

The Noble Truths of Family Life, The Noble Truths of the Heart

Venerable Ācariya Mahā Boowa's Dhamma Talk given on the 21st of February, 1964

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People often say that the way Buddhism teaches constantly about the suffering of living beings is unpleasant to them and makes them so depressed that they get no joy out of listening to the Dhamma. They feel as if the sufferings and discontentment being talked about were joining forces with the sufferings and discontentment already inside them, making them despondent and sad. If that weren't enough, the basic principles of the Buddha's teaching – the four Noble Truths (*Ariya Sacca*) – start out with suffering as their primary theme, since that's what the religion teaches about far more than anything else. It's as if the Buddha were driving away the people who, out of fear of suffering, come running to the Dhamma for shelter, so that instead they will run away from the Dhamma inasmuch as they don't want to sit and listen to anyone talking about suffering and discontent.

Actually, when people say things like this, it shows that they haven't had enough training in the religion to understand its true aims. The fact that the religion teaches about suffering is completely in line with the way things are. This is in keeping with the name 'Noble Truths'. These truths are the religion's basic principles. They're true. The Buddha was a person who truly knew. This is why he was able to point out the lacks and deficiencies in living beings – for the sufferings we experience all have deficiencies as their basic cause.

Say for instance that the body has a painful disease. This shows that there's a deficiency in it. If every part of the body were perfectly fit and healthy, there'd be no way for pain and suffering to arise. You can see this from the people with their various ailments who come pouring into hospitals for examination and treatment. All of them without exception have deficiencies in their bodies. They're not fully healthy at all. When the doctors make examinations and prescribe medicine, they're examining to find the deficiencies in their patients and prescribing medicine to make up for them. If the medicine is right for the illness, the symptoms subside and the patient begins to feel better. The disease, if it gets the proper treatment, goes away. The suffering stops, and that's the end of

the matter.

The Buddha was wise, which is why he taught us not to treat discontent and suffering – which are effects – but to treat the causes, the deficiencies that bring them about. These deficiencies are called *samudaya*, which mean ‘origin of suffering’. When the causes are stopped the effects stop too, of their own accord. The fact that the Buddha starts out with suffering before anything else is simply to point out the evidence that establishes the truth, so that we can search out the cause and correct it in the proper way – in the same way that police have to use stolen goods as their primary evidence in tracking down and capturing thieves.

Not working enough to supply one’s family needs is one sure way to cause trouble and suffering within the family-circle. This same truth holds for people as well as all other living beings, namely if their needs are fully met there’s a minimum of suffering in their families. If their needs aren’t fully met, then even husbands and wives who love each other deeply can come to hate each other intensely and split apart.

This can come from deficiencies in making one’s living and in other areas as well. Suffering thus arises in the family because the family income may be insufficient to provide for its needs, or one of the family members may have no sense of enough in the area of sexual desire. These sorts of deficiencies can arise because of a lack of intelligence in making one’s living, which prevents one from keeping up with the competition; poor health; chronic laziness and ignorance, coupled with the extravagance of spending money beyond one’s means; overwhelming sexual desires which make one forget one’s family and responsibilities. These are just a few of the possibilities.

These sorts of deficiencies are termed *samudaya*, the origins of suffering. Wherever any of these deficiencies becomes pronounced, the suffering which follows is also pronounced. Wherever we are deficient, that’s where suffering will follow. This is why the Buddha taught us not to be lazy and wasteful, but to be hardworking and persistent, to save our earnings and spend them only for things which are necessary so that we can know how to avoid suffering. He also taught us how to wipe out that cause of suffering in the family which stems from laziness by using the path of firm commitment in making a living, so that we can reach the cessation of suffering in the family, in society and so on. This is so that every family and social community will be able to meet with happiness.

He did not teach us to sit around letting our feet and hands atrophy from not figuring out what sort of work to do, or to lie around embracing

our suffering because we have nothing to eat or use. He didn't teach us to sit stuck in suffering without finding a way out. Instead, all of the Noble Truths he taught were meant to free living beings from their sufferings. There's not a single Noble Truth that teaches us to let our sufferings bury us alive. The Buddha taught these truths both to monks and to lay people, although he used somewhat different approaches in line with the needs of his listeners. But in the final analysis, he taught the Noble Truths so that people would become wise enough to rid themselves of suffering, both on the external level – family, home, society, work – and on the internal level, the sufferings that arise exclusively within the heart.

The obstacles that prevent us from keeping up with the rest of the world in providing for ourselves are actually caused by ideas we think are up-to-date, for – who knows? – 'up-to-date' here may mean up-to-date in terms of the origin of suffering, that is the view that we can get away with earning just a little and spending a lot. If instead we try to follow the path indicated by the Noble Truths our earnings are sure to grow day by day, our behaviour will know its proper bounds, our expenditures will fall more in line with our position, our tendency towards extravagance – our way of seeing every purchase as necessary – will start to have principles to keep it in check, and our income – whatever its amount – will have a chance to stop and rest with us for a while. We'll come to realise that our desire to keep up with others in terms of buying things is the way to disaster because it destroys both our external wealth and our good habits, which are a form of wealth far more important than any other wealth in the world. If our good habits get spoiled because of our lack of thought for the present and future, we'll never have a chance to make anything of ourselves at all.

People who don't overlook their good habits and try to reform their minds so as to stay within the bounds of moral virtue, all that is noble and good, are sure to shine both now and in the future, because basic good habits are the basis of all wealth. Any form of wealth, if we want it to last, must depend on good basic principles in the heart, steady principles which are not easily swayed by outside influences. If we have reasoning in charge of ourselves and our belongings, we'll be safe from the kind of loss that comes from being deceived by others or fooled by ourselves. Being fooled by ourselves is something hard to detect, even though it happens to us all the time. We work hard with our own hands to save up a nest egg and then we ourselves are the ones who shatter it. Without a thought for what's proper we spend it all in line with those desires that overcome our hearts. Even just this much should be enough

to make us realise that we've got ourselves thoroughly fooled.

So when the religion teaches us to conduct ourselves in the right way to close off the opening that suffering has into our lives, it's the same sort of thing as when doctors explain diseases and medical treatment to their patients so that they'll conduct themselves in the right way as to avoid illness. The Noble Truths teach us to be intelligent in running our lives. The fact that the religion teaches us to know the causes of happiness and suffering – plus how to eliminate that which is bad and foster that which is good – shows that it doesn't teach us to be negative or pessimistic, as some people believe.

For this reason, we should make sure that we know the true purpose of the Noble Truths, which form the heart of every level of the world and every step of the Dhamma. People who hope for progress should analyse the Noble Truths so as to put them into practice in line with their position in life, so as to prosper both now and in the future. It's never happened that the Noble Truths of the Buddha have ever led to failure or loss for those who put them into practise. On the contrary, those who make use of these truths have become fine examples for the rest of the world to follow.

What I've been talking about so far concerns the Noble Truths in general terms. You might call them the external Noble Truths, the Noble Truths of family life, or whatever seems right to you.

Now I'd like to explain the Noble Truths within. The Noble Truths on this level deal, for the most part, exclusively with the heart¹. People who put the external Noble Truths into practice in a full and proper way, to the point where they enjoy happiness on the level of family life, may still have some deficiencies within their hearts, because suffering of this sort can happen to anyone on any level in life – rich, poor, men, women, lay people or ordained, no exceptions are made. If there's a deficiency in the heart, suffering is bound to find a way to arise, just as with the body. The deficiencies or insufficiencies of the heart are of three major sorts: *sensual craving, craving for becoming, and craving for no becoming*. Each of these three forms of craving is an origin for suffering because each of them acts as a weight on the heart.

The way to cure them is to train oneself in the Dhamma so as to nourish the heart and give it peace. If we don't allow the heart to drink enough of the nourishment of the Dhamma to meet its needs, it's bound to become thirsty and slip out to various other preoccupations in search of other things to drink. But the 'water' it finds in this way is, for the most part, like salt water. Once you drink it you become more thirsty and have

1 The word 'heart' in this context refers to that underlying essence of mind which manifests as feeling, memory, thought and consciousness. In its essence it is that fundamental quality of knowing upon which everything we experience is based.

to drink more. As a result, your thirst will never be quenched.

The heart thirsting for preoccupations that give rise to more craving will never reach the land of enough, but instead will stay stuck in the land of hunger. The Buddha thus measured the thirst for this sort of water by saying, “There is no river equal to craving”. This is the sort of water that causes harm to those who drink it, aggravating their thirst, making them want to keep drinking more. If we persist in drinking a lot of it for long periods of time, our intestines are going to corrode away for sure. If we can’t find any medicine to cure ourselves of this syndrome, our character will be destroyed and we’ll be sure to die.

Wise people have seen the harm of this sort of water, and so have taught us to avoid it and to search for various techniques to cut away at these three forms of craving. They teach us to train the heart with the Dhamma – the most tasteful and nourishing beverage for it – to make it give up its taste for salt water and take only the flavour of the Dhamma as its nourishment. When we train the heart with the Dhamma until it gives rise to a feeling of peace and contentment, that’s the flavour of the Dhamma that nourishes and benefits the person who drinks it. The more we drink it, the more peace and contentment we’ll feel.

At the same time, we’ll create an expansive and cheerful world within the heart. We’ll see animals as animals, people as people, evil as really evil, and good as really good. In other words, we’ll be true to the principles of the Dhamma, without being swayed like a person under the sway of hunger who sees dry leaves as fresh vegetables and so stuffs a handful into his mouth – and then, once his hunger is gone, realises the harm of his hunger in that it could make him so blind.

Thus, our desire for things that aren’t worth desiring is termed the origin of suffering (*samudaya*). Suffering is the harm which comes from this sort of desire. We torment ourselves to the point where our hearts can’t stay still, for they’re pressured into restlessness all the time. The path (*magga*) refers to techniques for cutting away at the three forms of craving step by step, while the cessation of suffering (*nirodha*) is the ending of suffering and discontent within the heart through the power of our practice of the path.

Every activity that is noble and good – generosity, morality, and meditation – is a part of the path (*magga*) which kills off suffering and its origin within the heart. So if you want to put an end to suffering in your own heart, you should view these activities as necessary duties. Make them constant habits until your heart has them fully developed. No one has put thorns in the way of the path to release from suffering

– it’s a path that people who look for release can follow in the purity of their hearts. And no one has put thorns in the land of those released from suffering – it’s a delightful state, just like the heart with no more discontent and suffering.

As for the question of suffering in the future – in this life or the next – don’t overlook your heart that is suffering right now. The same is true with every level of happiness because this very heart is the only thing that will possess those forms of happiness in its various destinations.

This should be enough explanation for now of the Noble Truths within and the Noble Truths without. I ask that you put into practice whichever level of the Noble Truths you see is appropriate for you, so that you can benefit from them by ridding yourself of external sufferings and the sufferings exclusively within the heart. The Noble Truths are each person’s property, inasmuch as each of us can suffer from deficiencies. If we use the Noble Truths to develop fully the areas where we see we’re still lacking, then the result – happiness in full measure – is sure to come our way without partiality or prejudice, no matter who we are.



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