

Selected Quotes on The Four Noble Truths
by Nick Koch

1

Now this, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the painful (dukkha) true reality (ariya-sacca): birth is painful, aging is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; union with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful; in brief, the five bundles [form, feeling, perception, formations, consciousness] of grasping-fuel are painful.
– Samyutta Nikaya 56.11 Peter Harvey translation

In the First Noble Truth, the Buddha proclaimed that 'there is dukkha (suffering).' It is put into the context of a 'Noble Truth' rather than a dismal reality. If we look at it as a dismal reality, what happens? 'Life is just suffering, it's all just suffering. You get old, you get sick and then you die. You have to lose all your friends: "All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will be come separated from me." That's all it's about; it's just dukkha from beginning to end'. There's nothing noble in that, is there? It's just pessimistic and depressing seeing it in terms of, 'I don't like it. I don't want suffering. What a bad joke God played on us creating this mess. And me being born in this mess, to live just to get old. What am I living for? Just to get old, get sick and die'. Of course, that's very depressing. That's not a Noble Truth. You're creating a problem around the way things are. With the Noble truth, 'there is suffering,' the advice to deal with this suffering is to welcome it, to understand it, to open to it, to admit it, to begin to notice it and accept it. It's a willingness to embrace and learn from that which we don't like and don't want – the pain and the irritation, whether it's physical, mental or emotional.
– Ajahn Sumedho

Dukkha is often translated as “suffering”. Suffering, however, represents only one aspect of dukkha, a term whose range of implications is difficult to capture with a single English word. Dukkha can be derived from the Sanskrit kha, one meaning of which is “the axle-hole of a wheel”, and the antithetic prefix duh (=dus), which stands for “difficulty” or “badness”. The complete term then evokes the image of an axle not fitting properly into its hole. According to this image, dukkha suggests “disharmony” or “friction”. Alternatively dukkha can be related to the Sanskrit stha, “standing” or “abiding”, combined with the same antithetic prefix duh. Dukkha in the sense of “standing badly” then conveys nuances of “uneasiness” or of being “uncomfortable”. In order to catch the various nuances of “dukkha”, the most convenient translation is “unsatisfactoriness”, though it might be best to leave the term untranslated.
– Bhikkhu Analayo

The Buddha says that he teaches only Dukkha and the cessation of Dukkha, that is, suffering and the end of suffering. The First Noble Truth deals with the problem of suffering. However, the truth of suffering is not the final word of the Buddha's teaching. It is only the starting point. The Buddha starts with suffering, because his teaching is designed for a particular end: it is designed to lead to liberation. In order to do this he must give us a reason for seeking liberation. If a man does not know that his house is on fire, he lives there enjoying himself, playing and laughing. To get him to come out we first have to make him understand that his house is on fire. In the same way the Buddha announces that our lives are burning with old age, sickness and death. Our minds are flaming with greed, hatred and delusion. It is only when we become aware of the peril that we are ready to seek a way to release.

– Bhikkhu Bodhi

As beginners, we need only hold to the basic principle that “developing life” means “causing life to progress to the highest level,” that is, beyond all problems and dukkha, beyond all the possible meanings and gradations of these two terms. For those unfamiliar with the word dukkha, we can tentatively translate it as “stress, unsatisfactoriness, conflict, agitation—all the things that disturb life.” Dukkha is what we are running from all the time. Dukkha interferes with a life of calm and ease as well as with spiritual perfection. When life is developed beyond all dukkha, it reaches its highest possible level. Now, some people do not know about their own problems. They do not understand dukkha, neither in general terms nor in their own lives. They look at themselves and say, “Oh! I don't have any problems; everything is okay.” They accept all their difficulties and sorrow as normal and ordinary. Are we like this? We need to take a serious, detailed look into our own lives to see if there is anything that we can call “a problem.” Is there any dukkha? Is there anything unsatisfactory or disturbing about life? Such questions are necessary when we choose to study the Dhamma. If you have not looked inside, if you are unaware of your problems, if you feel no dukkha, then you cannot know why you are on retreat, why you have come to a meditation center, or why you are studying Dhamma. Please, take a good, clear look at your problems and dukkha before proceeding any further.

– Ajahan Buddhadasa

Dukkha is a word notoriously hard to translate into English. In the Pali canon, it applies both to physical and to mental pain and dis-ease, ranging from intense anguish to the subtlest sense of being burdened or confined. The Pali commentaries explain dukkha as “that which is hard to bear.” Ajaan Maha Boowa, a Thai forest master, translates it as “whatever puts a squeeze on the heart.” Although no single English term covers all of these meanings, the word “stress” – as a strain on the body or mind – seems as close as English can get to the Pali term; “suffering” can be used in places where “stress” seems too mild.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Many people have charged Buddhism with being pessimistic because the four truths start out with stress and suffering, but they charge misses the fact that the first truth is part of a strategy of diagnosis and therapy focusing on the basic problem in life so as to offer a solution to it. Thus the Buddha was like a doctor, focusing on the disease he wanted to cure. Charging him with pessimism is like charging a doctor with pessimism when he asks, “Where does it hurt?” The total cure the Buddha promised as a result of his course of therapy shows that, in actuality, he was much less pessimistic than the vast majority of the world, for whom wisdom means accepting the bad things in life with the good, assuming that there is no chance in this life for unalloyed happiness. The Buddha was an extremely demanding person, unwilling to bend to this supposed wisdom or to rest with anything less than absolute happiness. His course of therapy points to the fact that such a happiness is possible, and can be attained through our own efforts.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

2

Now this monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the originating-of-the-painful (dukkha-samudaya) true reality. It is this craving (tanha), which leads to renewed being, accompanied by relishing and attachment, seeking enjoyment now here, now there; that is, craving for sense-pleasures, craving for being, craving for non-existence.

– Samyutta Nikaya 56.11 Peter Harvey translation

So the key origin or cause of dukkha is tanha. This literally means 'thirst', and clearly refers to demanding, clinging desires which are ever on the lookout for gratification, 'now here, now there'. It contains an element of psychological compulsion, a driven restlessness ever on the lookout for new objects to focus on: I want, I want more, I want different. This propels people into situation after situation which are open to pain, disquiet and upset. So tanha is not just any 'desire' – for desire can be wholesome and for good things. Chanda, or desire-to-act, can be either unwholesome, like tanha, or wholesome, and it is a key ingredient of one of the four iddhi-padas, or 'bases of success', which aid spiritual development. [...] The first sermon identifies three types of craving: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-existence. The second type refers to the drive for ego enhancement based on a certain identity, and for some kind of eternal life after death as me. The third is the drive to get rid of unpleasant situations, things and people.

– Peter Harvey

All of use are slaves to craving. It is ignoble, but it is true. Desire is insatiable. As soon as we get something, we find it is not as satisfying as we thought it

would be, and we try something else. It is the nature of life, like trying to scoop up water in a butterfly net. Beings cannot become contented by following the dictates of desire, chasing after objects. Desire can never satisfy desire. If we understand this truth correctly, we will not seek satisfaction in this self-defeating way. This is why the Buddha said that contentment is the greatest wealth.

– Sayadaw U Pandita

When desire is scrutinized closely, we find that it is constantly shadowed by dukkha. Sometimes dukkha appears as pain or irritation; often it lies low as a constant strain of discontent. But the two – desire and dukkha – are inseparable concomitants. We can confirm this for ourselves by considering the whole cycle of desire. At the moment desire springs up it creates in us a sense of lack, the pain of want. To end this pain we struggle to fulfill the desire. If our effort fails, we experience frustration, disappointment, sometimes despair. But even the pleasure of success is not unqualified. We worry that we might lose the ground we have gained. We feel driven to secure our position, to safeguard our territory, to gain more, to rise higher, to establish tighter controls. The demands of desire seem endless, and each desire demands the eternal: it wants the things we get to last forever. But all the objects of desire are impermanent. Whether it be wealth, power, position, or other persons, separation is inevitable, and the pain that accompanies separation is proportional to the force of attachment: strong attachment brings much suffering; little attachment brings little suffering; no attachment brings no suffering

– Bhikkhu Bodhi

Vedana, or feelings, have great power over our actions. In fact, the whole world is under the command of these vedana. For example, tanha (craving) can control the mind. Craving itself is first conditioned by feeling. Thus, the vedana have the strongest and most powerful influence over our entire mind. Thus, it is especially important to understand the secrets of the vedana. [...] In some Pali texts the vedana are described as “conditioners of the mind”. Mind, in this instance, arises from our thoughts, desires, and needs. We cannot endure the influence of the vedana. We are not free within ourselves; we think and act under the power of vedana. Feelings condition the mind and force us to act. If we master the vedana, we will master the world.

– Ajahn Buddhadasa

We have to look more closely at how suffering arises—or, in other words, how khandhas [5 aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness] become clinging-khandhas. When khandhas are experienced, the process of fabrication normally doesn't simply stop there. If attention focuses on the khandhas' attractive features—beautiful forms, pleasing feelings, etc.—it can give rise to passion and delight. This passion and delight

can take many forms, but the most tenacious is the habitual act of fabricating a sense of me or mine, identifying with a particular khanda (or set of khandhas) or claiming possession of it. [...] Whatever shape it takes it's always unstable and insecure, for the khandas providing its food are simply activities and functions, inconstant and insubstantial. In the words of the canon, the khandhas are like foam, like a mirage, like bubbles formed when rain falls on water. They're heavy only because the iron grip of trying to cling to them is burdensome. As long as we're addicted to the passion and delight for these activities—as long as we cling to them—we're bound to suffer.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

The Buddha had a word for this experience of an identity inhabiting a world defined around a specific desire. He called it bhava, which is related to the verb bhavati, to “be” or to “become.” He was especially interested in bhava as process—how it comes about, and how it can be ended. So “becoming” is probably a better English rendering for the term than “being” or “existence”, [...] The Buddha's Awakening also taught him that craving and clinging leading to stress are identical to the craving and clinging that lead to becoming. So becoming is inevitably stressful. This explains why the typical human way of avoiding suffering—which is to replace one state of becoming with another—can never fully succeed. If, to escape the sufferings of being a painter, you decide to become a miner instead, you simply exchange one set of sufferings for another. Regardless of what identity you take on, or however you experience the mountain of the world, it's going to entail some degree of stress. Thus to put an end to suffering, it's necessary to put an end to becoming.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

3

Now this, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the ceasing-of-the-painful true reality. It is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it.

– Samyutta Nikaya 56.11 Peter Harvey translation

That is, the ending of thirst for the 'next thing', so as to give full attention to what is here, now; abandoning attachments to the past, present or future; freedom that comes from contentment; not relying on craving so that the mind does not fixate on anything, adhering to it, roosting there. When craving and other related causes thus come to an end, dukkha ceases. This is equivalent to Nirvana, also known as the 'unconditioned' or 'unconstructed', the ultimate goal of Buddhism. As an initial spur to striving for Nirvana, craving for it may play a role, but this helps in the overcoming of other cravings, is generally replaced by wholesome aspiration, and is completely

eradicated in the full experience of Nirvana. Nirvana is only attained when there is total non-attachment and letting go.

– Peter Harvey

The term *vossagga* stands for “letting go”, in the sense of relinquishing, forsaking, or renouncing. Similar to the closely related *patinissagga*, “giving up”, *vossagga* has a considerable scope of meaning in early Buddhism. Both terms can be seen to throw into relief the central theme that underlies the path to liberation from its outset to its final completion, namely the need to quite literally “let go” of any clinging whatsoever. [...] giving up, similar to getting go, spans the whole scale of meditative development. Perfecting giving up, then requires giving up all craving, whereby the mind will be thoroughly liberated. Such giving up is the theme of the third noble truth, according to which the eradication of *dukkha* requires giving up craving. It was through such giving up of craving and of any sense of 'I' and 'mine' that the Buddha reaches supreme awakening.

– Bhikkhu Analayo

Applied at the mundane level, contemplation of the four noble truths can be directed to patterns of clinging to existence occurring in everyday life, as, for example when one's expectations are frustrated, when one's position is threatened, or when things do not go as one would want. The task here is to acknowledge the underlying pattern of craving that has led to the build-up of clinging and expectations, and also its resultant manifestation in some form of *dukkha*. This understanding in turn forms the necessary basis for letting go of craving. With such letting go, clinging and *dukkha* can, at least momentary, be overcome. Practiced in this way, one will become increasingly able to “fare evenly amidst the uneven”.

– Bhikkhu Analayo

When, however, we take up the practice of the Dhamma, we apply a brake to this relentless generation of *sankharas*. We learn to see the true nature of the *sankharas*, of our own five aggregates: as unstable, conditioned processes rolling on with no one in charge. Thereby we switch off the engine driven by ignorance and craving, and the process of *kammic* construction, the production of active *sankharas*, is effectively deconstructed. By putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned: the *asankhata-dhatu*, the unconditioned element. This is *Nibbana*, the Deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, the final liberation from all conditioned formations and thus from impermanence and death. Therefore our verse concludes: “The subsiding of formations is blissful!”

– Bhikkhu Bodhi

Several years back I was leading a day-long discussion on the four noble

truths. When we got to the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, the passages we were discussing contained descriptions of nibbana, and the general consensus in the group was that they didn't like the sound of it. It seemed to alien, too foreign to be really appealing. Then we got to the fourth noble truth and we started talking about right concentration. That sounded very appealing: rapture and pleasure permeating the entire body. Those were things you really could get your mind around. They sounded compelling. And that's the way it is with the practice: You have to develop the fourth noble truth, the path of practice, before you can appreciate the third. You have to hold onto right concentration before you can let go into the Deathless.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Taken together, the four categories of the noble truths, along with their imperatives, follow a basic problem-solving approach: one solves the problem of stress by following a path of practice that directed attacks the cause of the problem. The noble eightfold path develops the qualities of mind needed to see that all the possible objects of craving—the five aggregates—are stressful, inconstant, and not self. As a result, one grows dispassionate toward them. With nothing left to focus on, craving disbands. When one experienced the “remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, & letting go of that very craving”, the problem is solved.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

4

Now this, monks, for the spiritually ennobled, is the true reality which is the way leading to the cessation of the painful. It is this noble eight-factored path, that is to say, [1] right view, [2] right resolve, [3] right speech, [4] right action, [5] right livelihood, [6] right effort, [7] right mindfulness, [8] right mental unification (numbers added).

– Samyutta Nikaya 56.11 Peter Harvey translation

The Noble Eight-factored Path is a middle way that avoids a life of pursuing either sense-pleasures or harsh asceticism, and it leads to the cessation of dukkha. [...] The order of the eight Path-factors is seen as that of a natural progression, with one factor following on from the one before it. Right view comes first because it knows the right and wrong form of each of the eight factors; it also counteracts spiritual ignorance, the first factor in Conditioned Arising. From the cool knowing of right view blossoms right resolve, a right way of thinking/aspiring, which has a balancing warmth. From this, a person's speech becomes improved, and thus his or her action. Once he is working on right action, it becomes natural to incline towards a virtuous livelihood. With this as a basis, there can be right effort. This facilitates the development of right mindfulness, whose clarity then allows the development of the calm of meditative concentration.

– Peter Harvey

Majjhima Nikaya 44.11 explains that the eight factors can be incorporated into three “aggregates” of training. Right speech, right action, and right livelihood make up the aggregate of virtue or moral discipline (sila); right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration make up the aggregate of concentration (samadhi); and right view and right intention make up the aggregate of understanding or wisdom (panna). This threefold sequence in turn serves as a basic outline for the gradual training [...] which unfolds in stages from the first step to the final goal.

– Bhikkhu Bodhi

In fact, all three aspects of the training—virtue, concentration, and discernment—help one another along. Virtue makes it easier to settle down into concentration and to be honest with yourself in discerning which members of the mind's committee are skillful and which ones are not. Concentration provides the mind with a sense of refreshment that allows it to resist unskillful urges that would create lapses in virtue, and the stability it needs to discern clearly what's actually going on inside. Discernment provides strategies for developing virtue, along with an understanding of the mind's workings that allow it to settle down in ever stronger states of concentration.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Right intention claims the second place in the path, between right view and the triad of moral factors that begins with right speech, because the mind's intentional function forms the crucial link connecting our cognitive perspectives with our modes of active engagement in the world. On the one side actions always point back to the thoughts from which they spring. Thought is the forerunner of action, directing body and speech, stirring them into activity, using them as its instruments for expressing its aims and ideals. These aims and ideals, our intentions, in turn point back a further step to the prevailing views. When wrong views prevail, the outcome is wrong intention giving rise to unwholesome actions. Thus one who denies the moral efficacy of action and measures achievement in terms of gain and status will aspire to nothing but gain and status, using whatever means he can to acquire them. When such pursuits become widespread, the result is suffering, the tremendous suffering of individuals, social groups, and nations out to gain wealth, position, and power without regard for consequences. The cause for the endless competition, conflict, injustice, and oppression does not lie outside the mind. These are all just manifestations of intentions, outcroppings of thoughts driven by greed, by hatred, by delusion. But when intentions are right, the actions will be right, and for the intentions to be right the surest guarantee is right views.

– Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Buddha occasionally mentioned a Tenfold Path. In this expanded list, Right Knowledge and Right Release are added after the more familiar list of eight factors. When the Eightfold Path leads to the ending of clinging and suffering, Right Knowledge is the insight that brings about Right Release. Right Knowledge is neither an abstract truth nor something we learn from a teaching; nor is it mysterious or supernatural. As a continuation of the Eightfold Path, Right Knowledge is knowing firsthand the benefits experienced through living the path and the suffering experienced when we don't live the path. The benefits include greater peace, compassion, well-being, integrity, and spiritual freedom. The suffering includes agitation, fear, conceit, greed, and hostility. The more strongly we experience the benefits, the more clearly we see the differences between being attached and being free, having ill will and having goodwill, having ethical integrity and not having integrity. As we begin to make different choices, the contracted and agitated states of clinging begin to lose their appeal and power over us and we learn that they are neither hardwired nor necessary. As we see and experience healthy alternatives, these painful states begin to diminish in strength and frequency.

– Gil Fronsdal

The Buddha himself said that he got on the right path when he started dividing his thinking into these two types: thinking that was harmful and thinking that was harmless. In other words, he classed his thinking by the skillful or the unskillful impact it had on the mind. From that distinction, the rest of the path grew. [...] When the Buddha was critical of other teachers, it was most frequently over their inability, one, to explain what is skillful or unskillful, or two, to provide an understanding of what it's important to act in a skillful way and to avoid unskillful behavior. So this is what we're here for, to use his explanation of these issues as an aid in developing a sense of skill with the mind. And even with skillful thinking, he said there are times when it's even more skillful to let the mind rest in right concentration. It's another factor of the path. In fact it's one of the central ones. There's a passage where the Buddha refers to the other seven factors of the path as aids, as requisites to right concentration. Right concentration is the important one, the first factor of the path the Buddha himself first discovered. So that's what we work on. And in the process, we bring in the other factors as they are needed.

– Thanissaro Bhikkhu