

The Reasons for Studying the Four Noble Truths

By Geshe Tashi Tsering



PHOTO: Mark Oakney

Buddha's eleventh deed: turning the wheel of the doctrine, ordaining five ascetics, and teaching the four noble truths. From panels at Land of Medicine Buddha painted by Thubten Gelek and Ngawang Kunkhen.

Why are we interested in a spiritual life and in particular the study of Buddhism? In his book *The Four Noble Truths*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that our interest in the spiritual life is: "...something very instinctive and there is no need to prove it is there. Happiness is something that we all aspire to achieve and of course we naturally have a right to fulfill this aspiration".

I think that is the very foundation of what we need to understand. Not just intellectually, not just because somebody like His Holiness has said it, but we need to know the answer for ourselves. Do we really wish to be happy? His Holiness says it is instinctive. If that is so, is that instinctive feeling always with us? If it is, how much are we fulfilling it? How are we going about fulfilling it? I think the answers to these questions are really the basis of what we need to know before we start our study and our practice.

His Holiness says the Buddha started with the four noble truths because within us all there is an instinctive feeling to have happiness and to avoid problems and difficulties. Before we can look at how to fulfill that longing to be happy, we really need to experience whether or not this is so.

We have to experience the truth of this for ourselves – not because it is in the scriptures, not because somebody has told us. This is our starting point.

The Benefits of Studying the Four Noble Truths

The Minimum Benefit

My feeling is that the minimum advantage of studying the four noble truths is that we will gain some confidence that the problems and difficulties in our life can be stopped. At present our life is so conditioned by factors outside of our control, but, by seeing clearly what things actually cause all our problems and by seeing that they can be eliminated through understanding the last noble truth, the truth of the path, we will see that there is a remedy to cure this “conditioned” life. If we have some sort of confidence – through [a] course, through reading books, meditating, discussing, doing homework – then I think we will definitely have some result. That is the minimum advantage.

The Medium Benefit

Then, if we can see that our present situation can be stopped, that following something like the noble eightfold path has the capability to stop our conditioned life, we are close to seeing the second of the three refuges, which is the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. And seeing beings who are practicing this Dharma, we are actually seeing both the first and third refuges, the Buddha and the Sangha. Those who have completed the path are the buddhas and those in the process of practicing such things are the sangha. In studying the four noble truths we are establishing the three refuges.

And not only that, but also seeing that we ourselves are capable of doing it. The best way to take refuge in the Dharma is by putting the path into practice. Eventually we ourselves will become that refuge, by becoming a buddha. While we are practicing we are the Sangha – not necessarily as an ordained monk or nun, the real meaning of Sangha is someone who has a direct realization of emptiness. Studying the four noble truths, meditation on those points, we need to bring up this kind of understanding and gain that confidence within us. That is the second, the medium benefit.

The Highest Benefit

The highest benefit is seeing cause and effect and the real nature of suffering ourselves and how we have fallen into that kind of situation. And seeing how all other beings have done exactly the same. Then seeing that if we put the last

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

1. Life is characterized by suffering.
2. The cause of suffering is ignorance.
3. The cessation of suffering is attainable.
4. The path to the cessation of suffering.

noble truth into practice, we will be capable of benefiting not only ourselves but also other sentient beings, regardless of our present connection with others, without any discrimination of self-interest. That kind of activity can be achieved through understanding and practicing the four noble truths at a very deep and thorough level.

By practicing the path, without falling into the two extremes of nihilism or eternalism – nihilism, where we feel that nothing has any reality and therefore we are powerless to do anything, and eternalism, where we feel things are solid and unalterable – then we can be really effective in helping others.

Between these two extremes our understanding will become more and more subtle, and our understanding of cause and effect will become deeper and deeper. The cessation of our suffering is not given to us by someone as a gift but must emerge through practicing the true path. By reaching that kind of understanding, the gap will get smaller and smaller between the uncontrolled, conditioned life we now lead and the core which is pure and perfect peace. Even though it may be difficult to reach that center, we will get closer and closer through our practice.

Through studying, developing an understanding and then actually practicing the teaching of the four noble truths in our daily life, the highest benefit can also be so beneficial for all other sentient beings. We can not only cease our own suffering and the cause of suffering but can also cease the suffering and the causes of suffering in other beings. ☸

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See also The Four Noble Truths by His Holiness the Dalai Lama at www.lamayeshe.com/otherteachers/hhball/4noble_truths.shtml