

# Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel

Talks on the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism  
by Ven. Master Sheng-yen

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This book consists of talks on the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism by the Venerable Chan Master Sheng-yen at the Chan Meditation Center in Elmhurst, New York. These lectures took place on four consecutive Sundays between November 1 and November 22, 1998.

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It is our sincere hope that Master Sheng-yen's commentary on the Four Noble Truths will provide the reader with a clear understanding of their meaning, as well as the inspiration to integrate the teachings into their own lives.

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## ***Chapter One: Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel***

Soon after he realized full enlightenment, the Buddha wanted to share his discovery with all sentient beings. He traveled a hundred-fifty miles on foot from Bodhgaya, where he experienced illumination under the bodhi tree, to the city of Sarnath in Benares. His purpose was to seek out five monks [\[1.1\]](#) with whom he had previously practiced asceticism. The monks had left him when he turned away from asceticism to follow the middle way. Now he had become enlightened and in his great compassion wanted to help his friends find the path to liberation. So his very first teaching as the Buddha was to these five monks at a grove near Sarnath called Deer Park.

### ***The Buddha's First Teaching***

In this, the Buddha's first teaching [\[1.2\]](#) he expounded on the middle way between asceticism and indulgence, and also taught the Four Noble Truths. With this teaching he set in motion the Wheel of the Dharma--the teachings of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths are thus the foundation of the Buddhadharma. To understand, to practice, and to realize the Four Noble Truths is to realize the whole of the Buddhadharma. While most Buddhists may understand the Four Noble Truths to some degree, not everyone may be clear about all their implications. Therefore beginning today, I will explain and try to clarify these four truths as spoken by the Buddha.

When the Buddha expounded on the Four Noble Truths, he first stated what they were. They are, he said, the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the way out of suffering by means of the eightfold noble path [\[1.3\]](#). This is the first of the "three turnings and twelve processes" [\[1.4\]](#) of the Dharma Wheel.

What does that mean? As taught by the Buddha, each of the noble truths implied three turnings or aspects. Within each noble truth, the three turnings or aspects were: first, understanding that noble truth; second, putting into practice one's understanding of that noble truth; and third, accomplishing the results, or realizing, that noble truth. Thus, the sequence is from understanding, to practice, to realization. The complete practice of the Four Noble Truths thus consists of twelve processes [\[1.5\]](#), which when completed, assured one entry into nirvana.

Therefore, understanding the meaning of the Four Noble Truths is the first turning. As a result of the first turning, the ascetics understood the nature of suffering and its causes. The Buddha further explained the need to go beyond just understanding the Four Noble Truths, and putting that knowledge into practice. For example, knowing the origins of suffering, we need to abandon the kinds of actions that cause the accumulation of suffering. One has a firm conviction that cessation is possible, and practices the path to accomplish this. Thus the second turning is belief in and acting on the truths.

The Buddha told his disciples that he himself, realizing the four truths, had in fact accomplished cessation, and had fulfilled the path away from suffering, and become liberated. And now he was teaching them how to achieve liberation for themselves. The existence of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way out of suffering were fully understood, practiced, and suffering itself was ended. Thus the third turning is the realization, the result of practicing the truths.

As a result of the Buddha's three turnings of the Dharma Wheel even the least gifted of the five monks became enlightened [\[1.6\]](#), and became aryas, awakened ones, the Buddha's first disciples, and the first sangha--the community of Buddhist monks. For forty nine years afterward, the Buddha continued to expound on the Four Noble Truths and all the other teachings of the Buddhadharma until he entered great nirvana. Prior to that, he always admonished his disciples and followers to abide by the precepts (vinaya) [\[1.7\]](#), to accept the Dharma as their teacher, and take liberation (nirvana) as their ultimate goal.

What is abiding by the precepts? It is to live ethically, harmonious, and with stability. What is accepting the Dharma as your teacher? It means taking the Four Noble Truths as the fundamental teaching, and understanding that existence is characterized by impermanence. It is to understand that all things inherently lack independent existence, and are empty of self. It is to believe in the cessation of suffering and in the certainty of ultimate liberation in nirvana. To understand this is to practice the three seals of the Dharma (three marks of existence): suffering, impermanence, and no-self. And how does one realize the three seals? One begins with the practice of the Four Noble Truths.

What is it to have liberation as one's goal? To have liberation as one's goal, one must fully understand the workings of conditioned arising--that all things arise as a result of many different causes and conditions. To understand the nature of our existence, we begin by understanding the twelve links of conditioned arising [\[1.8\]](#) that determine the shape and path of our life as it unfolds. If one can contemplate these twelve links, one will fully understand the causes of suffering, as well as the way out of suffering towards liberation [\[1.9\]](#).

Thus, the Four Noble Truths encompass the complete teachings of the Buddha and include the three seals of the Dharma, and the twelve links of conditioned arising. Therefore, to realize the goal of the Four Noble Truths, one must also understand and contemplate suffering, impermanence, no-self and conditioned arising.

Although Buddhism can be divided into various schools such as the Theravada, the Mahayana, the Vajrayana, the sudden and the gradual [\[1.10\]](#), and so on, all of them have as their basis the Four Noble Truths, without which, they could not be considered Buddhist. With this brief introduction, let us now proceed to arrive at a deeper understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

### ***Why the Truths are Noble***

In general, we can say that all liberated beings (aryas), such as arhats and buddhas, have thoroughly penetrated the Four Noble Truths. And because these truths pervade the understanding of these holy beings, we call them noble. They are also called noble because by understanding and practicing them, we too can reach liberation.

The aryas awakened to the first noble truth of suffering and its many origins. First there is suffering from catastrophic calamity, natural disasters, and other threats from the environment. Second, we can isolate fear and uncertainty sources of suffering. And third are the endless kinds of self-generated afflictions we experience. These latter types of suffering are more clearly mental in origin and manifestation. Thus, the awakened ones are fully aware of the manifold origins of suffering that keep us in the oceanic suffering of samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

The second noble truth is that the fundamental cause of suffering is ignorance manifesting as greed, aversion, an delusion. Ignorance in turn leads us to engage in actions that cause suffering. Action, the literal meaning of karma, includes overt

actions as well as thoughts and words. So what we call the origin or cause of suffering is actually karma--the force that propels existing conditions in our life to a future result, a kind of momentum that leads us in a certain direction. It is a composite energy generated by the illusions and afflictions of sentient beings, causing them to engage in certain actions. These actions themselves plant further 'seeds' (causes and conditions) for further consequences. When the seeds ripen the resultant force becomes a potential that propels us into the future, leading us to particular experiences of suffering.

The third and fourth noble truths derive from the deep understanding realized by aryas of the actual non-existence of suffering, and hence the possibility of its cessation. The Buddha expounded various approaches to arrive at cessation from suffering. Among these, most important is an ethical way of life, which is to say, engaging in conduct that does not cause suffering. We must also cultivate awareness so that we do not create the causes for future suffering. If we are unaware of the causes of suffering, we prolong it by creating the same causes over and over. When we are aware of the causes of suffering, we can cease our negative actions, so that liberation from suffering can result.

Finally, we call these truths noble because they are genuine, timeless, and necessary. They are genuine because nothing can contradict, discredit, or supersede them, and while practicing them one will experience that they are genuine. They are timeless because suffering and the end of suffering are not limited to a particular culture or period of time. As long as there is suffering, sentient beings will strive to end such a state. Finally, they are necessary because to reach cessation we must actually practice the path that leads to liberation.

### ***Worldly and World-Transcending Cause and Effect***

A closer look at the Four Noble Truths shows us two kinds of cause and effect at work. One is called 'worldly cause-and-effect,' which leads to suffering; the other is called 'world-transcending cause-and-effect,' which leads to liberation.

Worldly cause-and-effect takes place in space and time, and whatever exists in space and time is characterized by impermanence. Yesterday, you were not here in this hall; today you are here listening to me; after the talk today you will be gone. When we experience this as individuals, we are experiencing impermanence. This sense of change also gives a sense of continuity in our lives. But as the days go by, our lives are also coming to a close, day by day. So impermanence is essentially this progression from birth to death, from existence to non-existence.

To experience impermanence we must exist in the space-time continuum. Our sense of space can be great or small--we can sense a multitude of spaces or a very limited space. The difference is the key to how we experience the workings of cause and conditions. These various factors coming together and dispersing give us a sense of time. The very fact that the different aspects of our lives shift, alter, and transform, results from these causal relationships. The workings of causes at conditions, which take place in space, are inseparable and imbedded in time, so we experience time and space together. As I said before, the world is what comes together in space-time, and this experience of constant change is impermanence.

Simply put, world-transcendence is freedom from worldly cause-and-effect, freedom from suffering in time and space. The awakened ones--arhats and buddhas--are no longer fettered by time and space, therefore not influenced by the suffering which impermanence brings. For this reason the state of world-transcendence is a state of liberation.

How do the worldly and world-transcending realities relate to the Four Noble Truths? Worldly cause-and-effect encompasses the first two noble truths of suffering and the origin of suffering. Suffering is actually an effect of living in time and space, and its origin is our ignorance as to the true nature of living in worldly reality.

Surely, you are thinking, there must be some kind of happiness in life, and indeed, there are many occasions in life of joy and happiness. The Buddha himself did not deny these states of joy and happiness, but when he spoke of impermanence as suffering he had in mind the very subtle way impermanence permeates even the joy that we feel. Even in the midst of happiness there is loss and decay. This happiness will fade away just like anything else. Nothing in time and space, nothing in the world lasts or can be truly acquired, however great our desire for things to be other than what they are. This suffering includes our ultimate inability to escape old age, sickness, and death. Since we are not our own masters, on the coarse as well as very subtle levels, suffering is inherent in all aspects of our experience.

World-transcending cause-and-effect relates to the third and fourth noble truths of the cessation of suffering and the path that leads out of suffering. Cessation is the state in which worldly cause-and-effect is abandoned, there is no more accumulation of karma, and nirvana is realized. One is free from suffering, and the process of reaching this state is the path. Later we will elaborate on the way of practicing the path.

Thus, when the Buddha turned the Wheel of the Dharma, he also taught that the path of liberation is the path of moving from the worldly to the world-transcending modes of acting, thinking, and speaking. And after three turnings of the Dharma wheel, the three expositions of the Four Noble Truths, all five mendicant monks achieved liberation.

## ***Karma and Retribution***

Earlier we said that suffering originates in karma. Therefore, all suffering is retribution, which can be understood as either karmic retribution, or resultant retribution. Karmic retribution is the operation of the underlying causes and conditions that propel karmic energy. Resultant retribution is what we experience subjectively as a result of the karmic forces coming due. Resultant retribution takes on the guise of different kinds of suffering. In a later talk we will address the different kinds of suffering, but for now I just want to reaffirm that suffering originates in karma.

How is karma created? Basically, karma is created through the functioning of the six sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. These organs are not necessarily the cause of suffering; rather it is our cherishing them that causes suffering. We cherish them because through them we have a notion of our own body, which we attach and cling to it as if it were perfect, lovable, and permanent; and above all, because through it we have a sense of identity, a sense of self. As a result we generate passions that rule our behavior, setting in motion the karmic forces that propel us into the future.

The third noble truth of cessation refers to the extinction of our mental defilements (afflictions) from the sense organs. As I said these organs are not the cause of the problem. The colorations we add to our experience, through attachment and clinging, are the cause of the problem. So if the six sense organs, defiled by the clinging mind, can be said to be the origin of suffering, correspondingly, the cessation of suffering means ending such defilements.

The fourth noble truth is the path leading toward cessation known as the eightfold noble path. While this path and its eight aspects seem easy to understand, they are extremely rich and encompassing. The path includes the threefold practice of

precepts (sila), meditative concentration (samadhi) and wisdom (prajna). It also includes many other practices, such as the five methods of stilling the mind [\[1.11\]](#), and the four foundations of mindfulness for developing insight. [\[1.12\]](#)

In conjunction with the Four Noble Truths there are also the very detailed practices known as the sixteen aspects of the Four Noble Truths. [\[1.13\]](#) These aspects can be used as objects of meditation, beginning with the awareness of the breath (calming), and proceeding to the development of meditative awareness (insight). All these methods lead to path of 'seeing' (awakening to) the nature of reality.

## *Summary*

We have talked about numerous things from the turning of the Dharma Wheel, to engaging the path, to attaining arhatship through cessation. So far we have only given a brief summary of the Four Noble Truths. Nevertheless, by the time I finished talking about the three turnings you should have all become aryas like the five monks. (Laughter) But in case there are some of you who have not attained enlightenment, and if today's talk sounded pretty enticing, please come back next Sunday, and we will talk in more detail about the Four Noble Truths. I hope to describe the Four Noble Truths as a group and reveal their different levels, layer after layer, of their subtle implications. If I say the levels get deeper and deeper, I might scare you off, so I will just say I will just try to make them clearer and clearer.

Now we have some time for a few questions.

*Questioner:* How can we relieve day-to-day suffering?

*Shifu:* We experience day-to-day life as a burden of body and mind that may seem to come from the environment, but it mainly originates in our own body and mind. This burden is the reality of impermanence. Because of this particular burden that we feel and experience, we take suffering to be inherent in our lives. Happiness is temporary relief from this burden, after which the sense of impermanence and through it, suffering, reappears

One can, however, experience happiness that is less subject to impermanence. The particular happiness the Buddha discusses is the joy of Dharma. The more we practice the Dharma, the more happiness we will have. If we really engage in the Dharma to the point of full liberation, we will be extremely happy, even elated.

*Questioner:* In daily life, we often encounter the suffering of the sick, such as a terminally ill relative who wants to be relieved of their suffering. What is the correct view for a Buddhist who truly grasps the essence of the Four Noble Truths? What can relieve his fellow being of such suffering, whatever the cause?

*Shifu:* One engages the Four Noble Truths by oneself; understand suffering and the way out of suffering, as it relates to you. If a sick person is still conscious and is receptive, there may be an opportunity to help that person practice. We cannot implant the Four Noble Truths in another person, but we can at least help them understand some of the origins of suffering, and begin practicing the Four Noble Truths. But if that person is not receptive or able to comprehend, then the Four Noble Truths will not help. While we can relieve their pain and so on, that is not the end of existential suffering or liberation from it. Medication and other methods of relief are not what we mean by cessation. Only by engaging in practice can someone be freed from the suffering described in the Four Noble Truths.

When a friend was on the edge of death I tried to convey some the teachings, but this person was quite agitated, in agony and pain, and was not receptive. Since that would not work, I simply sat next to my friend and started to quietly recite the Buddha's name. This worked to a certain extent because my presence at his bedside and the stability of my mind perhaps influenced him directly; in a non-verbal way, so that he was able gradually to calm down.

If reciting the Buddha's name is not effective, you can try meditating next to that person. This may sound far-fetched but it can be effective. The prerequisite is that you are really engaging in mediation, so that with a very stable, calm mind, your mind and the other person's can come to a mutual response. That person may directly calm down as a result. But if your mind is scattered or unduly influenced by the environment or lots of wandering thoughts, this will probably not work.

Thank you for your questions. So I encourage you to come back next Sunday... or you will not be liberated! (Laughter and applause)



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## **Chapter Two: *The Nature of Suffering***

Last week we discussed the turning of the Dharma Wheel in Deer Park in which the Buddha gave his first teaching of the Four Noble Truths to the five ascetic monks. We spoke of the basic meanings of the four truths, and of the path away from suffering to liberation. We will continue examining the first noble truth and the nature of suffering, layer upon layer, hoping to find clarification as well as deeper meanings.

There are various approaches I could take to sharing with you the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. Indeed their profundity can be revealed through many traditions of Buddhism, but for my sources I rely on the early scriptures, such as the *nikayas*, the early Pali sutras, also known as the *agamas*, and from the Sanskrit shastra called *Abhidharmakosha* (*The Treatise on Benefit Knowledge*). [\[2.1\]](#) Other approaches include that of the Madhyamika (Middle Way) [\[2.2\]](#) and the Yogacara (Mind-Only) [\[2.3\]](#), two very dominant Indian schools of thought that were very authoritative in their explanations of the Four Noble Truths. In Chinese Buddhism, besides the lines of Chan--Linji and Caodong (Zen: Rinzai and Soto)--there were the Tientai and the Huayan traditions [\[2.4\]](#), each with its own way of explaining the Four Noble Truths. So, with this in mind, I will be commenting primarily from the point of view of the earlier, more fundamental Buddhist tradition.

### ***Three Aspects of Suffering***

The first noble truth is the truth of the existence of suffering. The Buddha taught that suffering should be seen from three aspects [\[2.5\]](#): first is the suffering of suffering, second, the suffering of change, and third the pervasive suffering of the five skandhas, which I will discuss later.

### ***The Suffering of Suffering***

The suffering of suffering is ordinary suffering that we can feel in body and mind. Examples of suffering of suffering would be the discomfort from illness, or being separated from a loved one. These kinds of suffering everybody can recognize. But on a much more fundamental level, the suffering of suffering means that we are not our own masters. We are constantly under the influence and conditioning of other forces, from the external environment to the experiences and workings of our own minds and bodies. All these conditions are 'other-powered' because all the causes and conditions that make up a particular moment are dependent on other things happening, either in the environment or in our own body. This is called 'conditioned arising' or 'dependent origination.' At a deeper level we are not even in control of our minds and thoughts. This inability to control our very own being is suffering.

When we deeply reflect on ourselves, we see that we have our own perspectives and views of things. To this extent we seem in control of our minds. But when we take a closer look at our thought processes, very often the prior thought and the following thought contradict each other. In Chinese this is called 'the battle between the heavens and the humans,' the conflict between the rational mind and our feelings. When we know a certain action is right, our feelings may be the opposite--what we think and what we feel may be in conflict. We think we have a certain personality and certain traits but when we look closer, we seem to have multiple personalities and are in fact almost schizoid. We think one way, and act another way. In

different situations, we have completely different personalities. This conflict between different ways of being in the same person can cause much suffering.

We can try to use our mental and physical powers to maintain ourselves in comfort and health, but over time we realize that our body is undergoing changes, is getting older, and is subject to disease. If our own body does not listen to us, how much control over it do we really have? If you are a boss or a teacher you may feel you have control over other people, but there are limits, however much we may want to manipulate others. Ultimately, there is no person aside from yourself that you can rely on. You're on your own. And this inability to be in control and to feel at ease in the environment is also a source of suffering.

People want to rely on someone other than themselves. Some disciples of mine have a strong dependency on me, so as to say, "Shifu, you have to take care of your health. How can we rely on you if you're not around?" Here I am thinking to myself, "I can't even rely on myself and along come you folks who want to rely on *me*." (Laughter) So I tell them to rely not on me but on the Dharma, because it is the Dharma that I myself rely on. I'm here today, but I may die tomorrow so I encourage all of you to also rely on the Dharma, to be centered in the Dharma.

## *Suffering of Change*

The second aspect of suffering is the suffering of change. The dominant feature of existence is constant flux. The Chinese Book of Changes, the I-jing, says that all things are constantly in the state of becoming. By contrast Buddhism says that things arise and perish simultaneously--in the very midst of birth there is both creation and extinction. It is not that after birth the process of dying begins, but that in the very midst of being born there is death. In the midst of creation there is extinction; in the midst of extinction there is birth. The only constant is change--impermanence.

We can view impermanence in ways that correspond with the three aspects of suffering. First is impermanence with respect to the individual's direct experience of birth, living, and death. Second is impermanence with respect to suffering accompanied by constant change as a fact of existence. Third is impermanence with respect to the conditioned arising and extinction of all phenomena. If we can understand these dimensions of impermanence in suffering, we can also recognize the truth of emptiness and no-self.

The Chinese character *hua* means 'suffering of change' but also has the nuance of 'destructible.' Something here today may not be around tomorrow. This is so even with the working of our minds from moment to moment. One thought leads to the next, thought after thought, in constant flux. This is the meaning of 'suffering of change.'

It may appear that in life we have attained certain results or goals, but these too are constantly changing. Ultimately, there is no such thing as some objective result or goal that has been truly attained, because whatever it is will lack permanence. Rather, we need to understand that the world is a never-ending process, without beginning or end. When we look at our accomplishments from this perspective, we see that the fruits of our endeavors are themselves the product of change. Something had to change in order to get from our starting point to where we are now. When we finally get what we want, why should the process of change suddenly stop? For this reason we should not try to hold on to our gains as something set forever in stone. Success is nothing like a fixed or even stable reality, and can be very fleeting.

I met a fellow who had recently become a professor. I said, "Congratulations on becoming a professor." This is what he had attained, what he had planned for his life. Next I told him, "It's unfortunate that one day you will be retired, or even fired."

(Laughter) I was not trying to pour cold water on his accomplishment; I was trying to encourage him to gain a deeper insight into the way of existence--that things change and nothing is permanent. So, I encourage you to get a deeper level of insight into your own being and the way of the world, because with this penetrating wisdom, you can start to be free from the suffering of change, the suffering of impermanence.

## *Pervasive Suffering*

The third aspect of suffering, pervasive suffering, has a two-fold meaning. First, it means that all beings experience suffering--that none can escape it. A second meaning is associated with the fourth skandha of volition. To explain this I will first need to discuss the five skandhas as a whole.

Buddhism teaches that a human being is made up of five aggregates or skandhas. Like all forms of existence the five aggregates are characterized by two underlying realities--coming into being (creation) and change (extinction). Once again this points to impermanence as the common thread in the three aspects of suffering. However, even this is only a coarse level of understanding. Pervasive suffering also refers to an undercurrent of consciousness in which attachment and craving can instantly change to hatred and repulsion. It is a very subtle kind of psychological suffering.

The first aggregate is form, referring to the material or physical aspects of our body. The latter four are mental, and within those there are subtler divisions. The second aggregate is sensation. The third is perception, but you can also call it conception. The fourth is volition, which as I have mentioned, plays a key role in pervasive suffering. The last aggregate is consciousness.

Sensation and perception can also be understood in terms of the processes of the mind. 'Mind' is a very general term, but from the perspective of Buddhist psychology we see two different things in this mind: the discriminating, or primary mind and mental phenomena. The discriminating mind is like an emperor who controls his generals, soldiers, and so on. The second and third aggregates, sensation and perception, are a part of this emperor mind, and these two can be subdivided into as many as 175 different mental states.

Discriminating mind contains--you could say owns--its mental states, such as greed, jealousy, joy, pleasure--a whole army of negative as well as positive thoughts. As such, the mind and its states mutually reinforce each other. The mental states are not the mind; they are just the soldiers doing the bidding of the mind, helping to maintain and perpetuate it. While volition is also a mental aggregate along with sensation and perception, it works at a much more subtle level. Being the aggregate that leads to action, volition ensures that all living beings are constantly in a state of motion and arising. For this reason they cannot escape from the subtler form of pervasive suffering.

Suffering pervades the three realms of existence that make up samsara [\[2.6\]](#): the realm of desire, the realm of form, and the formless realm. This is so because these realms are characterized by attachment, however coarse or subtle. Take someone of great attainment whose highly refined consciousness is free from the coarser attachments of greed, hatred, jealousy, and other lower discriminations. That person has reached the samadhi of 'neither conceptualization nor non-conceptualization'--the samadhi of infinite consciousness. In this very high state one is free from the suffering of suffering and from the suffering of impermanence, but one is still subject to pervasive suffering.

The three realms are dimensions of existence where beings reside depending on their level of their consciousness. Until one transcends these three realms, they are not free from suffering. In the realm of desire, where humans exist, we have all three levels of suffering. Even if one abides in a deep samadhi where they are free from the suffering of impermanence, that individual returns to the world of vexation when they come out of samadhi. For this reason no matter how refined the level of consciousness, as long as there is attachment, that individual will experience pervasive suffering.

The Buddha spoke of eight kinds of suffering that human beings endure: birth, old age, sickness, death, separation from loved ones, confrontation with enemies, inability to attain what one seeks and, lastly, the suffering of the five aggregates. Of these eight kinds of suffering, the first seven are contained in the five skandhas. This is called the 'uninterrupted suffering of the five skandhas,' meaning that from one moment to the next, pervasive suffering is renewed by the existence of the aggregates.

According to the agamas and the Abhidharmakosha, there is another dimension of meaning to the five skandhas, namely, 'grasping.' [\[2.7\]](#) Grasping arises when a sense faculty interacts with a sense object, creating attachment, and consequently, suffering. This grasping after sense experience assures the continuation of the five skandhas through life after life. The objects of grasping are not just desires, but also hatred and delusion. Simply put, grasping causes suffering and in turn, suffering causes the continuation of the five aggregates through rebirths. On this basis we hold onto the poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance which propel us into future rebirths. Then, because of the five skandhas, we give rise to vexations again. So vexations cause the five skandhas, and the skandhas cause vexations. They are inseparable, mutually causing each other.

In summarizing the five skandhas, we can say that they pervade the three realms of existence, that there is no suffering apart from the five skandhas. But Buddhism also says that through the practice of Buddhadharma we can be freed from the very source of our suffering--the five aggregates.

## ***The Lesson of the Heart Sutra***

The Heart Sutra states it very clearly: "The bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, while coursing in the deep prajnaparamita, saw that all five skandhas are empty and thereby transcended all suffering." The real point of the Buddhist way is not just to understand suffering, but also to see the emptiness of suffering. We can use the teaching of the five skandhas to clarify the different dimensions of suffering, to realize the empty nature of the skandhas, and thereby to transcend our own suffering.

When we perceive the five skandhas in the same way as Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, simultaneously there is liberation. This is because upon seeing the true nature of our existence, we see that it is simultaneously suffering, impermanence, emptiness, and selflessness. What is the relationship between these four? First, there is impermanence. When one does not penetrate into the reality of impermanence, there is suffering. Being in suffering, one feels that there is an 'I' experiencing suffering. But for Avalokitesvara, the nature of suffering was revealed in a three-fold way. It is impermanent, empty and selfless, without the suffering. Why is that? Because by developing penetrative insight in Buddhadharma practice, one is freed from suffering. Through insight into the workings of impermanence, we come to recognize selflessness. In this way the Avalokitesvara perceived impermanence and emptiness, and, through emptiness, understood that there is no self. But with a deluded view we only experience suffering, as very real, permanent, and 'mine.' And because of our clinging and attachments we cannot escape.

## *Summary*

So what good is all this talk about suffering and the way out of suffering? Now that you know what suffering is, I hope that knowledge can help you. I hope you also have an understanding of the three seals of the Dharma--suffering, impermanence and no-self. But it is my experience that many disciples and students, both lay and monastic, have heard all this over and over again, and yet continue to experience suffering. I often find myself listening to their complaints and asking, "Why don't you practice the Buddhadharmā?" And they will say, "Practice? I know all about practice. I know about suffering, I know about impermanence, and I know about emptiness, and I know about no-self. Despite all this I am still angry and vexed" This is actually the state of affairs with most. We find ourselves knowing all these things yet cannot help being vexed. Why is that? Because our fundamental ignorance has not been uprooted. We are still controlled by greed, hatred, and delusion, so we still undergo suffering. We know we are ignorant yet we are persistent in our ignorance, and that is true ignorance.

Seeing all of you come here to hear me talk about suffering makes me very happy, and being so happy, I was carried away talking about suffering, suffering, suffering. This means that with your permission, I'll have to continue talking about the Four Noble Truths next week. Even though our subject is suffering, I am happy to talk about it. And there are more wonderful things to follow such as the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and, finally, the way out. This will make me very happy. (Laughter and applause)

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## **Chapter Three: *The Origin of Suffering***

In the first of these talks, we gave a general explanation of the Four Noble Truths. In the second talk, we examined in depth the first noble truth--the truth of suffering. Today, I want to talk about the second noble truth, the truth of the origin of suffering.

Very often we find ourselves in difficult situations and blame others for our problems. Sometimes we even blame God or other deities for our difficulties. There is a Chinese saying, "The heavens are without an eye," meaning that the deities are not looking out for us. Some Buddhists may even blame the Buddha in whom they have taken refuge. So, unless we pay very close attention to what is happening in our own lives, it can be very easy to blame others for our tribulations. In particular we should pay close attention to suffering in our own lives, and how that suffering originates. We need to understand the true origin of our suffering.

By the origin of suffering we mean that which is causing our life experiences in the present. Whatever we experience at this very moment is the result of karma. In its simplest sense, karma means action; therefore, karma is the result of what we have done in the past. So when we speak of karma, we are talking about causes and consequences.

The effects of karma pertain not only to this present life, which is very short, but also to countless past and future lives. So when we truly understand suffering as the result of causes laid down in previous lives, we will acquire a broader view of where we stand in relation to our experiences. We will also understand how the actions in this life will influence future suffering.

The workings of karma may not always cause obvious suffering. We can testify in our own lives to numerous occasions of happiness or good fortune. We can even feel blessed at times. However, when we are feeling blessed, when we are successful, when all things are going our way, we can become arrogant and conceited. We may think, "I worked hard to bring about my own success. I should be proud and feel good about it." Yet when things turn against us, when good fortune departs, we may start to blame others or external events for our misfortune.

This kind of mindset shows that we really do not truly understand the workings of karma. If we did our view of our situation in the world would be less myopic and would extend beyond this present life. We would see that success, blessings, and good fortune are due to the karma that has been created over immeasurable time in the past. We would understand that we are not the sole factor, but only one among many that are responsible for our good luck. We would also realize that the difficulties and tribulation in our lives are also due to actions in past lives.

Someone who has this wider view of the world will be less subject to suffering, freer from conceit, arrogance, and complaints. They will understand that whatever they experience in this moment is the result of deeds occurring in this and past lives. When we understand this, there is no need to be so proud or so despairing whatever our situation. This kind of understanding is useful as it frees us from negative attitudes that can be the cause of further creation of karma and suffering.

## ***The Workings of Karma***

How does karma come into being and manifest in our life? The Chinese character *chi* meaning 'origin of suffering' also has the nuance of 'accumulation.' Origin then means 'source' and 'accumulation.' We already understand that the source is karma, but what is accumulation? In order for karma to manifest, other factors must come into play. These factors are 'causes and conditions' that are created by our vexations (*klesas* [\[3.1\]](#)), thus leading to accumulation. So accumulation refers to the vexations and the karma that the vexations generate. The main cause of suffering is karma, but it must come together with accumulated causes and conditions to manifest in the present moment. The factors that make karma ripen or manifest are vexations, our emotional afflictions. With the accumulation of the cause (karma), and the conditions (*klesas*) working together, we have a more complete view of the origin of suffering. These two mutually include and enhance each other, creating repercussions that eventually come into being. This is a subtler, closer view of the origin of suffering.

I will defer till later a detailed discussion of the *klesas*. First let us make sure we understand the origin of our suffering. We have two interrelated causes of suffering: one is karma the other is the *klesas*--the one rising to an effect when ripened by a multitude of vexations. Our experience in the present is not void of cause; it has its origins and is now made manifest through conditioning. Why do these two come together in the first place to cause all our suffering? To answer this question, we need to talk about intention.

## ***Karma and Intention***

With a general understanding of karma, we can now reveal another more subtle level of karma. When we act, that action is usually accompanied by intention. According to the Buddhist sutras, karma is in fact intention in the sense of momentum that propels the effects of a particular action to ripen in the future.

There is karma-as-intention and karma-as-intention-manifested. Karma-as-intention is the workings of our mind before we engage in an action. For example it is karma-as-intention when we think of doing something good or bad, but stop short of acting on it. Karma-as-intention-manifested means that after you have a good or bad intention, you act on it. People often seem not to be clearly aware when they are doing something good or bad. They cannot even distinguish between good and bad, let alone realize they are actually doing it. But when we talk about karma-as-intention-manifested, we mean that one clearly comprehends what they are doing, whether good or bad.

## ***How Karma Manifests***

With respect to how it manifests in our lives, there are four kinds of karma. First is ripening or fruition karma; next is resultant karma; then there is remaining karma or karma that has not come to a conclusion yet; and finally there is simultaneous karma, in which the result immediately occurs with the action. Where do we stand in relationship to these dimensions of karma? At any given moment in our life we are really not sure for example, whether we are experiencing resultant karma. We are not sure to what extent we are creating new karma, whether our actions have any lasting results or residues, nor do we understand simultaneous karma. I will not try to go into all of the four kinds of karma, but for our purpose today fruition karma is most important.

Now we will talk about fruition karma, or the ripening of karma. With karma-as-intention the karma created is not as great as the karma from actually doing it. On the other hand once our thought turns into karma-as-intention-manifested, the real world repercussions will be greater and karmic retribution from that action will also be greater. 'Retribution' in relation to karma carries a neutral meaning, as it depends on the kinds of causes and the kind of results.

Karma can ripen in a three ways: through thought, through speech, and through action. Karma-as-intention that does not ripen into karma-as-intention-manifested is 'concealed karma,' since it only exists in one's mind. Opposed to this is 'manifest karma,' which refers to karma-as-intention plus speech and/or action. Relating this to intention, we see that karma can ripen as intention only; intention plus speech, and intention plus action.

Does just thinking about killing someone create bad karma? When you understand karma as cause and effect, you will see that even thoughts indeed accumulate karma. Merely by dwelling on the idea of killing someone, you put into motion a causal relation with repercussions. These kinds of thoughts constitute one's mental life, and if there is sufficient accumulation they can manifest in speech or action. In the sutras the Buddha says that in the world of samsara there is not a single action or even giving rise to thought that is excluded from creating karma. Whatever sentient beings do or think is centered on attachment to self{ and because of this they continue to create karma. Therefore, when we even have thoughts of killing, as Buddhist practitioners we should give rise to a sense of contrition and practice repentance.

Generally speaking, when one engages in negative actions (the cause), one will reap negative results (the effect). This is the causal result of bad karma. Correspondingly, when one engages in virtuous actions, one will reap virtuous results. This is the causal result of virtuous karma. There is another kind of karma that is neither good nor bad, and I'll get to that later. Speaking generally however, karma can be good, bad, or neutral.

With karma that is neutral the determining factor is the state of mind while engaging in such actions, whether there are subtle leanings towards wholesome or unwholesome. There will still be retribution tilted towards good or bad, but it will be mild. However, there are genuinely neutral karmic actions, with neither wholesome nor unwholesome overtones, and the retribution that results will be neither good nor bad.

Depending on their karma sentient beings can be reborn in one of six modes or realms [\[3.2\]](#) of existence. A sentient being that engages in wholesome actions will receive retribution by being reborn in one of the three upper realms--the human realm, or one of the two heavenly realms. A sentient being that engages in unwholesome actions will receive retribution by being reborn in one of the three lower realms--the animal realm, the realm of angry spirits, or most severely the hell realm. Thus one's accumulated karma determines where among the six realms, and what form they will take at the next rebirth.

Still another twofold division is made according to the practice of the path: karma with vexations and pure karma. Karma with vexations includes good, bad, and neutral karma, and is the origin of suffering. Pure karma is created by the practice of Buddhadharma, the path leading out of suffering. Engaging in pure karma, one can become free from the origin of suffering.

## ***The Klesas***

Earlier we talked about karma and vexations accumulating as causes and conditions to causing our suffering. This is what the Buddha meant by the origin of suffering. Our emotional afflictions are really the ripening agents for karma, whether it be good, bad, or neutral karma. Whatever propels us to continue the cycle of existence is considered the origin of suffering. A



sentient being completely free of emotional afflictions or vexations will not originate suffering. Thus, the way out of the suffering is the termination of the *klesas*.

It is crucial to understand the role emotional of afflictions in creating karma. Of these, the most important is *avidya*, or fundamental ignorance. In the Chinese *avidya* is translated as two characters to mean 'not bright' or 'not clear,' referring to the brightness and clarity of the mind of wisdom. Without this mind of wisdom, one remains in darkness--a kind of innate or fundamental ignorance that governs our way of being. Once we truly understand how the auxiliary forces of the *klesas* ripen our karma, it becomes possible to change these conditions to end suffering. Then, karma is less likely to ripen into effects.

There are six root vexations, or *klesas*, which branch out into innumerable other negative mental factors. Two of the most pervasive are greed and hatred. From greed grow desire, covetousness, and clinging, and attachment. Hatred has innumerable descendents such as aversion, anger, and jealousy. Greed and hatred are like master criminals with their gangsters. To break up the gang it is better to go right to the top. Once you get rid of the boss the underlings will disperse and scatter. Once we cut away the roots, the branches will wither away.

The six root vexations divide into the five emotional afflictions: ignorance, greed, hatred, pride, and doubt, with the sixth being the affliction of wrong views. Wrong views are views of the world that we have held since time without beginning. In fact you could even say that all six vexations are wrong view. All six are the byproducts of what we have done in the past with one difference. Emotional affliction is the accumulation of all our past actions, emotions, and so on, while affliction of views includes all of the karma we have created plus what we have learned in this present life--the different views and perspectives that we hold.

### ***Four Paths to Actualization***

Related to emotional vexations and vexations of view are the four paths to actualization. There is the path of accumulation, the path of seeing, the path of practice, and the path of actualization. The path of accumulation is in recognizing vexations; that is to say, understanding the truth of the origin of suffering.

The path of seeing is realizing that causes and conditions are empty of self--seeing the truth of emptiness for the first time. At the moment one realizes the path of seeing, one's vexations of view are terminated and the correct view of reality is gained. Such a person has seen the truth, but has not yet attained perfection. He or she will continue to practice so that remaining deep-rooted emotional vexations can be subdued on the path of practice. Seeing the nature of reality is just the beginning of practice, which consists in subduing one's emotional vexations, one by one, until the path of actualization is reached. At that point the whole being is in harmony and accord with the nature of reality, free from all of the six types of vexations.

So the order is that we start on the path of accumulation as ordinary people with vexations. When we gain realization and see emptiness, we are on the path of seeing. Entering the path of practice we subdue and terminate vexations one by one. When our practice culminates in full realization, this is the path of actualization as an arhat. In the Mahayana school, the full realization of the Buddha means that all vexations are terminated.

Unless we take the path of practice and cut off the six root vexations we will be propelled into future cycles of suffering. To understand the challenge, let's talk about the secondary vexations that grow out wildly like branches from the root vexations. The Buddha talked about the 84,000 vexations and correspondingly, 84,000 Dharma practices to cut them off. As long as

these 84,000 vexations exist, we have 84,000 obstructions to overcome before we perceive the true nature of reality. How to terminate these 84,000 vexations? Frankly, that would be just an enormous, huge endeavor. But as I said before we should not worry about the branches. Just get to the roots. Cut off the root vexations and the other 83,994 will eventually wither and die off by themselves.

Previously we said that karma-as-intention was less severe than the karma-as-intention-manifested. If we think something but don't act on it, that is less consequential for retribution. As an analogy think of a pot of water on the stove, and imagine that the water consists of karma-as-intention. Now imagine that we light a flame under the pot. Think of the flame as our countless vexations. Eventually the hot flame of our vexations will cause the water (karma-as-intention) to boil over into speech or action (karma-as-intention-manifested) with future consequences. You can see from this analogy that if we put out the flame of vexation to begin with, we will remove the means by which future cycles of karma and suffering are created. With this understanding, we can see that the purpose of practicing Buddhadharma is to cut off vexation, and thereby terminate suffering.

In our first talk on the Four Noble Truths, we discussed the twelve links of conditioned arising. The twelve links are stages in the birth and death cycle (samsara), that determine conditioned arising, one stage leading to the next. One of those links is existence--the coming into being of the individual. In the twelve-linked chain the first link, fundamental ignorance, leads to attachment and so on. Eventually this occasions the eleventh link, our coming into existence as a new round of birth and death. Existence, or the existence of future lives, has two qualities: that of 'flowing with vexation' and 'accumulation of suffering.' Through these two forces we propel our own being into the future cycles of birth and death.

First there is flowing and accumulation in accordance with our mind--the internal realm. The internal workings of our own mind propel us into our future suffering and the continuous arousal of vexations. There is also flowing and accumulation in accordance with the world--the external realm. In the previous lecture we talked about primary mind [\[3.3\]](#) and its mental objects--the mind-emperor and all its subordinates which carry out its bidding. These mental factors refer to greed, hatred, ignorance, and all the other root-and-branch vexations. When these vexations come in contact with the external realm through the primary mind, this also gives rise to further vexations and suffering. Flow and accumulation can take place both internally, through our own emotional afflictions, and externally, by our mind coming into contact with, and responding to the external world. This is the origin of suffering.

## ***Summary***

The Four Noble Truths are very complex, difficult to understand, and difficult to talk about. For three consecutive Sundays we have talked only about suffering and the origin of suffering. We have yet to cover the third truth, cessation of suffering, and the fourth truth, the way out of suffering. When I am finished I believe that you should have a full understanding of the core of Buddhadharma, because the Four Noble Truths incorporate all aspects of the Dharma. We can use them as a foundation for understanding what the Buddha taught, and we can use them in our practice.

Even though they deal with suffering I am always happy to speak on the Four Noble Truths because they also show us the way out of suffering. If you all are still interested in the way out of suffering, we will continue next week. Thank you for coming. (Applause)

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## **Chapter Four: *The Cessation of Suffering***

Today I will complete my presentation of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. In three previous talks we discussed the truth of suffering and the truth of the origin of suffering. We will continue with the third and fourth noble truths: the cessation of suffering, and the path of cessation.

### ***The Meaning of Cessation***

True cessation is not the process of ending suffering; true cessation is a state of complete realization. It means having completely terminated emotional affliction and having fully realized the path; it is liberation from the causes and the effects of suffering, and it is a state where there are no more outflows--the root defilements of craving, becoming, and ignorance that keep us in samsara, the cycle of birth and death.

The cause of suffering is resistance to suffering and trying to escape tribulation. We help ourselves when we can find meaning in our suffering and allow ourselves to live through our difficulties, when we can understand and accept suffering as the result of our own thoughts and actions. To the degree that we recognize the causes of suffering and really experience their effects, we achieve a kind of liberation, and we have begun to be free from it.

As an analogy if you are not relaxed when you sit in meditation your legs and back may hurt. In this case the cause is your body taking a meditation posture; the effect is discomfort. So you have the both cause and the effect of suffering. But if you find value in meditation, then to a degree you will free yourself from the discomfort of sitting. Not that the discomfort will go away, but you will not try to escape or resist, and your mind is already liberated. This is just an analogy, but you can say this is a kind of cessation of suffering.

### ***Realizing the Nature of Emptiness***

True cessation is fully realizing the nature of emptiness and liberating oneself from the cycle of birth and death. How does one fully realize the nature of emptiness? To understand emptiness we should first understand the workings of causes and conditions. Phenomena come into being through 'conditioned arising,' the coming together of causes and conditions mutually influencing each other. Everything is in constant flux; nothing remains the same one instant to the next. Any cause or condition affecting the object will transform the whole. Through this constant transformation all phenomena arise, deteriorate, and eventually cease. Since everything is in flux without a permanent nature or identity, there can be no separately identifiable 'self' We call this quality of selflessness in phenomena 'emptiness.' This emptiness of substantial reality we call 'no-self'

Those who realize the nature of emptiness also realize that their own nature is that of flux, change, and impermanence. They will directly experience that mind, body, and environment, are pervaded with a dynamic quality of emptiness. They will see buddha-nature. To deeply and fully realize buddha-nature is to become an arhat, a noble one who has attained cessation. It is to have the four characteristics of an arhat: (1) that all defilements have been purified, (2) that all that needs to be done has been done, (3) that all future rebirths have been exhausted, and (4) that liberation from karma and retribution has been

achieved. This is realizing the true nature of emptiness.

## ***Nirvana***

Nirvana in Sanskrit means 'extinction-quietness.' Extinction is the complete cessation of suffering and the termination of the samsaric cycle. Quietness means that fundamental ignorance and its vexations have been stilled, extinguished, no longer arising. There are two levels of nirvana: nirvana with remainder and nirvana without remainder. An arhat who has realized nirvana with remainder has been liberated from all mental defilements but the body of retribution still remains. The body is still subject to the misfortunes that can befall a body, but this remainder does not have the ordinary person's vexation from having a body. The arhat still experiences painful events and difficult situations but being completely free from the klesas--desire, hatred, and delusion--the mind does not suffer. Such was the case with many of the Buddha's disciples who became enlightened.

The second kind of nirvana is nirvana without remainder (parinirvana), where the life cycle terminates with no trace of the five skandhas, and no future retribution. From the perspective of individual liberation, an arhat or a buddha who enters nirvana without remainder will no longer appear in the three realms of existence. From the perspective of the bodhisattva path [\[4.1\]](#) there are certain important differences, but for now I want to focus on how nirvana relates to cessation. Either one of these nirvanas is reached at the fourth fruition [\[4.2\]](#) level of the arhat path, the level of 'no more learning.' The three previous stages are all called stages 'with further learning,' where there is still a need to practice.

Indeed, talk of liberation can be quite enticing and alluring, but until we become an arhat these lofty states have no relation to us. Talking too much about nirvana can trivialize the path, so let's continue talking about the path itself.

## ***The Eightfold Noble Path***

When the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths to five ascetic monks at Deer Park, he explained the fourth noble truth as the path away from suffering. By this he meant the eightfold noble path, which are the eight practices that can lead one to cessation. These are right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right perseverance, right mindfulness and right concentration.

This eightfold path is the middle way between extremes of indulgence and asceticism. Following the path of pleasure will not free one from suffering because happiness and pleasure are not lasting, and inevitably everyone encounters misfortune, illness, and death. On the other hand asceticism with its harshness and self-torment cannot, by itself, lead to wisdom and freedom from attachment. Free from these two extremes one should follow the stable and middle way of the eightfold path.

Because we have not yet realized the truth of cessation we find ourselves still in the four sufferings of birth, old age, sickness and death. To help us end the cycle the Buddha taught us to practice the eight paths, eight ways of being through which we can begin the process of cessation. First I want to make sure we understand the difference between the *process* of cessation and the *realization* of cessation. The noble eightfold path is a gradual process of ceasing our vexations and suffering, including the root vexation of ignorance. To the extent of one's attainment in the eightfold path, one will diminish one's vexations and suffering. The path is gradual, but the ultimate result is complete realization of cessation.

While on the eightfold path we should also practice the five higher preparations of faith, generosity, precepts, concentration, and insight. They are called preparations because as we advance on the path, we reach higher levels of fulfillment of these requisites. But we should not understand the five preparations and the eightfold path as separate. The more we engage in the five preparations the deeper we get on the eightfold path. As we discuss the eightfold path in detail, we will also relate them to the five higher preparations.

Because of time limitations I will not discuss in great detail the eight paths, as they deserve at least one whole lecture by themselves, but I will try to briefly explain each and relate it to the cessation and liberation.

### ***Right View***

The first noble path, right view is the correct understanding of the true Dharma, especially the Four Noble Truths, the three Dharma seals (three marks of existence), and the twelve links of conditioned arising. We have discussed these concepts in previous talks. The first higher preparation, faith, is very much connected with right view. As Buddhists we must not rely on blind faith but on faith based on a correct understanding of the Dharma. As such, right view may be the most important of the eightfold paths in accomplishing cessation.

### ***Right Aspiration***

The second noble path is right aspiration, which also means 'correct thought' and 'correct reflection.' As Buddhists we should hold correct views but we should also integrate them into our thinking and into our very being. To accomplish this we must reflect on what we have heard and learned. In relation to the Four Noble Truths we must understand the origins of suffering in our own actions, and we must see all circumstances as potential suffering. Understanding the origin of suffering, we will develop right aspiration and affirm that suffering can be ended. With that conviction we integrate the Four Noble Truths into our thinking and our own being, and we engage the path. This is what is meant by right aspiration.

### ***Right Speech***

Right speech is the cultivation of the four precepts governing speech. The first is to speak the truth and to abstain from uttering falsehoods, of which the most serious are claiming to be a buddha when one is not, and claiming to be enlightened when one is not. The second is to refrain from slander or divisive speech that can create discord. The third is to speak pleasantly and courteously, and to refrain from harsh language that can cause suffering to others. The fourth is to refrain from frivolous chatter, and idle or malicious gossip. When practiced as virtues these rules of speech help to purify our minds and actions.

### ***Right Action***

Right action refers to abstention from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking of intoxicants. They are basically the five precepts one accepts when taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. To observe these five precepts is right action. Right action relates to suffering insofar as action is karma, and as long as we create karma that leads to

suffering, cessation is not possible.

## ***Right Livelihood***

Right livelihood means earning one's living in accordance with Buddhadharma, and not causing harm to oneself or others while doing so. There are therefore many kinds of right livelihood, and many kinds of wrong livelihood. The Buddha proscribed earning one's living through breaking any of the precepts of right speech and right action. Wrong kinds of livelihood also include making one's living through deception, through self-aggrandizement, through occult practices, through false claims about oneself, and through exaggeration. There are subtle distinctions among these but they all involve deception and exploiting others. In connection with right livelihood, the Buddha said in the *nikayas*, "... this holy life is not for cheating people, scheming, nor for profit, favor, and honor... this holy life is lived for the sake of restraint, for abandoning [delusion], for dispassion, for cessation.[\[4.3\]](#)"

## ***Right Effort***

The sixth noble path is right effort, or perseverance, and refers to the four proper lines of exertion, or endeavor: (1) to cut off unwholesome acts that have already arisen, (2) to prevent from arising unwholesome acts that have not yet arisen, (3) to develop wholesome acts that have not yet arisen, and (4) to increase wholesome acts that have already arisen. By 'acts' is meant physical acts as well as words and thoughts. Right effort is endeavoring to attain whatever in the Dharma is attainable through faith, diligent application, and perseverance.

## ***Right Mindfulness***

Ordinarily our minds are full of a whole army of distractions and discursive thoughts. Right mindfulness is being free from these mental afflictions so that there's just one thing remaining in the mind, and that is the path of practice. One approach to mindfulness practice is to contemplate the six objects of mindfulness: the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the precepts, the merits of renouncing worldliness, and the merits of good deeds. The six mindful practices are really the prerequisites to engaging in the four foundations of mindfulness of body, of sensation, of mind, and of dharmas (external and mental objects).

It is not necessary to practice all six mindful practices before practicing the four foundations. You can choose any one of the six as a preparatory practice. Once we engage in the four foundations of mindfulness, we can enter the eighth noble path of right concentration.

## ***Right Concentration***

Right concentration consists of a whole repertory of samadhi [\[4.4\]](#) practices. It would not be possible here to detail all of them, but they include the seven expedient stages: (1-5) the five methods of stilling the mind [\[4.5\]](#), (6) the four foundations of mindfulness, and (7) the path of seeing, which is the first level of the arhat path. For right concentration there are also the practices of the sixteen aspects [\[4.6\]](#) of the Four Noble Truths, which was briefly discussed in the first lecture.

## ***Cessation and the Twelve Links***

To begin the process of cessation we need to understand the twelve links of conditioned arising, and how they are both the causes and the effects of suffering. The twelve links are the stages that an individual experiences through the samsaric cycle of birth and death. The first is (1) fundamental ignorance: being ignorant as to the impermanent nature of existence and being defiled by the poisons of desire, hatred, and delusion. This link sets into motion the second link, (2) action, or volitional impulses, where the seeds of karma are planted. The third link is (3) consciousness, the active mental force that propels us from one life cycle to the next.

In the fourth link, (4) name-and-form, we enter the phase of the current life in which the karmic residue of consciousness and bodily form unite to ultimately become an individual. The fifth link, the (5) six entrances, or sense faculties, are our windows of interaction with the world. Note that in addition to the senses, consciousness is the sixth sense faculty; The sixth link, (6) contact is the interaction of the sense faculties with the environment. The seventh link, (7) sensation discriminates among experiences as to pleasurable, painful, or neutral. The eighth link, (8) desire, is the result of the interactions between sense faculties and their sense objects. The ninth link, (9) grasping, is the eighth link translated into action. When the craving for existence becomes grasping, one's re-entry into the world of samsara is imminent. The tenth link is (10) existence, the creation of a new cycle of karma in the form of a sentient being.

Once there is sensation, inevitably there is desire, when there is desire there is grasping; once there is grasping, there is existence; once there is existence, there is the eleventh link, (11) birth. The newly born individual has received the retribution of previous karma and is starting a new round of karma creation. The twelfth link, (12) aging and death, completes the current cycle. Once there is birth there inevitably will be old age and death. So those are the twelve links of conditioned arising.

## ***The Four Noble Truths and The Twelve Links***

How do the twelve links relate to the Four Noble Truths? The first noble truth, the existence of suffering, is related to the seven-fold links of consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense faculties, contact, sensation, birth, and aging/death. The second noble truth, the origin of suffering, is related to the five-fold links of ignorance, action, desire, grasping, and existence. In terms of the Four Noble Truths, you could say that the set of five are the causal factors and the set of seven the effects, namely, our being caught in the cycle of suffering. The origin of suffering causes suffering; suffering is dependent on its origin, and will not exist without it.

## ***Contemplation of the Twelve Links***

To begin cessation we can practice the twofold forward and reverse contemplation of the twelve links of conditioned arising. Forward contemplation throws light on the existence of suffering, leading to the question, "What is the origin of suffering?" Following the causal chain of existence we first contemplate how fundamental ignorance sets in motion the life cycle. Ignorance then conditions action, and action conditions consciousness. From consciousness we contemplate name-and-form, and on to the six sense faculties and so forth. And finally we see that our desire leads to grasping. Because there is grasping, there is existence, and when we exist we are born, we become sick, and we die. And of course there is much suffering

between birth and death. Contemplating this process we can arrive at a profound understanding of the state we find ourselves in. This is the forward contemplation of the twelve links of conditioned arising, and its purpose is to help us realize cessation.

We can practice reverse contemplation to realize the emptiness, the actual non-existence of suffering. However, we should not think of reverse contemplation as starting with the last link, sickness and death, and asking, "What causes sickness and death?" "They are caused by existence." "What causes existence?" "Existence is due to grasping," and so on, working way back to the first link. That is not how it is done. In reverse contemplation we still follow the links from first to last, but instead we contemplate that there is no fundamental ignorance to begin with.

One begins with fundamental ignorance, contemplating that once there is no ignorance there will not be any deluded actions. Once there are no deluded actions, there is no defilement of consciousness. We proceed in this manner on to the six sense faculties which give rise naturally to contact, desire, grasping, existence, birth, death and so on. This is reverse contemplation on the cessation of the twelve-linked chain of conditioned arising. It is a gradual way of engaging the eightfold path, particularly the first path, right view that is essentially an antidote to fundamental ignorance. Practicing right view, right action, and so on, one uses the eightfold noble path to put a cease to the chain of existence.

This reverse approach can be a way of 'backing out' of conditioned existence. But the first step is to fully understand the fundamental ignorance with which we enter the world. In Buddhism the Sanskrit *avidya* means having a fundamental misconception of the nature of the world; specifically, it means not understanding the three Dharma seals--impermanence, suffering, and no-self. This leads us to create karma. In Chinese the term means 'not bright,' or 'not clear,' about the true nature of existence; in other words being in the dark, not illuminated by wisdom. So, lacking this wisdom is the first aspect of fundamental ignorance; the second is that being ignorant, we create new karma, and the cycle continues.

So we have the forward contemplation on the causes of suffering, and the reverse contemplation on the non-existence of suffering. In forward contemplation we realize how we come into being and in backward contemplation we realize we have no independent self. Both modes of contemplation are related and it is necessary to complement one with the other. The point of both practices is to learn how to realize cessation, to terminate cyclic existence.

Awakening to true nature, your mind will be unclouded by ignorance--it will be bright with wisdom. Transcending fundamental ignorance, you will no longer be conditioned by it. This non-conditioning will be true for the remaining links of the chain, one after another. Thereby is birth and death also ended--when fundamental ignorance ceases, ultimately there is also cessation of birth and death.

### ***The Four Noble Truths and the Three Seals***

The three Dharma seals affirm that all conditioned things are impermanent, all suffering is caused by fundamental ignorance, and all dharmas are without self. Let's relate these ideas to understanding suffering, severing the causes of suffering, attaining cessation, and cultivating the path. Realizing the first noble truth of suffering and the second noble truth of the origin of suffering depends on realizing impermanence and selflessness. The realization consists in separating from suffering, and cutting off its origins. The third and fourth noble truths tell us that to reach extinction-quiescence we must engage the path. To engage in the path is to govern oneself on the principles of impermanence and selflessness. With these principles in mind we can separate from suffering; we can sever its very origins. When we truly understand that suffering is impermanent and does not truly exist, when we truly realize that suffering is fundamentally empty, we are headed in the direction of cessation.



This concludes our presentation of the Four Noble Truths. Thank you for coming. (Applause)

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## Notes

[1.1] Kondanna, Asaji, Wappa, Mahanama, and Bhaddiya (names in Pali), the early followers of the Buddha during his ascetic practice, which was characterized by extreme austerity and belief in the soul (atman).

[1.2] Subsequently recorded as *The Sutra Setting in Motion the Dharma Wheel*. (Pali: *Dhammacakka-pattavana Sutta*)

[1.3] The eightfold noble path consists of the practices of: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

[1.4] See *The Way to Buddhahood*, Ven. Yin-shun, Wisdom Publications, 1998, pp.174-178

[1.5] The three turnings and twelve processes are summarized below:

First noble truth:

This is the noble truth of suffering

The truth of suffering must be understood

The truth of suffering has been understood.

Second noble truth:

This is the noble truth of the cause of suffering

The cause of suffering must be abandoned

The cause of suffering has been abandoned.

Third noble truth:

This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering

The cessation of suffering must be experienced

The cessation of suffering has been experienced.

Fourth noble truth:

This is the noble truth of the path out of suffering

The path out of suffering must be practiced

The path out of suffering has been realized.

[1.6] The order of enlightenment of the monks (according to *The Life of the Buddha* by Edward Thomas, p.88) suggests there were three teachings, Or turnings of the Dharma Wheel before all five monks became awakened. First Kondanna alone, then Vappa and Bhaddiya, and then Mahanama and Asaji.

[1.7] The tripitaka, the 'three baskets' of the Buddhist canon, consists of the vinaya (rules of discipline for monastics), the sutras (the discourses of the Buddha), and the abhidharma (philosophical and psychological analysis).

[1.8] The twelve links (*nidanas*) of conditioned arising are the basic causal forces in samsara, the cycle of birth and death. They are called 'links' because they sequentially form the causal chain of sentient existence. The links are: (1) fundamental ignorance, (2) action, (3) consciousness, (4) name-and-form, (5) the six sense faculties, (6) contact, (7) sensation, (8) desire,

(9) grasping, (10) coming into existence, (11) birth, and (12) old age and death. 'Conditioned arising' refers to the fact that all phenomena are the result of the interplay between countless factors, interrelating in a nexus of cause and effect. Also referred to as the twelve links of dependent origination.

[1.9] The fourth talk in this series includes a discussion of the contemplation of the twelve links.

[1.10] Theravada: early Buddhism espousing the way of the arhat. Mahayana: later Buddhism espousing the way of the bodhisattva. Vajrayana: branch of Mahayana espousing esoteric cultivation. Sudden and gradual schools: two approaches to enlightenment within Chinese Chan Buddhism, often associated with Linji and Caodong schools (Zen: Rinzai and Soto).

[1.11] The five methods of stilling the mind: (1) mindfulness of breath, (2) contemplating the impurity of the body, (3) mindful recollection of the buddhas/bodhisattvas, (4) meditation on the four limitless mentalities (loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity), and (5) contemplating causes and conditions.

[1.12] The four foundations of mindfulness, described in the *Sattipatthana-sutta* (Pali) are: (1) mindfulness of breath, (2) mindfulness of sensation/feeling, (3) mindfulness of mind, and (4) mindfulness of mental objects (dhammas).

[1.13] The sixteen aspects or attributes of the Four Noble Truths are: first noble truth--impermanence, suffering, emptiness, selflessness; second noble truth--cause, origin, condition, completion; third noble truth--cessation, peace, bliss, emergence (renunciation); fourth noble truth--true path, knowing, attaining, elimination (of delusion). For a more detailed discussion of the sixteen aspects, see *The Four Noble Truths*, Ven. Lobsang Gyatso, Snow Lion Publications, 1994.

[2.1] A sutra (Pali: sutta) is a recorded discourse or teaching of the Buddha; a shastra is a treatise or commentary on a sutra, or aspects of a sutra. Shastras are more commonly associated with the later Sanskrit (Mahayana) canon, as opposed to the earlier Pali canon.

[2.2] Mahayana school of thought founded by the Indian masters Nagarjuna and Aryadeva (2nd century C.E.) which refrains from asserting extreme positions, such as not asserting either the existence or non-existence of things.

[2.3] Mahayana school of thought founded by Indian masters Maitreyanatha, Asanga, and Vasubandhu (5th century C.E.) in which the central notion is that all experiences are 'mind-only,' i.e., outside the knowing process, there is no reality; thus the world is a construct of the mind.

[2.4] Of the five traditional schools ('houses') of Chan--Weiyang, Yunmen, Fayuan, Linji, and Caodong--only the latter two still exist. These two correspond to the Rinzai and Soto sects of Zen.

[2.5] The three-fold aspect of suffering is expounded in the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification, by Buddhagosa (5th century C.E.))

[2.6] Samsara is the cycle of birth and death that sentient beings transmigrate through, and is associated in Buddhism with nirvana, the state of transcendence from samsara.

[2.7] Sanskrit: trishna, Pali: tanha, literally 'thirst,' 'grasping,' 'craving.'

[3.1] The Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification) by Buddhagosa (5th century C.E.) enumerates ten klesas (variously translated as 'defilements,' 'passions,' 'impurities,' 'vexations,' 'delusions'): desire, hate, delusion, pride, wrong views, doubt, rigidity, excitability, shamelessness, and no conscience. Some analyses limit the number to the first six, regarding them as root vexations from which all other vexations derive.

[3.2] The six realms (or modes) of existence are the three upper realms and three lower realms. The realm one is reborn in results from one's guiding and completion karma. The three upper realms are the human, the lower gods (asuras), and the celestial beings (devas). The three lower realms are the animal, the angry spirits (pretas), and the hell beings (naraka). The inhabitants of all six realms inhabit samsara and are therefore subject to rebirth.

[3.3] 'Primary mind' here refers collectively to the six sense consciousnesses, which are the six sense faculties interacting with their corresponding sense objects. The sense faculties are sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and cognition.

[4.1] The path of the arhat and the path of the bodhisattva are often distinguished, the former being the path of individual liberation, the latter being the path of deferring enlightenment until all sentient beings are delivered.

[4.2] Four fruition levels of arhat: (1) 'stream-enterer,' one who has eradicated wrong views, but is not entirely free of the defilements of desire, hatred, and delusion; (2) 'once-returner,' one in whom the defilements are only slightly present, and who will return only once more; (3) 'non-returner,' who is free from the five fetters of ego, doubt, ritual, sensuality, and envy; and will not be reborn; (4) 'arhat,' one who has attained the state of no more learning, has extinguished all defilements, and is free from the fetters of existence.

[4.3] *Anguttara-nikaya (Graduated Collection)*, from the sutra section of the Tripitaka.

[4.4] Samadhi: state of deep meditative absorption in which the individual experiences extreme single-mindedness, and suspension of the sense of time. Buddhism describes many types and levels of samadhi.

[4.6] See Chapter One, endnote [1.11](#).