

## Overview of the Four Noble Truths

The previous article expounded on the relationship between the fruitions of liberation and “the six destinations of rebirth and the three realms.” This article will introduce the most important method of cultivation in the Sound-hearer Bodhi<sup>1</sup> (*Srāvakabodhi*)—the Four Noble Truths. These are the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Origination of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Noble Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering.

What makes the Four Noble Truths the noble truths? First of all, the “truths” means that the contents reflect the true reality of the dharma realm; in other words, they are consistent with and are verifiable by the facts in the true reality of the dharma realm. Why “noble” truths? Because whoever diligently follows the teaching of the Four Noble Truths can become a liberated noble sage. Therefore, cultivating the Four Noble Truths allows sentient beings to be free and liberated from the mundane world and become either sages or saints in the Path to Liberation.

The first truth in the Four Noble Truths is the Noble Truth of Suffering. One needs to observe that suffering does exist in the dharma realm (the transmigration within the six destinations of rebirths or the three realms). Such observation starts at a relatively general level and gradually progresses to the more subtle and refined level. The Noble Truth of Suffering can be classified into three sufferings, five sufferings, or eight sufferings. The three sufferings are suffering associated directly with physical and mental uneasiness, suffering associated with decay, and suffering associated with impermanence. The five sufferings refer to the sufferings in the five destination of rebirth, i.e., suffering in the heaven, human, animal, hungry ghost, and hell realms. Another classification of the five sufferings refers to the suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death; the suffering of separation from what we love; the suffering of association with those we hate; the suffering of not getting what we want; and the suffering of the five flourishing aggregates<sup>2</sup> (*skandhas*). If we further divide

---

<sup>1</sup> Bodhi is a Sanskrit term for awakening or enlightenment. There are generally three types of bodhi: (1) bodhi of the Sound-hearer (*śrāvakabodhi*); (2) bodhi of the Solitary-realizer (*pratyekabodhi*); and (3) complete, perfect enlightenment (*samyaksam̄bodhi*) of the Buddha. Sound-hearer is the translation of the Sanskrit term *śrāvaka*, which literally means “listener.” It refers to the direct disciple of the Buddha, one who listens to the teaching of the Buddha. Solitary-realizer is the translation of the Sanskrit term *pratyekabuddha*, which literally means “self-enlightened one” or “solitary buddha”.

<sup>2</sup> The five aggregates is a way that the Buddha enumerates the constituents of a person. They are the aggregates of (1) form, (2) sensations, (3) perception (4) formation, and (5) consciousness.

the first suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death into four kinds of suffering, then these four kinds of suffering along with the last four of the five sufferings make up the eight sufferings. Starting from the coarser three sufferings and progressing gradually to the more subtle delineations of five or eight sufferings, one can observe and verify that all the phenomena (everything that exists) in the three realms do possess the suffering characteristics as depicted in the principle of the Noble Truth of Suffering.

What is suffering associated directly with physical and mental uneasiness? It means that the nature of coming into contact with unpleasant objects is indeed unpleasant. For example, being sick is suffering; no one will enjoy being sick, so the feeling of being sick itself is called suffering associated with physical and mental uneasiness. If one could not find a cure for the illness through the help of doctors or medical technology, one would need to go through various severe, lasting, and at times unbearable physical and mental sufferings, and these sufferings are associated with physical and mental uneasiness.

As to the suffering associated with decay, it refers to the eventual inevitable suffering even when one is in a happy state, since such state will not last and will eventually vanish and hence cause suffering. Take eating ice cream to illustrate the point. Eating the first bowl of ice cream on a hot summer day is quite refreshing and enjoyable; however, the sensation of eating the second bowl will be less refreshing and enjoyable. After having the third, fourth, or fifth, we might begin to shiver. If we are forced to continue to eat the sixth and the seventh, we will eventually experience unenjoyable sensation or even suffering. From this example, we observe that the enjoyable sensation is ever-changing, and it decreases along the way or even eventually turns into unpleasant sensation. Not only do humans experience suffering; even heavenly beings who are in much better states cannot escape from suffering of the decay either.

Although the suffering associated with impermanence is listed as the third of the three sufferings, it is inherent in the aforementioned two sufferings. What is the suffering associated with impermanence? Let us suppose one who practices meditative concentration (samadhi); during meditation, one reaches the serene state of the mind. In such state, one is able to maintain the serenity for a long time and does not have any sensation of suffering. Therefore, one has neither experienced mental nor physical suffering, nor the suffering associated with decay. However, there is still suffering associated with impermanence even in the state of serenity while meditating because changes do exist at all time; they are just so subtle that they can hardly be detected. This subtle change, and hence suffering associated with impermanence, can still be detected by one with a finer mind. No matter how wonderful the experience of a serene mind is, one must eventually come out of the meditation to rest or sleep. Whilst his mental consciousness experiences this state of serenity, it continues to rise,

cease, and change. As a result, the mental consciousness will tire out, so one must come out of meditation to rest or sleep. This shows that even when one is in a seemingly lasting, enjoyable, tranquil sensation while meditating, one still experiences the inherent suffering associated with or caused by change at the same time. In the dharma realm, there are three main types of suffering, suffering associated with physical or mental uneasiness, suffering associated with decay, and suffering associated with impermanence.

If one contemplates deeper into the five sufferings as well as the eight sufferings, there is the suffering of separation from what we love. Usually, suffering of separation from what we love refers to the suffering of the eventual inevitable separation from our beloved kin or friends. Such separation will inevitably cause suffering, albeit a coarser kind. The suffering of separation from what we love in the Sound-hearer Bodhi refers to the suffering of losing the five aggregates that we love and attach to so dearly. One should contemplate deeper into the subtler suffering of separation from what we love associated with one's body and mind when contemplating the eight sufferings.

Another type of suffering is the suffering of association with those we hate. Suffering of association with those we hate arises when we encounter unpleasant states or persons, for example, when our body no longer functions properly.

Through these finer and deeper observations, we can arrive at the conclusion that none of the three realms or the six destinations of rebirth are devoid of the three, five or eight kinds of sufferings. Hence, all things are suffering. What the Sound-hearer needs to observe is that everything in the three realms is suffering; permanent happiness cannot be found anywhere in the three realms.

After having carefully observed the truth of suffering, one must probe further on the following questions: "Why is there suffering? What is the origin of suffering? What are the causes of suffering?" These are the contents associated with the Noble Truth of the Origination of Suffering that need to be investigated in detail. The origination of suffering is closely tied to the *tathāgatagarbha*<sup>3</sup>. Inasmuch as sentient beings crave for or cling to the five faculties, the *tathāgatagarbha* of each individual sentient being spontaneously gives rise to the five faculties. Sound-hearers understand this; therefore, they

---

<sup>3</sup> Commonly translated as womb of the *tathāgata*, matrix of the *tathāgatas*, embryo of the *tathāgatas*, essence of the *tathāgatas*, etc., which refers to the essential primordial essence that is fundamental to the existence of each sentient being. It is called the original mind, root consciousness, fundamental reality, non-arising dharma, nirvana, or *ālaya* consciousness in the Sound-hearer Vehicle. In the Solitary-realizer Vehicle, it is called the embryo-entering consciousness. In Mahayana, it is called the True Mind, True Suchness, *ālaya* consciousness, and retribution consciousness.

follow what the Buddha has taught, and observe and verify that the existence of the form, sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness aggregates is caused by sentient beings' love for the five aggregates. For example, human beings love the form aggregate<sup>4</sup> because they enjoy being able to perform all kinds of actions. Heavenly beings also love the form aggregate because it allows them to fly around. As a result of this craving and attachment, the *tathāgatagarbha* creates the form aggregate for sentient beings—the physical bodies for humans in human world and the heavenly bodies for the beings in the heaven realm.

We also crave and attach to the “sensation” aggregate, which includes the painful, pleasant, and neither painful nor pleasant feelings. For example, nobody likes to be angry and we all know that bad temper is not only revolting but also bad for one's health. However, we can hardly stop getting mad while we are angry, and often let our temper run wild instead. That is because we have also been inattentively clinging to the unhappy sensations.

What is our attachment to the perception aggregate? We always want to be able to perceive and be aware of our eating, sleeping, exercising, resting, studying, traveling, etc. All these belong to the perception aggregate that we enjoy dearly. As long as we crave for or cling to such perceptions, the *tathāgatagarbha*, in response to such craving or clinging, will give rise to the five aggregates and will keep producing the perception aggregate, allowing us to survive and remain in the six destinations of rebirth; this is the perception aggregate.

The formation aggregate refers to the processes by which actions or things can be formed by our physical, verbal, or mental acts. For instance, moving from one place to another, or switching from one task to another. We crave for or cling to the contents and meanings of such actions. Sound-hearers have observed and are fully aware of this; therefore, they want to completely extinguish their formation aggregate, which includes the physical, verbal, and mental acts. Thus, while cultivating and practicing Buddha's teaching, they must eliminate all the “acts” in the three realms and realize the meditative absorption of cessation (*nirodhasamāpatti*), which surpasses the states of the four concentrations and four formless absorptions.

The consciousness aggregate is what sentient beings crave for or cling to the most. We attach to the eye consciousness, which is why we long to continue to possess the eye-faculty; likewise for our ears, nose, tongue, and physical faculties. Because the consciousness aggregate possesses the various discerning capabilities that we enjoy dearly, they are called the “discerning sensation aggregate.”

---

<sup>4</sup> The form aggregate refers to all the physical constituents of a person, i.e., materiality, in contrast to the other four of the five aggregates that encompass the mentality of a person.

In fact, contemplating the Noble Truth of the Origination of Suffering is to observe that greed is the origin of suffering and in order to eliminate suffering, one cannot just directly extinguish the suffering itself, but must eliminate the root cause—greed—so that one will no longer crave the five aggregates. As a result, one's *tathāgatagarbha* will no longer produce the five aggregates (of a future sentient being) after death. When the five aggregates are no longer created, *tathāgatagarbha* remains alone by itself—such a state is called remainderless nirvana.

However, how does one eliminate the origination of suffering? In order to answer this question, we are going to expound on the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering. The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering says that one must unremittingly contemplate the five aggregates at a deeper level and then continue contemplating the detriments generated by the five aggregates. Whenever there is a physical body, illness, aging, and death will be inevitable. The same is with the mind. Whenever sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness exist, their deterioration will be inevitable, which will certainly lead to suffering. Comprehension of the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering is to investigate the deficiencies as well as burdens of the five aggregates and eventually eliminate one's greed for the five aggregates completely. After having eliminated greed, suffering will vanish because the five aggregates will no longer appear—hence the emancipation from the six paths of rebirth and the three realms.

We must be aware that although Sound-hearers have eliminated the greed for the five aggregates, the resulting non-reappearance or dissolution of the five aggregates does not mean the state of nihilism or nothingness; the non-reappearance or dissolution of the five aggregates is a state in which only the *tathāgatagarbha* remains. Otherwise, liberation will turn into nihilistic emptiness.

In addition to the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, one needs to also investigate the Noble Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering. Why? Because after having attained the first, second, third, and eventually fourth fruktions, a Sound-hearer is not necessarily an arhat with twofold liberation<sup>5</sup>, or a great arhat with three insights and six supernatural powers who can terminate his current life at will. He, who is enlightened through wisdom only, must, therefore, still live his life so he can continue on to the more advanced cultivation and accomplishment. Under such a circumstance, he must continuously live by the principle of the Noble Eightfold Path—right view, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In other words, after having attained the

---

<sup>5</sup> Twofold liberation refers to liberation through wisdom (insight) and mind (meditative absorption).

first fruition or beyond, a Sound-hearer will remain alive and help liberate sentient beings in the human realm when the opportunities arise; therefore, he must follow the principle of the Noble Eightfold Path for more advanced cultivations.

The first component in the Noble Eightfold Path is right view. One should follow the principles of the Four Noble Truths mentioned previously, and continue contemplating various sufferings along with their origins in the dharma realm. While one lives and helps sentient beings when the opportunities allow, one can only attain all fruitions of Sound-hearer Bodhi by completely eliminating the greed that causes suffering. One must live by the principle of “middle-way”, which follows the Noble Eightfold Path according to the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. To live by the “middle way” is to live with a mindset of neither suffering nor happiness; one no longer has desire to seek out happiness nor has any thought to avoid suffering. As a result, a Sound-hearer will no longer worry about anything. Why? Because he has fully observed and been totally convinced that all the causes and effects that obstruct the way to liberation will vanish eventually; they are all confluence and synergy of causes and conditions and will eventually vanish as circumstances change. So a Sound-hearer will neither worry nor attach to anything, and will eventually be able to liberate himself from the cycle of birth and death.

In summary, the fundamental content of the Four Noble Truths consists of the existence of suffering, origination of suffering, cessation of suffering, and path to the cessation of suffering. The Four Noble Truths are based on the transmundane law of causality and, at a deeper level, on the *tathāgatagarbha*, which sustains one’s renunciation from the cycle of birth and death in the three realms through multiple lifetimes of cultivation as well as eventual attainment of the fruition of liberation.