is an aversion to the discovery that something is wrong within oneself. One likes to continue in the fond thought that all is well. Thus it so happens that many refuse to accept the Truth of Dukkha, because they resent the idea that they are suffering from the universal malady of dukkha. They close their eyes to these views which are disturbing and distressing, and are quick to placate themselves, with the seemingly comforting thought that all is well, or else that all will somehow end well. Where ignorance is bliss, they prefer not to be wise. When, however subsequent events and circumstances compel them to realize, with what ease friends can turn into enemies, with what ease health can turn into sickness, with what ease secure possessions can turn insecure, with what ease youth inclines in one direction only—the direction of old age, with what ease old age inclines in one direction only—the direction of decay and death, are they not then thoroughly disillusioned? Can they then be heard to say “This earth-life really satisfies us”? Then and then only, through sheer bitterness of experience do they develop a sane approach to the understanding of the Truth of Dukkha, and if they steadily persist in this line of thinking and pursue it, they will find little difficulty in some day appreciating the fact that all things of this earth-life are involved in dukkha, wedded to dukkha and are productive of dukkha, and that this earth-life itself, in the last resort, is empty, illusory, and unsubstantial.

We have only to look around us with observant eyes and thoughtful mind to be convinced of the Truth of Dukkha. Who is the man whose course of life from birth to death has run undisturbed, like the unruffled waters of a placid stream, without even a single upheaval of worry, fear or grief to disturb that gentle drift? Which is the home that has not mourned the loss of a near and dear relative? Where in this world are the lips from which the cry of pain has never been heard? Where is the heart that has not heaved a sigh, and has not felt within itself the agony of sorrow at some time or other? Just at this moment, even as I am speaking and you are listening, can you visualize how many hundred thousands, nay how many millions of sick men in this wide world are tossing about on beds of pain, in homes and in hospitals? How many millions of patients are, even at this precise moment, lying stretched on tables in operating theatres of hospitals, hovering perilously between life and death? How many millions, having arrived at the end of life’s fitful journey, are this very moment gasping for the breath that is deserting them, gasping their last gasp? And how many millions of bereaved parents and bereaved children are weeping, pining for them that will not, and cannot, ever return? Not to see is not to know, except for the thoughtful. Then, consider the extent of poverty

and unemployment in this world, and the terrible suffering they cause. Are not these unmistakable indications of universal dukkha? As Jacob Boehme once remarked, "If all the mountains were books and if all the lakes were ink and if all the trees were pens, still they would not suffice to depict all the misery in this world."

But the critic will now interpose a question: "What *Dukkha* is there to the man blessed with health and wealth and the other good things of life?" Yes, he too is a victim of dukkha. He is no favoured exception to the rule of dukkha. The man blessed with health and wealth and the other good things of life, so long as he lives in this world, is part of this world, and as such, he will have to live and move with the rest of the world, for man is a gregarious animal. This means that he will have to associate with those who do not possess these good things of life. This invariably leads to situations of unpleasantness, to situations of jealousy and enmity, to situations of conflict between the haves and the have-nots, to the innumerable conflicts between the interests of labour and capital. Are not all these dukkha to the man who is said to be enjoying the good things of life?

Then what of the endless care and anxiety necessary to maintain oneself in health, to preserve unimpaired one's wealth and the other good things of life? Is not this an agony—the agony of maintenance? And is not this agony another form of dukkha? Then what of the agony of apprehension—the apprehension that all his good things of life may not stay long? What safeguards shall I adopt to protect my properties from the onslaughts of robbers and enemies, and also to protect them from the inroads of decay? "How long shall I be fortunate enough to enjoy my possessions?" These are the headaches, not of the "have-nots" but of the "haves." Are not all these indicative of dukkha? And when the protective methods adopted fail to answer their purpose, what of the agony of disappointment and the agony of loss? Where does not dukkha reign supreme?

I am now gradually leading you, from cases of obvious dukkha known as *dukkha-dukkhatā*, to cases of dukkha not so obvious, which occur as a result of the operation of the law of change. These latter are called "*viparināma dukkhatā*." "*Viparināma*" means change. The Buddha once used an expression of just three words which meant very much: "*Yadaniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ!*" "Where there is change, there is dukkha..." Just consider, when everything is changing and nothing is stable, what is the logical outcome but disharmony? The very incidence of change bespeaks dukkha or heralds the approach of dukkha. Therefore change itself is dukkha because there is the potentiality of disharmony and suffering. Is there anyone who has given us a guarantee that fortune will not turn into misfortune, that satisfactory conditions will continue to be satisfactory? There will always remain the possibility and potentiality of change. As long as this bare possibility exists, so long will there be fear and anxiety about the continuance of satisfactory conditions. This is one aspect of *viparināma-dukkhatā*. the very insecurity of the good things of life has from the earliest dawn of human history bespoken dukkha. The monarch fears for the security of his kingdom. Despite all his royal splendour he has his painful problems. We have heard it said "Uneasy lies the head that wears a Crown." The subject fears for the security of his life. The capitalist fears for the security of his wealth. The labourer fears for the security of his employment. If everything is changing and nothing is at rest, there can be no peace, no security in this world. If there is no peace, no security in this world, what will there be in their stead? There will be fear and insecurity. This again is dukkha. The fear of economic upheavals, the fear of unemployment, the fear of epidemics, the fear of wars, the fear of revolutions and the fear of many a world crisis bespeak dukkha. Most of them result from world conditions of insecurity. Is not dukkha then a necessary evil in this world—a cosmological necessity? In this sense, dukkha may be said to have an existence apart from man's awareness of it. Can we forget that two of the three great characteristics of all world-phenomena as declared by the Buddha are *anicca* (impermanence) and *dukkha*?

We can now appreciate the extent to which this element of change or *viparināma* can undermine all worldly happiness. When conditions change, as change they must, the very sweetness of the pleasure of sense-gratification turns into the bitterness of dukkha. It is the same with every other form of worldly happiness. The joys of family life may be comforting, the joys of friendship may be exhilarating, but conditions changing, the break up of the ties of family life, the tearing asunder of the bonds of friendship, through so many possible causes as misunderstanding, ill-feeling, acts of third parties and lastly through death, are bound to produce as great a sorrow as was the original joy. In short, great as was the joy of attachment, so great will be the sorrow of detachment or even greater. The greater the height from which you fall, the greater is the pain you will experience. The axe of impermanence is always there to fell the tree of joy. It hangs over all worldly joys like Damocles' sword. Mark you—it is not for nothing that the all-knowing Buddha has proclaimed: “*Nandi pi dukkhā*”, “Joy itself is sorrow.”

Not only are the things enjoyed constantly changing, but—what is more—the person enjoying them is also constantly changing. He too is subject to the inexorable law of change. We thus witness the amusing spectacle of a changing being pursuing a changing object. This brings us to the third aspect of dukkha known as *saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*.¹¹ We have already dealt with *dukkha-dukkhatā*, the obvious aspect of dukkha. Then we dealt with *viparināma-dukkha*, that aspect of dukkha which results from change or the possibility of change. Now we shall deal with the *saṅkhāra* aspect of change. *Saṅkhāra*, a word which has many secondary meanings, in its original sense refers to that which is formed by many things joining together, a composition, a group or aggregate or mass. In the present context it refers to the human being regarded not as an entity but as a mass or collection of five groups or aggregates. These constitute the being called man. Of these five groups or aggregates (*pañcakkhandha* is the Pali word), which constitute the composite man, one is the physical factor of *rūpa*, the body, and the other four are the mental factors of *vedanā*, the sensations, *saññā*, the perceptions, *saṅkhāra*, the volitions and *viññāṇa*, the states of consciousness. They are called groups or aggregates because each is again a combination of several other factors. None of these Aggregates or component factors is self-existing. They arise out of a cause. They are conditioned. That is to say, their existence depends on certain conditions and when these conditions and causes cease to exist, they too cease to exist. Thus the human body is constantly undergoing a kind of metabolic change. Old cells are continually breaking down and new cells are continually taking their place. Physiology concedes this. Often owing to the imperceptibly slow pace of this change, it is not perceived as change but nevertheless there is change: Hence the human body is not an entity but a process. Infancy, boyhood, youth, old age, are but stages in this process. The human mind, *nāma*, is also not an entity. It is also constantly changing. It is just a flow or succession of never ending sensations, perceptions, volitions and states of consciousness, all of which mental factors are collectively called *nāma* or mind. In this flow of mental factors, each follows the other with such a rapidity of succession, that what is in reality a plurality assumes the semblance of an entity or unity, even as the fire in a lighted stick, made to turn round and round, assumes the semblance of a circle or ring of fire, whereas in reality there was only a succession of positions taken up by the fire of the lighted stick. So there only *seems* to be a static thing called mind, whereas what exists is just a process or flow of mental factors. The mind is correctly said to be “*nadi soto viya*” i.e. like the flow of a river, and is never the same for two consecutive moments. The river one crosses in the morning is not the river he re-crosses in the evening. Each time, each moment, it is a different set of waters that flow. Similarly where the mind is concerned, each time it is a different sensation or perception or volition or consciousness that exists, only to pass away giving rise to another. Psychology concedes this. So we arrive at the all-important conception that the *nāma-rūpa* or mind-body combination which constitutes the composite being called

¹¹ For this threefold classification of *dukkha* vide D III 210.

man, is not a permanent self-existing unity but a process. It is a conditioned process, i.e. it comes into existence on account of certain causes and conditions. When these causes and conditions cease to exist, the process also ceases to exist. As has been aptly said in the *Samyutta Nikāya*,¹² *hetuṃ paṭicca sambhūta*, by reason of a cause they came to be; *hetubhaṅgā nirujjhati*, by rupture of a cause they die away. Being a process, it is something that is changing and is not permanent. For that very reason, it is dukkha. So we see that dukkha is inherent in the very formation of the human being. This is *saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*. This is that last example of dukkha that was referred to by the Buddha when in his enunciation of the First Noble Truth he said, “This five-fold mass which is based on grasping—that is dukkha.” It is in the very nature of this mass of groups or aggregates to suffer dukkha. The being itself is dukkha. In its very formation it is dukkha. In this sense, one may say that dukkha is a biological and psychological necessity.

The Second Noble Truth

Now that we have understood the First Noble Truth and its significance, let us proceed to the Second Noble Truth, which points out the cause of dukkha. The First Noble Truth is like the diagnosis of a disease by a physician. The Second Noble Truth is like the physician’s discovery of the cause of the disease. The Third Noble Truth is like the assurance of the physician that there does exist a cure for the disease, and the Fourth Noble Truth is like the physician’s prescription for the cure of the disease.

Let us understand this Second Truth in the way it has been enunciated by the Buddha: “What now, O Monks, is the Noble Truth of the cause of suffering? It is this *taṇhā* or craving which leads from birth to birth, which is accompanied by pleasure and greed, finds ever fresh delight now here, now there.”¹³ Craving is here shown as the great motivating factor back and behind all actions of deluded man, driving him now in one direction, now in another.

All dukkha is rooted in this selfish craving for the things of the world, in this inordinate attachment, this passionate clinging which is known as *taṇhā*. The word *taṇhā* is often inadequately rendered as “desire,” but the word “desire” hardly conveys all that is connoted by the Pali word *taṇhā*. The word “desire” can sometimes refer to some very laudable human inclination such as the yearning to be good or to serve mankind. But in the Pali word *taṇhā* (Sanskrit *tṛṣṇā*) there is always present the element of selfishness. The word “craving”, therefore, is the best rendering of *taṇhā*.

It is this element of selfishness in *taṇhā* that creates all the havoc for man. Craving can never be completely satisfied. Craving gratified begets further craving, even as the attempt to quench one’s thirst with salt water only re-doubles the thirst. Craving is a powerful urge. It is a dangerous urge. It is responsible for nearly all the ills of this world. The political upheavals of the various countries of this world, their social and economic problems can, almost all, be traced to the nefarious influence of this powerful *taṇhā*. This selfish craving is the mainspring of almost all human activity, the prime causative factor of nearly all the struggles and efforts of deluded man. What is it that makes the murderer raise his hands against his victim? What is it that makes the thief remove another’s goods? What is it that makes one man jealous of another’s success? Clearly it is selfish craving, one’s love of self, manifesting itself in some form or other, and looking at things only from the point of view of self and not from the point of view of others. Sometimes the manifestation of selfishness is obvious, sometimes it is subtle.

¹² *Kindred Sayings* I, p. 169

¹³ *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 357

Now, the love of a lover to his beloved is often a good example of selfishness manifesting itself in a subtle form. A lover's love is seldom a selfless love. It is a love which craves for recognition and claims a return. In short, it emanates from a love of self. In the generality of cases, a man loves another because he loves himself better, and craves to give himself the pleasure of loving and being loved. Intrinsically therefore, he is out to please himself, and his love for another is but self-love disguised. Otherwise, love cannot so easily and suddenly turn into hatred as it sometimes does when the love offered is rejected. Have we not heard of instances where the lover is the murderer of his beloved? These incidents can happen only when love springs from selfishness. When it was reported to the Buddha that Queen Mallikā, wife of King Pasenadi of Kosala, had in answer to the King said that she loves herself more than anyone else in the world and that King Pasenadi also being similarly questioned by the Queen had said that he loves himself more than anyone else in the world, the Buddha was not surprised. He replied as follows: "You may traverse the whole wide world in all directions with your thought but you will nowhere find any one dearer to man than his own self."¹⁴ So man's craving or *taṇhā* in whatever way you may look at it, and in whatever form it appears, is man's attempt to gratify himself.

Now, one may be tempted to ask, "Why does this *taṇhā* or craving bring dukkha in its wake?" It is because *taṇhā* is a hankering after that which is itself changing, a hankering after the unreal. When man pursues a goal which is elusive, a goal which continually recedes and retreats as often as he attempts to approach it, what else can he expect but the disharmony of dukkha?

It may now be asked, "Why do we hanker after the unreal?" Our ignorance (*avijjā*) makes us mistake the unreal for the real, the shadow for the substance, and makes us pursue the shadow. The Dhammapada says:

"In the unreal they see the real. In the real they see
the unreal. Those who abide in the pasture ground
of wrong thoughts never arrive at the real"¹⁵

As long as we fail to develop that intuitive highest wisdom (*paññā*) which is latent in us and which, if developed, would enable us to see things as they really are and in their correct perspective, so long shall we continue to mistake the unreal for the real. Thus do we pursue the gratification of the senses, little knowing that we are pursuing a phantom and hoping that this will give a lasting satisfaction. Our eyes crave for pleasant sights. Our ears crave for pleasant sounds. Our tongues crave for pleasant tastes. Our noses crave for pleasant smells. Our bodies crave for pleasant contacts. Our minds crave for pleasant thought-impressions. But these various objects of sense are constantly changing, and to cling to that which is changing is as foolish and painful as to cling to a perpetually moving wheel. Thus craving misleads us. Craving confuses. Craving misrepresents. Craving also consumes us as if it were a fire. "*Natthi rāga samo aggi*"¹⁶ said the Buddha once. This means: "There is no fire like lust." It is so consuming.

Self-evident facts are often apt to be overlooked. Hence the Buddha employed so many different similes to portray the transitoriness, the illusiveness, the unworthiness and the dangers of craving. It is not only to a consuming fire that craving has been compared by the Buddha. He has compared it to a net that ensnares and clings to one,¹⁷ to the onrushing current of a river

¹⁴ *Kindred Sayings* I, p.102

¹⁵ Dhp 11

¹⁶ Dhp 251

¹⁷ *Gradual Sayings* I, p. 225

which carries away everything that comes before it¹⁸ and to a seamstress who brings two ends together and binds them.¹⁹ Each one of these similes reveals some particular aspect of *taṇhā*.

So far we have considered the reaction of man's craving on himself. Let us now consider the reaction of craving on others, on the outside world. Nowhere has this been so vividly described by the Buddha as in the Majjhima Nikāya. "Verily, O Monks," said the Buddha, "due to sensuous, craving kings fight with kings, princes with princes, priests, with priests, citizens with citizens, the mother quarrels with the son, the son quarrels with the mother; the father quarrels with the son, the son quarrels with the father, brother with brother, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend."²⁰ Craving thus is a malignant growth. It spreads its roots far and deep. Its career is "to have and to hold" as the notarial expression goes. Hear then the voice of the Buddha who cried halt to this mad careering when he exclaimed "*taṇhāya mūlaṃ khaṇatha*."²¹ Dig up the very roots of *taṇhā*; not otherwise are we safe. One may venture to say that it was the Buddha, who for the first time in the history of religious thought, expounded the cause of dukkha without reference to any external or supernatural agency. My sufferings are due to my actions, and my actions are due to my craving or *taṇhā*. In the Second Truth are therefore involved two doctrines—the doctrine of *kamma* and the doctrine of Rebirth. The former deals with the law of action and reaction. The latter deals with the law of reproductive thought.

The Third Noble Truth

We will now proceed to dwell on the Third Noble Truth, which declares that with the cessation of *taṇhā* or craving, dukkha ceases to exist. You can see for yourself that the Third Noble Truth is a corollary to the Second Noble Truth. If craving is the cause of dukkha, then surely the cessation of craving must mean the cessation of dukkha. Kill the germ and the disease is killed. Remove the cause and the effect is removed. This is the import of the Third Noble Truth. If there was no Third Noble Truth, well might Buddhism have been called a doctrine of pessimism and gloom but with the Third Noble Truth followed by the Fourth, it is a doctrine radiating with hope and joy.

Let us understand the Third Noble Truth in the way it has been enunciated by the Buddha. "What now, O Bhikkhus, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering?" "*Yo tassa yeva taṇhāya asesā-virāga-nirodho*"—it is the Cessation of craving without a trace of it left behind, *cāgo*—the abandonment of it, *paṭinissaggo*—the renunciation of it, *mutti*—the liberation from it, *anālayo*—the detachment from it. "*Idaṃ vuccati, bhikkhave, dukkhanirodhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ*." "This, O Monks, is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering."²²

As a result of this string of words employed in this description to emphasize more or less the same idea from different aspects, a few conclusions emerge. The first is that the renunciation of craving can be complete. The next is that, judging from the words used—cessation, abandonment, renunciation, liberation, detachment—what is contemplated is not a forcible control or suppression of craving but a voluntary abandonment, a letting go. The thought also emerges that craving is a dangerous burden to carry with us in the journey of life, a hurtful

¹⁸ *Itivuttaka*, Woodward's Translation p. 194

¹⁹ *Gradual Sayings* II p. 286

²⁰ *Middle Length Sayings* I, p. 144

²¹ *Dhammapada* V. 337

²² *Kindred Sayings* V. p. 357

appendage which must be abandoned and dropped without the slightest delay in order to ensure a comfortable journey. It is this Third Truth which affirms that craving is not an inseparable appendage but that it can be abandoned and dropped. The very expression “*dukkha nirodha*”—cessation of suffering—implies this.

Let us consider the effects on the mind of this complete abandonment of craving, this complete renunciation. A person who has completely ceased to crave is none other than an arahant and therefore in considering the effects on the mind of the cessation of craving, we are considering the nature of the arahant-mind. It is a psychological marvel.

The arahant cannot create *kamma*, i.e. moral or immoral actions which produce a reaction, in as much as with the complete cessation of craving there is no “*cetanā*” or worldly intention which could motivate his actions. The mind is completely freed from all that is temporal, earthly or gross. Of him it is said: “*pāpañca puññañca ubho saṅgaṃ upaccagā.*”²³ That is to say, he has transcended the attachments of both good and evil. It is not only evil that has to be transcended but even good. Further reference to this view will be made later.

Another result of the complete cessation of craving is the beautiful and perfect tranquility of mind that the arahant enjoys. Says the Dhammapada:²⁴

“Calm is the mind, calm is the speech, calm is the deed of him who, rightly understanding and perfectly placid, has gained liberation.”

Complete freedom from grief and fear is another result of the cessation of craving. Grief and fear are states of mind which can arise only when there is craving. Says the Dhammapada:²⁵

“From craving springs grief. From craving springs fear. For him who is freed from craving, there is no grief. Whence fear?”

The arahant is also supremely happy. An expression used to describe them is “*pītibhakkā*” i.e. feeders on joy. How the arahants refer to their own happiness is expressed in the Dhammapada:²⁶

“Ah! Happily do we live without craving among those who crave. Among the men who crave we live without craving.”

The arahant’s freedom from craving and his consequent domination of his senses is so complete, that he can look at all beings, all things, all conditions, unaffected and unmoved. He is not attached to anything. He is not repelled by anything. Perfect equanimity reigns supreme in his mind.

Not only is he unmoved by all contacts and sensations, he has also within him—paradoxical though it may seem—the ability to consider pleasant sensations as unpleasant, and unpleasant sensations as pleasant, or view them all with complete indifference. This is because he has transcended the sense-level. In the Dīgha Nikāya the Buddha makes pointed reference to this twofold ability by using the following two expressions: “*appaṭikkule paṭikkūlasaññī*” seeing the pleasant in the unpleasant and “*paṭikkule appaṭikkūlasaññī*” seeing the unpleasant in the pleasant²⁷. This ability to control the sense data comes only to those who have completely renounced craving.

²³ Dhammapada V. 41

²⁴ Ibid V. 96

²⁵ Ibid V. 216

²⁶ Ibid V. 199

²⁷ D II 107. Vide also *Kindred Sayings* V. p 100

When the Buddha, meditating under the *Bodhi* tree at Gaya in the last watch of that memorable night reached this glorious and blessed state of the cessation of all craving, and realized that it was craving that motivated Life, in triumphant joy he uttered a beautiful stanza containing a very exquisite and vivid allegory. It is one of the best allegories in all the world's literature. It is in the form of an imaginary address to craving, whom he regards as a house-builder, the builder of the House of Existence:

“Anekajāti saṃsaram, sandhāvisaṃ anibbisaṃ

Through many a birth in *Saṃsāra* have I, without success, wandered,

Gahakārakaṃ gavesanto

Searching for the builder of this house.

Dukkhā jāti punappunaṃ

Painful indeed is repeated birth.

Gahakāraka diṭṭhosi

Now, O House builder, thou art discovered.

Puna gehaṃ nakāhasī

Never shalt thou build again for me.

Sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā

Broken are all thy rafters.

Gahakūṭaṃ visaṅkhitaṃ

Thy ridge pole is shattered,

Visaṅkhāragataṃ cittaṃ

My mind has attained to the unconditioned.

Taṇhānaṃ khayamajjhagā

Achieved is the cessation of craving”²⁸

How exactly the cessation of craving brings about the cessation of dukkha, and how exactly existence can come to an end, can only be understood by a close study of the doctrine of Dependent Origination known as the *paṭicca samuppāda*. Suffice it for the present to follow a simile used by the Buddha in the Majjhima Nikāya.²⁹ “Suppose, monks, the light of an oil lamp is burning, generated by oil and wick, but no one from time to time pours oil or attends to the wick. Then, monks, according as the fuel is used up and no new fuel is added, the lamp for want of nourishment, will become extinct. Even so, monks, in him who contemplates the transitoriness of existence, craving ceases. Through the cessation of craving, grasping ceases. Through the cessation of grasping, becoming ceases. Through the cessation of becoming, rebirth ceases. Through the cessation of rebirth, old age, sickness, death, pain, lamentation, suffering, sorrow and despair cease. Such is the cessation of the whole chain of dukkha.

We can appreciate this phenomenon if we picture the sight of a creeper that is entwined round a tree, a creeper that is just uprooted. The creeper has been spreading from branch to branch. The tender tendrils of this creeper will no more reach out to contact any further branch

²⁸ Dhps 153, 154

²⁹ M II 292

so as to cling to it and grasp it and help it to continue its existence. The process of clinging and grasping having ceased, the creeper will just cease to grow, will gradually wither away and perish never to regain life any more. The roots of the creeper have dried up, because they now lack the nutriment of the soil, which is necessary to sustain the creeper.

So it is with human life, which is also a process of living by clinging and grasping and willing to live. A thought tends to reproduce itself. It is by reason of this reproductive power of thought, that the will to live makes man re-live, or as Dahlke put it “we live eternally through our lust to live.” Clinging to life makes life cling to us. The Pali word to express this clinging and grasping is *upādāna*. Like the physical creeper, the creeper of human life needs nutriment to sustain it. Craving is this nutriment. Craving is that which causes *upādāna* or grasping and thus helps to maintain the onward movement of the creeper of human life. By grasping is meant not grasping by the hand only. The Pali word *upādāna* refers to six kinds of Grasping, which correspond to the six senses. Thus there is grasping by the eye of sights; there is grasping by the ear of sounds, there is grasping by the nose of smells, there is grasping by the tongue of tastes. There is grasping by the body of tangible things. In Buddhist psychology there are six senses, not five. Therefore, sixthly, there is grasping by the mind of thought-impressions and ideas. These acts of grasping are mental energies or forces set in motion. Energy is indestructible. No energy therefore is ever lost. So the mental energies released by these graspings, combined with the residual karmic energy at the moment of death, make for the continuity of life in any appropriate sphere or plane, when it ends here. Along with the parental sperm and ovum they condition the foundations for the arising of another life. Contact of seed with soil is not sufficient to engender plant life. There must be a third element—the outside element of light and air. Similarly, the outside elements, where the engendering of human life is concerned, are these energies released by craving, and distance is no bar to the operation of these energies. In the degree therefore in which you reduce craving, fewer and fewer things will be grasped by you, fewer and fewer sense objects will attract you. As craving continues to decrease, Grasping becomes weaker and weaker and like the tendrils of the uprooted creeper, will gradually lose their strength and power to grasp, until finally the whole creeper fades away. When craving completely ceases, the power to grasp also completely ceases; the creeper of human existence then will lie dried up at its root. Indeed, at the moment of death, it is only such a one as an arahant, who has completely shed every trace of craving and grasping, who can triumphantly exclaim:

“Oh Life! to thee I no more cling
Oh Death! where is thy sting?”

The question is always asked “What happens after death to the arahant who has destroyed all craving? Does he exist or does he not exist? If he does exist, where does he exist? If he does not exist, how can you speak of the bliss of Nibbāna which he is said to be enjoying after death?” All these questions appertain to the nature and condition of Nibbāna. In the questioner’s question lies an assumption that he is capable of understanding Nibbāna. But Nibbāna is said to be *atakkāvacara*, which means “cannot be reached by logic and reason.” Reason is not the highest faculty of man. Reason has its limitations. Nibbāna and like matters are realized not through reason, but through a higher faculty called *paññā*, lying dormant in us, but which we all can arouse and develop by means of meditation. With the arising of this intuitive or supernormal or supra-mundane knowledge, this highest wisdom, one is able to sense the Truth as naturally and easily as one would sense cold or heat. It is so different from that arduous process of reasoning at the end of which also one is still in doubt whether one has realized the whole Truth or not. Where this higher faculty is concerned there is no effort to comprehend. The understanding just dawns on one. Some prefer to call it revelation, others call it intuition, yet others call it a latent sixth sense, but whatever name is given to it, whatever label is appended to it, it is a source of

understanding that works independently of the senses and the reasoning faculty. It is a transcendental faculty lying dormant in us. The finite can never grasp the Infinite, but by meditation we can transcend the finite. Nibbāna is reality itself. It is the Infinite. It is the Absolute, and the Absolute cannot be explained in terms of the relative. As some one has aptly remarked, reason cannot be more reasonable than ceasing to reason on things beyond reason.

This very question as to what happens to an arahant after his death was put to the Buddha by one Upasiva as mentioned in the Sutta Nipāta³⁰ and the Buddha's answer was as follows:

“Of one who's passed away there is no measure
Of him, there is naught, where by one may say aught.
When once all things have wholly been removed,
All ways of saying too have removed.”

And elsewhere he has said, “*Ākāse'va sakuntānaṃ padaṃ tassa dūrannayaṃ.*”³¹ The path of the arahant after death cannot be traced, it is like the path of birds in air.”

All that which the limited faculty of reason can suggest is that the existence of Nibbāna appears to be logically sound and that it appears to be a cosmic necessity. Everything is seen to exist in pairs of opposites. If there is hot, there is cold. If there is small, there is large. Hence if there is the finite, there must be the infinite. If there is the relative, there must be the absolute. If there is that which is born, that which is become, that which is made, that which is compounded, there must also be the opposite of it. And it is to this opposite that the Buddha referred when he was speaking of Nibbāna. In the Udāna he has said: “There is, O Monks, a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded.”³² Beyond such considerations, logic and reason cannot carry us any further in our attempt to understand Nibbāna, precisely because it is something beyond the scope of logic and reason. It must be left to the intuitive or supra-mundane faculty of *paññā* to help us to understand Nibbāna. This faculty is latent in us but it has to be aroused and developed by meditation. We can then understand Nibbāna not as a theoretical exposition but with the flavour of immediate experience. As Radhakrishnan has said:

“Then great truths of philosophy are not proved but seen ... In moving from intellect to intuition, we are not moving in the direction of unreason but are getting into the deepest rationality of which human nature is capable. In it ... we see more truly and not simply measure things by the fragmentary standards of intellect.”³³

The Fourth Noble Truth

We now come to the Fourth and last Truth, the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of dukkha. This is the prescription of the All-Knowing Buddha for the ills of life. By this Truth the Buddha prescribes a way of life which is calculated to bring about a complete cessation of that powerful urge of *taṇhā* ever present in man. This way of life is the Noble Eightfold Path.

It is only if we are thoroughly convinced that all life is ill, that all life is dukkha, that we will welcome any suggestion of a way of escape from dukkha, not otherwise. Hence it is, that to some the Noble Eightfold Path has no attraction at all, to some the attraction is mild, often only of an academic nature, while to just a handful it is something absorbingly vital, something

³⁰ Sn 1076

³¹ Dh 93

³² *Verses of Uplift* p. 98 (Woodward's Translation)

³³ *An Idealist View of Life*; Radhakrishnan p.120

wonderfully energizing and uplifting, something very dear and personal. To this handful, the treading of the Path even in its initial stages brings with it inspiration and joy which later lead to a profound spiritual experience.

At the outset of this aspect of the subject, it is important to appreciate why this remedy for dukkha is referred to as a Path (in Pali, *magga*). It might have been called the Eightfold Remedy or the Eightfold Cure, but why Eightfold Path? A remedy or a cure may or may not have been used by any one before it is offered to us. There is nothing in the word “remedy” or in the word “cure” to suggest that it has been tried and tested earlier, but not so when the word “Path” is used. A path must have been treaded by some one before it can be called a Path. There is inherent in the connotation of the word “Path” (*magga*) the idea that some one had treaded it before. A Path cannot come into existence all of a sudden. Some one must have first cut through a jungle, cleared a way and walked along it. Similarly the Noble Eightfold Path has been treaded before by many a Buddha in the past. It has also been treaded before by many a *Pacceka Buddha* and many an arahant. The Buddha only discovered the Path but did not create it, since it existed from the ancient past. Indeed it is an Ancient Path (*pūraṇa magga*) as was described by the Buddha himself in the *Samyutta Nikāya*. Here he has said, “Just as if, O Monks, a man faring through the forest sees an ancient path, an ancient road, traversed by men of former days and he were to go along it and going along it should see an ancient city ... even so I, O Monks, have seen an ancient Path, an ancient road, traversed by the rightly Enlightened Ones of former times. And what, O Monks, is that ancient path, that ancient road, traversed by the rightly Enlightened Ones of former times? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path ... I have gone along that Path, and going along that Path, I fully came to know Suffering, the Arising of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering and the Way leading to the Cessation of Suffering.”³⁴ You will thus appreciate the psychological importance of using the word “Path” which is calculated to inspire the highest confidence (*saddhā*) in the remedy that has been prescribed.

This Path is also called the Middle Path (*majjhima-paṭipadā*) because it steers clear of two extremes. It avoids on the one hand, the debasing indulgence of the sensualist and the laxity of the pleasure-seeking Epicurean, and on the other hand, it avoids the absurd austerities and meaningless self-mortification of religious fanatics. The Middle Path proclaimed by the Buddha, however, is a Path of reason and prudence.

This Fourth Noble Truth is not a mere enunciation of a fact. It is a Path and so it must be trodden. It is something essentially practical. To know this Truth properly one must tread the Path. This Truth contains a careful and wise collection of all the important ingredients necessary for the spiritual development of man. These ingredients are well known to every Buddhist, viz. *Sammā Diṭṭhi*—Right Understanding, *Sammā Saṅkappa*—Right Thought, *Sammā Vācā*—Right Speech, *Sammā Kammanta*—Right Action, *Sammā Ājīva*—Right Livelihood, *Sammā Vāyāma*—Right Effort, *Sammā Sati*—Right Mindfulness and *Sammā Samādhi*—Right Concentration.

These eight factors constitute the very essence of the ideal Buddhist life. It is a carefully considered programme of purification of thought, word and deed ultimately resulting in the complete cessation of craving and the consequent dawning of the highest wisdom.

An important feature to be noted in regard to this Path is that these eight factors are interrelated and interdependent. Hence they are not to be cultivated one by one in the order in which they are listed, as if they were a series of successive steps that have to be taken one after another. They are not mutually exclusive. They are mutually supporting factors. Development of one factor therefore helps in the development of other factors and, what is more, the perfection of one factor coincides with the perfection of all the other factors. Thus, ultimately, at

³⁴ *Kindred Sayings* I, p. 74

the highest level all these factors will be seen to function simultaneously. Hence one is free to develop these factors in whatever degree he likes. It is useful to keep in mind the Venerable Bhikkhu Silācāra's most instructive comparison³⁵ of these eight factors to eight different strands that are closely intertwined in one rope which a man is attempting to climb. Each time the climber grasps the rope, his fingers will come into closer contact with one particular strand than with any other. At the next moment the contact will be with another strand. Yet all the while he is climbing. Similarly in the treading of the Eightfold Path, sometimes one may concentrate on one factor, at other times on another, with however no loss of progress at any time.

Another feature in regard to these eight factors is that they fall into three different groups or categories of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* i.e. virtue, concentration and wisdom. This is known as the threefold division of the Eightfold Path. This threefold division is very important for practical purposes. It represents the three stages of spiritual progress. In the Majjhima Nikāya³⁶ it is said that the three divisions are not arranged in accordance with the Eightfold Path but that the Eightfold Path is arranged according to the three divisions.

Sīla (virtue) refers to moral discipline or purity of conduct and under this category appear three of the eight factors, viz. Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. *Sīla* is the sine qua non for spiritual development. It is the first step. It is the foundation for further progress along the Path. Right Speech is essential for *sīla*. Man possesses the power of speech, unlike animals. This is man's channel of expression of thought and he should not abuse it but use it in a manner so as to cause good thoughts to arise in others and not bad thoughts. He should speak in a manner so as not to cause harm or hurt or loss to others. The factor of Right Speech thus conduces to *sīla* or purity of conduct by ensuring abstention from falsehood, tale-bearing, harsh speech and idle gossip.

Similarly man's ability to act should not be abused. He can act in so many more and more effective ways than animals could. He should not make use of this ability to cause harm or hurt or loss to others. So the factor of Right Action conduces to purity of conduct by ensuring abstention from killing, from stealing and from wrongful sex indulgence.

The factor of Right Livelihood is also important. Man's struggle for existence, his pressing necessity to procure the material needs of life to maintain himself and his family, compel him to regard the business of earning a livelihood as his most important task in life and therefore there is the great urge to go to any length in order to achieve this end. Considerations of fair play and justice are all thrown to the winds, and considerations of resultant loss or harm to others are apt to be lightly overlooked. This is a temptation to be guarded against if purity of conduct is to be maintained at all costs. Hence the factor of Right Livelihood conduces to purity of conduct by ensuring abstention from trading in arms, from trading in animals for slaughter, from trading in human beings, from trading in intoxicating drinks and from trading in poisons. There is a popular belief that these are the only forms of wrong livelihood. It is not so. In the Majjhima Nikāya,³⁷ practising "trickery, cajolery, insinuation, dissemblance, rapacity for gain upon gain" are considered wrong livelihood. In general terms, as mentioned in the Dīgha Nikāya,³⁸ Right Livelihood means the avoidance of a wrong way of living and the obtaining of a livelihood by a right way of living. *Micchājīvena pahāya sammā jīvitam kappenti*. Thus by the development of these three factors of Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, purity of conduct (*sīla*) is ensured. One knows of no other religion where there is a code of ethical conduct so

³⁵ *The Noble Eightfold Path*; Bhikkhu Sīlācāra p. 21

³⁶ M I 363.

³⁷ M II 118

³⁸ D I 344

comprehensive in its details, and so exacting in its requirements. All this is necessary in order to ensure perfect purity of conduct.

But in Buddhism purity of conduct is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. Perfect conduct divorced from a purpose, not directed to a desirable end, has but little meaning from the Buddhist point of view—a very lofty point of view, not easy to comprehend. Not only evil but also good must be transcended. They are both of this world (*lokiya*) and do not appertain to things that transcend this world (*lokuttara*). Even the Dhamma has to be transcended. The Buddha has compared Dhamma to a raft to be used by us *nissaraṇatthāya* i.e. for the purpose of crossing over in safety, and *na gahaṇatthāya* i.e. not for the purpose of retention. Once we have reached the other shore; we do not have to carry the raft with us. It has to be put aside.³⁹ So, the next two categories after *sīla*, namely *samādhi* and *paññā*, show the direction in which lies the purpose of *sīla*. The purpose of *sīla* then is to help in the development of mental concentration and the realization of the highest wisdom. The purer one's conduct is, the purer is one's mind, and the purer one's mind is, the greater is his ability to concentrate. Then purity of conduct and purity of mind help in the realization of Wisdom. An impure mind can never be a fitting receptacle for the highest Truths of life.

Into the second category of *samādhi* fall three factors, namely Right Effort (*sammā vāyāma*), Right Mindfulness (*sammā sati*) and Right Concentration (*sammā samādhi*).

Right Effort here has a very special meaning, since it is concerned with the development of the mind. Right Effort then is the effort to prevent the arising of evil states of mind that have not arisen, the effort to overcome evil states of mind that have already arisen, the effort to produce good states of mind that have not arisen, and the effort to develop further the good states of mind that have already arisen. This classification will show you how vast, how penetrating and how stupendous is the mental effort that is needed for progress in *samādhi*. Can there be any doubt then, that this will some day lead to mind-mastery and wisdom?

The next factor in this category of *samādhi* is *sammā sati* or Right Mindfulness. Right Mindfulness is the quality of awareness. It ensures complete awareness of all the activities of the body as they occur (*kāyānupassanā*), complete awareness of all sensations and feelings as they occur (*vedanānupassanā*), complete awareness of all activities of the mind as they occur (*cittānupassanā*) and complete awareness of all mental objects when the appropriate situations arise (*dhammānupassanā*). This attitude of complete awareness brings about powerful results. It sharpens to the finest degree man's powers of observation, induces the deepest calm and ensures that nothing is said or done or thought unguardedly or hastily, mechanically or without deliberation. He who develops this factor is able to take count of every single and minute activity of the mind, even such activities as are generally considered to occur when the mind is passive and receptive; so penetrating and powerful is his sense of awareness.

The last factor in this category of *samādhi* is Right Concentration which ensures one-pointedness of mind (*ekaggatā*). It is the ability to focus steadily one's mind on any one object and one only, to the exclusion of all others. There are many exercises in mind-concentration which space does not permit me to mention, much less to describe. Long continued practice of mental concentration makes the mind highly penetrative. It becomes like a high-powered light which can thoroughly illuminate any object on which it is focussed. Hence any object of thought which presents itself to such a mind is thoroughly penetrated and comprehended through and through. Now this concentration of the mind, like *sīla*, is not an end in itself. The purpose of developing this *samādhi* or concentration is to make use of its penetrative power to understand existence and thereby to realize the highest wisdom (*paññā*).

³⁹ *Middle Length Sayings* I p. 174

We now come to the third category, namely, *paññā* or wisdom. When this highly concentrated mind abiding in *samādhi*, is made to focus its attention on the three great characteristics of existence, namely *anicca* (impermanence) *dukkha* (disharmony) and *anattā* (egolessness or soullessness) the mind is able to see things as they actually are (*yathābhūtañāna*). The result is the dawning of that highest understanding—*sammā diṭṭhi*. One sees reality. This coincides with the cessation of craving and the attainment of Nibbāna. So *sammā diṭṭhi* is one of the factors in the category of *paññā*. This is *sammā diṭṭhi* at its highest level. *sammā diṭṭhi* at its lower levels is a general understanding of the nature of existence and the understanding of Right and Wrong. This modicum of *sammā diṭṭhi* is helpful at the start to begin the practice of *sīla*. Without this modicum of *sammā diṭṭhi* there will be no proper incentive to the practice of *sīla*. It will thus be seen that Right Understanding becomes the beginning as well as the end of the Eightfold Path.

The other factor that falls within the category of *paññā* is *sammā saṅkappā* or Right Thought. Thoughts are all important. Words and deeds are nothing but expressions of thought. Thought rules the world. The power to think is greatest in man—not so in the lower animals. It should therefore be man’s endeavour to make the best use of this power of thought which he is privileged to possess and to think none but the best of thoughts. From the point of view of Buddhism the best of thoughts are threefold—thoughts of renunciation (i.e. thoughts free from craving), thoughts of benevolence, and thoughts of compassion. The practice of *sammā saṅkappa* therefore ensures freedom from lust, freedom from hatred and freedom from cruelty or harm. Even this factor is developed for a purpose to make it possible for the mind when purified to see Reality, to gain the highest wisdom.

The description of the Eightfold Path is now over. It will be seen that this is a Path of progressive self-culture leading from purity of conduct to concentration of mind and from concentration of mind to wisdom. But it does not mean that complete *sīla* must first be achieved before *samādhi* is begun or that *samādhi* must be completed before *paññā* is begun. There are different levels of these qualities and the practice of one helps the other and the level of each rises. This is what was meant when it was earlier stated that these factors are interdependent and mutually supporting. This view is of great practical importance and cannot be over emphasized. The Buddha has expressed this view forcefully and vividly in regard to the interdependence of *sīla* and *paññā*. In the *Sonadanda Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*.⁴⁰ He has said “As one might wash hand with hand and foot with foot, even so, wisdom is purified by virtuous conduct and virtuous conduct is purified by wisdom (*Sīlaṃ paridhoto paññā, paññā paridhoto sīlaṃ*). Further, the Buddha continues:

“*Yattha sīlaṃ tattha paññā,*
Yattha paññā tattha sīlaṃ”⁴⁰

“Where virtue is, there wisdom lies
Where wisdom is, there virtue lies”

Conclusion

I have reached the end of my discourse. I have endeavoured to give some understanding of the Four Noble Truths, not to satisfy any intellectual curiosity, not to provoke argument but with the sole purpose of giving an incentive to the treading of the Path. Once you do so, you can then see for yourselves the result, as you proceed. Idle speculation and hair-splitting arguments are to no purpose. The Buddha has strongly condemned the study of the Dhamma for the sake of

⁴⁰ DI 156

criticism or vain talk.⁴¹ What is needed is not talking about the Path, but walking it. “*Ehipassiko*” is an epithet of the Dhamma. It means, “Come and see for yourselves.” The proof of the pudding is in the eating of it, not in any learned chemical analysis of its component parts. Some may fear that the mental training involved in the treading of the Path is too severe and is doomed to failure. But, it must be remembered that the more the mind is exercised the more it gains in strength and the more it becomes controllable. The Buddha has said in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*,⁴² “Monks, I know not of any other single thing so tractable as the cultivated mind.” Hence it is that the number of brain cells that can arise in a man is unlimited. Finally, I would wish to say that if all the wisdom of the Four Noble Truths can for practical purposes boil down to one single instruction, to one single admonition, to one single dictate, that instruction, admonition and dictate is contained in the words once uttered by the Buddha viz. “*taṇhāya mūlaṃ khaṇatha*” – “dig up the very roots of *taṇhā*.”⁴³ Without the elimination of this pernicious element of craving no true happiness can ever come to man. It has been amply shown how potently this law of change is operating at all times, in all places, in all ways, in this world and how everything in this world without a single exception is subject to its inexorable rule. It is this phenomenon of change that strikes at the root of all worldly happiness. Viewed against this background of shifting situations and shifting scenes, worldly happiness is just a passing show: The entire world is in a state of perpetual change and unrest, and so is its inhabitant man. There is tension everywhere. Hence man’s search for worldly happiness is nothing but an empty race, a futile rush, a maddening thirst that is never quenched.

Man’s search for happiness has gone on from age to age but it can never be found in the way it is sought—in merely adjusting the conditions of the external world and ignoring the internal world of mind. The history of the world proves this. Social reforms; economic reforms, legal reforms and political reforms, however well-intentioned and well-calculated they may have been, never brought complete and genuine happiness to man. Why? When one set of unsatisfactory conditions that have appeared has been eliminated, another rears its head, and when that is eliminated yet another appears. This appearance and re-appearance, this rise and fall is the essence of all mundane things and conditions. There can never be any mass production of true happiness. It is something personal and individual. It comes from within and not without. It is not so much the external world that one has to explore in the search for happiness as the internal world of mind.

The modern scientific age, with its brilliant scientists and its wonderful inventions, has no doubt economized labour, shattered distance and captured time. But I ask you, has science invented one single machine, one single instrument or other contrivance to shatter *dukkha*? The modern scientific age is transplanting hearts and transporting or attempting to transport men to the moon. But I ask you, is not the moon but another earth subject to the same infirmities, the same limitations and the same lamentations as are prevailing on earth? What is the great gain to man, I ask you, by adding one or more of these revolving planets to man’s possession of this *dukkha*-laden earth? Why should he saddle himself with the problems of the moon, when he has not as yet solved the problems of this earth? What is needed is not an extension or furtherance of the sphere of human existence but a deliverance from existence itself. And as for the change of heart, I ask you, is not the best change of heart the change that results not from the surgical removal of the physical heart, but the psychic removal of *taṇhā* or craving? The change of heart that thereby results is a glorious achievement. We are our own surgeons to effect that change of heart. In those surgical removals, the operation will succeed but the patient may

⁴¹ M I 171

⁴² A I 4

⁴³ Dh 337

succumb. In these psychic removals, if the operation succeeds there is greater success and glory to the patient.

Sisters and brothers, I thank you for the attention you have given me. May you—one and all—some happy day in your lives get the urge to contemplate seriously these Four Noble Truths and may that contemplation bring you pure joy ending finally in the attainment to that Reality, that Highest Wisdom, that Everlasting Peace and Security and Happiness which is called Nibbāna.

That Nibbāna may you all attain.



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