

## **Introduction**

Hello everybody. I've been requested to talk about the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Paths, which is indeed the pillars of the Buddha's teachings. In fact, soon after his perfect awakening, the Buddha gave his first sermon to a group of five ascetics, and he basically talked about the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Paths. He started off by talking about the Noble Eightfold Paths as the Middle Path.

## **Middle Path as a cliché**

I'm sure that many of you are familiar with the usage of the word the Middle Path, which is sometimes used quite sweepingly, I would say. It has become a cliché. When we want to understand the Middle Path, the Middle Way that the Buddha was referring to, we must understand it in accordance with the context. Well, the context is thus:

## **Brief biography of Siddhattha's search for awakening**

Before the Buddha's renunciation, he was enjoying a life of luxury. He himself said that his wealthy father pampered him by giving him three mansions for the three different seasons, which were all staffed by women, and he was indeed enjoying the pleasures of the senses before his spiritual maturity ripened. He began to look for a deeper meaning in life and soon after he left his home, he went in search of spiritual teachers. At that time, there was Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta.

Siddhatha Gotama became the student of Āḷāra Kālāma and attained to the third stage of the formless attainments, because that was as far as Āḷāra Kālāma could attain himself. Siddhatha Gotama was not satisfied with the attainment, and he thought that there must be something higher, and this was not what he was seeking.

Siddhatha Gotama continued looking for another teacher, and soon he came across Uddaka Rāmaputta. Uddaka Rāmaputta was either the son or chief disciple of the ascetic called Rāma. Rāma had already passed away, and this Uddaka was actually taking over his teacher's post. So, they called him Uddaka, Rāma's son.

So Rāma taught until the fourth formless attainment, but he himself had not attained it. He just knew how to get there according to his teacher's instructions. He gave his instructions to Siddhatha Gotama at that time, and Siddhatha Gotama, being a very gifted meditator, very soon attained to the stage that Uddaka Rāmaputta's teacher had himself attained. Uddaka Rāmaputta himself had not attained it but he was also a very spiritually matured person, very humble, and he offered to let Siddhatha Gotama, who had now attained the same attainment that his teacher had, to take over all his students.

Nowadays, if something like that was to happen, the teacher would feel envious and would try to do all sorts of things to disparage his student who had become better than him, or do other things to get rid of him. However, Uddaka was a very matured person, and he genuinely pleaded that Siddhatha Gotama took over his position as teacher of all his students. However, at that time, Gotama was not satisfied with the attainment, and he went to seek further by himself. He left Uddaka Rāmaputta, and went on to practice self-mortification.

## **Rationale behind self-mortification**

At that time, among the samaṇas, among the renunciants, the recluses, there is a popular belief that if we mortify ourselves and keep the body so busy with having to cope with

discomfort and pain, then one would be repaying the debts of our old kamma, our past bad kamma, by undergoing all types of self-mortification.

At the same time, because the samaṇas were busy with coping with this hardship, discomfort, and pain, they would not have the time to indulge in sensual pleasures and therefore create new kamma. So that was a belief at that time. Gotama experimented with that, going on a very austere practice, many of which are mentioned in some of the suttas in the Majjhima Nikāya, Sīhanāda Sutta, for example. In the commentaries, it is said that he did that for about six years. Some of his known practices were sleeping on nails, going around naked, staying in very extreme temperatures such as staying in the hot sun without any shade and staying in the open throughout the night during the winter months. He also ate very little food, about a handful of beans but he was so emaciated that he fainted and almost died.

After he regained consciousness, he thought: "This must surely not be the path that can lead to the goal that I'm looking for, which is the ending of all sufferings." He abandoned the austere practice and took some time to regain his strength and thereafter, he practiced to attain the jhānas. He also attained the psychic power of being able to see past lives and understand the kammic consequences of actions, how beings like himself, as well as others, were reborn according to the kamma that they had created.

### **Supreme awakening of the Buddha**

So finally, after seeing all that, he attained supreme enlightenment by penetrating the Four Noble Truths.

### **Middle Path in context**

So, to understand it in this context, the middle way or the middle path means what is not the extreme of sensual indulgence which he was indulging in before he renounced as the son of a wealthy man and also not to undertake self-mortification and cause harm and suffering to oneself for no beneficial results.

### **Sensual indulgence in context**

When we talk about indulgence in sensual desires, one would think of doing something which is beyond the ordinary. For example, you might not think that enjoying a delicious plate of char kuey teow is sensual indulgence. Would you think that enjoying a cup of coffee is sensual indulgence from the conventional point of view? However, if you are talking about the Middle Path that leads to the end of suffering, those are also indulgences. As long as you are involved in enjoying the pleasures of the senses, then you are not on the Noble Eightfold Path. As you shall see later, the second Path factor which is Right Thought involves renunciation of sensual pleasures.

### **First sermon**

The first sermon that the Buddha gave was given to the five ascetics. Those five were actually attending to him when he was undertaking self-mortification but abandoned him when they saw that he was going back to eating to regain his health and strength before embarking on the path of practicing for the jhānas. The five ascetics thought that he had abandoned his practice and therefore, they left him. They abandoned him because they thought that he had abandoned the practice of self-mortification, which they believed was the path that led to liberation and enlightenment.

After the Buddha got enlightened, he thought about the five ascetics as the people who were most suited to receive his teachings and benefit from them at that time. He went searching for them and when he found them, he started off by saying that there were two things that a renunciant should not be involved in. The first is indulgence in the pleasures of the senses and the second is self-mortification. And he said that he had found the middle way, which is neither indulgence in sense pleasures nor self-mortification.

### **Noble Eightfold Path**

And he said, "So what is this middle path, this middle way? It is none other than the Noble Eightfold Path, which is Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Composure or Samādhi."

So, these are the eight factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.

### **4 Noble Truths**

After having listed these eight factors, he went on to talk about the Four Noble Truths instead of elaborating on them. So, he talked about the first noble truth, which is suffering and he defined suffering in a conventional and ultimate sense.

#### **Definition of suffering in the first sermon**

He defined suffering in five ways: birth, aging, sickness and death. It's very ironic because nowadays, when you celebrate a birthday, you say "Happy birthday". However, from the Buddhist point of view, birth is actually suffering. In fact, the commentary described that birth is like "pushing an elephant through a keyhole". There is so much suffering when you are being pushed out of your mother's womb. That is a lot of suffering for the child as well as for the mother. Therefore birthing in itself is suffering.

So is aging. When you age, you can't see clearly, you can't hear clearly, your teeth start to fall off, and your hair turns grey and so forth. Thereafter, you feel that you are getting old, wrinkled and unhappy. You are no longer at the prime of your youth and that is another form of suffering.

Sickness, of course, is suffering. There is no doubt about it. And perhaps death is kind of ambiguous. For most people, it's suffering because they are clinging to life on this earth. Well, for some others who don't cling so much, who want to commit suicide because of so much suffering, so much depression that they can't stand any longer, well, death may not be suffering. It's happiness to them. Or that's what they think. But in any case, death is suffering. Especially if you die a very painful death.

The second is association with the unloved. The third is dissociation from the loved. The fourth is not getting what is desired and the fifth, in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging is suffering. I said earlier that the Buddha defines suffering conventionally as well as in the ultimate sense.

One to four are all conventional. And number five is in the ultimate sense. Now, it doesn't have to take a Sammāsambuddha, a perfectly self-awakened one, to tell us about the first four types of suffering. It's very obvious. Even a child would know. If children don't get what they want, then they will start crying and they're suffering. When you use the word suffering, most people tend to think that suffering means painful suffering.

### **3 types of suffering**

If you look below, there are actually three types of suffering. One is called Dukkha-dukkha, painful suffering. The second is called Vipariṇāma-dukkha, transformational suffering. And the last one is called Saṅkhāra-dukkha or constructional suffering. Let me explain.

### **Dukkha-dukkha (painful suffering)**

Dukkha-dukkha is the suffering that most people understand. That is when you stumble across tree stump, or you step on a thorn when you're barefooted, or you accidentally knock into the door, and so forth. All these are painful sufferings which are very obvious. Everybody knows that. It doesn't need a Sammāsambuddha to tell you that.

### **Vipariṇāma-dukkha (transformational suffering)**

The second is Vipariṇāma-dukkha or transformational suffering. This is actually another word for pleasant experiences. When you enjoy something, e.g. you enjoy a good relationship. Maybe when you start to fall in love with somebody, it's such a great relationship to have that somebody who makes you very happy whenever you are with him or her. As a result of that, there is a clinging to that relationship. It's something pleasant and you like it. It gives you a lot of adrenaline, serotonin and all that sort of stuff. So, it gives you a high. You like the feeling. So that is actually transformational suffering because eventually when the relationship breaks up, then there's a lot of suffering, especially when you think of all the good old times that you had together. Your relationship was so perfect. You were so happy, and now it's no longer there. And that hankering after those past pleasant experiences is painful suffering. So that pleasant experience at that time is actually potential dukkha. It will become transformational dukkha eventually if there is craving involved when you are enjoying pleasant experiences.

### **Saṅkhāra-dukkha (constructional suffering)**

Then the next one is called Saṅkhāra-dukkha. I call it constructional suffering. Suffering that is related to constructions. Constructions is a translation of the word Saṅkhāra. Sometimes it is translated as fabrications, as by Ajahn Thanissaro. Sometimes it is translated as mental formations. Sometimes it is translated as conditioned phenomena. In short, what it actually means is anything that is constructed out of causes and conditions: That is a construction.

All right. So, this is the ultimate suffering. When you are having pleasant experiences at a particular time with attachment to or craving for it, that pleasant experience has the potential of suffering embedded in it. Even though that potential suffering has not occurred yet because that pleasant experience is still happening, even at that time it is constructional suffering because nothing lasts forever. Everything arises and passes away from moment to moment. Although we don't really see it, we don't really experience it that way. It is an illusion that we live with all the time.

### **Empirical evidence for the power of mindfulness**

Many years ago, I think back in 1984 or 1985, I accompanied Sayadaw U Paṇḍita to the US, to the Insight Meditation Society at Barre, Massachusetts. That was Sayadaw U Paṇḍita's maiden retreat in the West. He taught all the big timers, Ram Dass, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg and all those big timers were there. He was teaching a teacher's retreat and I was there as a translator. A professor from Harvard conducted an experiment on those yogis who had gone through the three-month intensive retreat.

The experiment started before the retreat commenced because they had to know what was their mental state, their mental agility and capability before and after the retreat. They used

an instrument called a T-scope. A T-scope is a screen, like a monitor, and that device is able to produce sparks that will appear on the screen. The frequency of these sparks, one spark from another, can be manipulated and adjusted by the operator. They asked each of their subjects to look at the screen and they calibrated their ability to differentiate one spark from another. They slowly increased the frequency from one spark to another and then when the gap of the sparks became smaller and smaller until the subject was unable to distinguish two sparks and only saw one, that is the threshold level of that particular yogi. The results differ from yogi to yogi. So, they have subjected all of them to their initial test. That was before the retreat and they have the threshold level for each of them. At the end of the retreat, all these yogis had to go for another test. It was just amazing because some of their threshold levels increased by 500%.

What does it mean? It means that initially before they started their retreat, they could only see two sparks as one spark because they could not see the interval in between them. However, at the end of the three-month intensive retreat, some of them could see one spark and there's a gap in between before the other spark arose. Can you see how fantastic it is? It is because the mind has been trained to be mindful and attentive to phenomena in a microscopic way that it can see that everything is arising and passing away from moment to moment, which prior to that training we thought was not so. What we thought was one spark was actually two sparks with a space in between.

Another common phenomena is the fluorescent lamp. The fluorescent lamp is actually on AC current and it is fluctuating from no light to light repetitively at a speed of about 60 times per second but we think that the fluorescent lamp is on all the time. We don't really see the flickering. Yeah, so that is also another illusion.

### **Momentary nature of the 5 aggregates**

Ultimately, the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, volitional activities and consciousness are arising from moment to moment in a discrete way. They are not one continuous mind. You have many, many minds that are arising and passing from moment to moment.

### **We have more than one mind**

In English, when we use the word mind, each one of us has only one mind but in Pāli, the word citta (which is usually translated as mind) can be plural or singular because it changes all the time from moment to moment according to causes and conditions. So that is the ultimate suffering because there is no way that you can control this arising and passing away from moment to moment of the five aggregates. All the Buddhas and all the Arahants are in the same boat as all other sentient beings in respect to this Saṅkhāra-dukkha, this constructional suffering.

As long as there are the five aggregates, you are subject to this. As long as you are conscious, the mind will be bombarded by all sorts of stimuli through the five senses. The Arahants and Buddhas are able to control their thinking; they can think what they want and they can stop what they don't want to think. They have control over their minds but the mind still keeps on responding to whatever stimuli that are non-stop coming to the senses. For ordinary people, when you're sleeping, you think the mind is resting. It's not having a rest; it still has dreams and all sorts of things going on which you are not conscious of.

### **Categorising suffering as defined in the first sermon**

Okay, so now let's try to see how we can categorize these five types of suffering that the Buddha listed or defined in this first sermon in terms of these three that we talked about: painful suffering, transformational suffering, and constructional suffering. Are all these three present in the definition of suffering that the Buddha gave? What do you think?

Look at the first one. Birth, aging, sickness, death. Which of the three types of suffering do they belong to? If you look at the colour you would know, birth, aging and sickness come under Dukkha-dukkha, painful suffering. Death as I mentioned earlier could be painful for most people, or it may not appear to be painful for some people. So it is sort of ambiguous. And then association with the unloved, of course that is suffering, that is Dukkha-dukkha, painful suffering.

Dissociation from the loved is of course, Vipariṇāma-dukkha, transformational suffering. Yeah, I talked about the love affair that you had when you first met somebody and then later your relationship broke off and then you hanker after all those good times that you had and that's where the suffering comes.

I was watching one YouTube video some time ago. There was this guy who you could say was a semi psychic. He asked one lady to come up to the stage and he asked the young lady to hold a champagne glass. The guy then said, "Yeah, I know that you had an affair with somebody and you broke up. Now I want you to think of that person that you broke up with, hold that in your hand and think of that person." And what happened? When she thought about that said person as she was holding the champagne glass, it shattered into pieces. You see how much energy there was in hate because she had not forgiven him. She was still holding that grudge in herself through so much hate. So that is the energy of hate. That is the suffering, dissociation from the loved ones. Once she loved so dearly but now, she hates just as dearly like a pendulum swinging from one end to the other end. You hate as much as you loved or even greater.

Then the fourth one, not getting what is desired. Yeah, not getting what is desired of course is suffering. That's painful suffering.

Now thinking about what is desired could be something that is pleasurable at the moment. So you have this idea and you want to realise that idea, fulfil the desire, and you're full of excitement. You feel kind of thrilled, a sense of pleasure to try to get what you want. That sets your adrenaline going, that gives you the pleasure from the hormones. That could also be transformational suffering because there was such a kick in the beginning but when finally you couldn't get what you wanted then it became painful suffering. So, it is transformational suffering too.

And finally, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering. That is from the ultimate sense, which is constructional suffering. As I said just now even the Arahants are not freed from that.

Of these three types of suffering mentioned, how many can Arahants and Buddhas be freed from?

They can only be freed from the second type, transformational suffering. However, they can't be freed from the first and the third. They can't be freed from painful suffering because they still have this body and the body is subject to all sorts of discomfort due to the weather, due to food and so forth. And of course, Saṅkhāra-dukkha: they cannot help but experience the suffering of this incessant arising and passing of all the five aggregates.

But they can be freed from transformational suffering because an Arahant may enjoy good food, may enjoy the aircon in his room but he does so without attachment, without any craving. Because of that, even if those things are no longer there, he will not hanker after them. So, there's no more transformational suffering for the Arahants.

So, this is suffering.

The four Noble Truths say that there is suffering, there is a cause of suffering, there can be a cessation of suffering and there is a way that leads to the cessation of suffering. Suffering is defined as I explained just now.

### **Cause of suffering**

What is the cause of suffering? The cause of suffering is craving. The craving that leads to further rebirth, the craving that delights in things here and there. Even if a person is in very dire circumstances, that person still craves for existence, craves for living. Unless of course, that person is so depressed or has suicidal tendencies due to other causes. Otherwise, a person will try to survive under all circumstances, no matter how difficult the conditions may be. That is the craving, the craving of wanting to remain alive.

And some people can very easily say "I can just enjoy without desire, enjoy without attachment. I don't want to live again. I don't want to come back to this life." You think it's so simple? When you get to your death bed at that time, you will see how you will cling. The dying man clings to a straw. You will cling to the straw even when you are about to die. You can see how those people who are in coma, hanging on for months and years and still not willing to go. Some of them is because of clinging. It seems, from nurses and caregivers, they say that when the person whom they are attached to is willing to give up, is willing to let go and gives permission to that person to move on, then the person can move on quite quickly because that attachment is two ways. It could be attachment from the living side or it could be attachment from the comatose patient, whichever. They have created a bond between themselves. Therefore, any craving or attachment from any side will still bind the other to the life that he or she is in. Whether it's a comatose or in the in-between stage. For example, people who die suddenly in an accident or having a terminal disease, or say you get Covid today and you die two days later. These are the people who tend to hang around in the in-between stage because their kamma has not really dissipated yet. Their kammic energy is still there. If the other party still has a lot of attachment, then that will keep that person in the limbo state for as long as the attachment is there between the two of them. The sooner the attachment is cut, the better.

### **Ending/cessation of suffering**

The third noble truth is the ending of suffering. There can be a cessation of suffering and that cessation of suffering is achieved by the complete cutting off or abandoning of craving. I think that some of you meditators who have been meditating for some time may perhaps know that you have certain attachments and desires to certain things or expectations. And you have been watching your mind for a long time. You know that a lot of suffering that you are causing yourselves or causing others is due to your attachment to certain ideas, certain expectations, certain beliefs. And that's why you react when people don't live up to your expectations, your beliefs to whatever. And that causes a lot of suffering for yourself and for others. Yet, you do it again and again and again and you still suffer. Although you know intellectually that it's because of this craving, of this attachment to these beliefs, expectations and so forth, that you are suffering, you know that that is the cause of your suffering and yet you cannot give it up. It is still there. Why is that so?

Because there's only intellectual understanding. That's not insight. That's not true wisdom. Well, some people need to do it the hard way. If you have managed to practise well enough so that mindfulness becomes second nature to you in your daily life and not only when you are on a silent intensive retreat, you will be able to see whatever goes on in your mind. Then you can choose not to execute all those thoughts and intentions that are going on in your mind. Verbally or physically, you are able to arrest them on time. If you are someone like this who has succeeded in internalising mindfulness to his daily life, then you will see again and again and once when you've seen enough, when there's enough wisdom, not intellectually but experientially seeing how the suffering was caused by this attachment, that one fine day it will dawn upon you:

"Yeah, why am I so stupid? I just have let go of this and it's done!" And suddenly you just really, truly let go because you have seen enough, you have suffered enough. At that point of time that suffering ceases completely. I'll give you an example of one of my yogis. I was conducting a Hokkien retreat in SBS some years ago. Most of my students were oldies but there was one middle aged lady there. One day she was in the meditation hall. She saw this elderly lady walking into the hall and the moment she saw her there was the feeling of dislike that arose in her and she wondered, "Why do I have this feeling of dislike for this woman? I don't know her. I've never seen her. This is the first time I've seen her so why should I have any dislike for her?" She asked the question *Why* but I have taught them to not to pursue your questions intellectually. We just ask the question, drop it and then go on to practice open mindfulness. And so that's what she did.

She just asked the question, dropped it and then continued her practice and later on either a later part of the day or the next day while she was sitting it suddenly dawned upon her that this woman looked like her grandma and her grandma was a very traditional Chinese old lady. She preferred a grandson not a granddaughter and so she was very disappointed when she was born and didn't treat her very well. So, because of that she had this dislike for her grandmother and because this person looked like her grandmother there was this unconscious dislike that arose in her for no apparent reason. Hence, it was buried in the subconscious. After that realisation, in a subsequent encounter with the same woman again, there was no feeling of dislike whatsoever. So that suffering of dislike disappeared because she saw the cause of the dislike was clinging on to the idea that someone who looked like her grandmother would treat her in the same way like what she did.

Okay, so that is a cause of suffering. As long as you are able to understand the cause of suffering is attachment then at that moment when there is deep understanding that suffering will completely disappear. That is the cessation of suffering. So, this applies at various levels. What I said just now, the example I gave to you is at a very conventional level, but this also applies to a very ultimate level in the sense of the abandonment of all sorts of cravings, attachments and desires that will lead to the rebirth. I mean the ending of all forms of suffering, especially the suffering of having the five aggregates. As long as there are the five aggregates suffering will always be there.

### **What is nibbāna?**

Nibbāna is the cessation of the five aggregates because there's no more five aggregates to suffer.

All right so there can be a cessation of suffering if you can abandon that craving causing that suffering.

### **The way that leads to the cessation of suffering**



Then the fourth Noble Truth is the way that leads to the cessation of suffering. Yeah, it's easier said than done. How can one abandon attachment, abandon desire? To do that one has to follow the Noble Eightfold Path then only will one be able to understand the cause of suffering which is craving, attachment, desire and then abandon it for the suffering to cease. Okay so this is the Four Noble Truths in brief. Basically, it's about identifying the cause of your particular suffering that you are having.

### **Root cause of mental sufferings in the world**

Talking from a worldly sense, all the mental sufferings I will say that people have can be singled down to just a few things. It is just your attachment to expectations of how people should behave, to views and opinions or to beliefs. Basically, these are the three things that cause suffering in all of us and if you watch your mind all the time, every time you suffer, ask yourself *Why* and you can see very, very clearly that it is due to some sort of attachment.

In fact, that was my practice before I renounced. Before I renounced, I didn't really know anything about meditation. I couldn't even sit quietly for 10 minutes. I was fascinated by Zen at that time and Zen says: "When you walk just walk, and when you sit just sit." But when I sat, I just couldn't sit because I'd be doing all sorts of things in the mind. But I was very fascinated by the Four Noble Truths and I tried to verify them in a conventional sense in my daily life, not in a formal sitting meditation situation.

### **Experiential verification of the first two Noble Truths led to my renunciation**

So, from a very early time even before I started to learn any formal meditation, I was already watching my mind most of the time. Whenever I felt disappointed, upset, angry or hurt, I asked myself *Why* and invariably the answer was *Attachment*—attachment to expectations of how people should behave towards me, expectations of how things should be, attachment to my belief system, to my opinions and views. So you see, that's all very simple. And the more I saw of that, the more I got disillusioned with the world and finally I renounced the worldly life.

Okay so I hope that this will be an encouragement for all of you. Even though you may not have the time or the circumstances that are conducive to do long-term intensive retreat you can still go a long way if you keep on watching your mind all the time and try to understand these first and second Noble Truths in your daily life as often as you can.