

# WHOSE TRUTH?

The 4 Noble Truths & the Two Truths

By Geshe Tenzin Zopa





# 4 NOBLE TRUTHS

Truth of Suffering  
Truth of the Causes of Suffering  
Truth of Cessation  
Truth of the Path



## 4 NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths is amongst the fundamental, essential and most important teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni given about 2600 years ago in Sarnath, India. This teaching is called the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma and respected by all the different Buddhist schools and practitioners whether they are Theravada, Mahayana or tantric practitioners.

After the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha remained silent in meditative retreat at Deer Park, Varansi. Then Brahma blew a right-turning conch shell, calling the Buddha from meditation and in earnest, requested the Buddha to turn the wheel of dharma, to teach and thus created the auspiciousness for Buddha to grant teachings in this “southern world” i.e. this planet and universe.

When Buddha met his first disciples, there was a strong connection to each other from the first instance. The karma between Buddha and the 5 disciples had been established two lifetimes ago before. At that time, he was a prince often called the Great-Hearted Bodhisattva. He was walking amongst the forests in Nepal accompanied by the bodhisattva Maitreya. At the place in Nepal now called Namobuddha, the two bodhisattvas encountered a family of 5 tigers, comprising of a mother tiger and 4 cubs. These tigers were tortured by starvation with no chance of survival. The two princes discussed how to save the precious lives of the tigers. Maitreya said, “I’d better find some food for them.” The Great-Hearted bodhisattva (Shakyamuni), said, “The tiger might not live long enough for you to go looking for food.”



Nevertheless, Maitreya left to search for food. After Maitreya left, Bodhisattva Great-Heated immediately lay down. He cut his flesh from his thigh and respectfully offered it to the tiger. Tigers would readily normally eat flesh but these tigers did not dare go near the flesh because the compassion of the Bodhisattva Great Hearted radiated out like powerful light-rays to their eyes. Bodhisattva Great Hearted understood this and filled with great compassion and bodhichitta, he prayed, “You must eat this flesh that I am giving you. By tasting this meat, you will have the karma to be reborn as my disciples when I come to this world to Turn the Wheel of Dharma.” At this prayer, the tigers’ fears were subdued and ate the flesh of Bodhisattva Great Hearted.

Whatever remained of the Buddha’s bones thereafter, were collected and placed inside a stupa built on that site. There are 3 major holy sites in Nepal where you should visit and make a wish which will be fulfilled within this life. Boudha Stupa and Swayambunath Stupa are the other sites which are regarded as wish-fulfilling. In Nepal there are hundreds of holy places but should you miss these 3 places, you would not have accomplished the purpose of visiting Buddhist holy sites in Nepal.

Thus, the 5 disciples whom Buddha encountered in Sarnath were the reincarnations of the tiger family. The moment they met, they all sensed the shared karma of a past life. Prayers of compassion and bodhicitta can be so powerful that it is almost as if you can fix the result and its date. So when the disciples, who were now ordinary brahmins, encountered the Buddha in the aspect of the compassionate, fully-subdued Sage, the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma (which was the teaching of the Four Noble Truths), took place. When Buddha granted the first teaching, some obtained the Hinayana Path of Seeing upon hearing the first word. That meant they realized emptiness directly. Some achieved beyond the Path of Seeing.

The above is a brief story how these teachings came to this world.





To establish the teachings and the realizations of the Paths and the Grounds, with the result of subduing the mind, is the purpose of this teaching on the 4 Noble Truths.

When listening to any teachings, we need to set up the proper motivation. It should not be only to obtain temporary happiness or to clear immediate problems but rather to clear all obstacles to the attainment of ultimate happiness, which is the state of Buddhahood. Our human instinct is to obtain ultimate happiness/enlightenment because that is our nature. From the moment we are born to the moment we die, our instinct is to want to become a Buddha because we always want the greatest happiness. We put effort into making money, getting into a relationship and the like but where is the real happiness? The real happiness is only in enlightenment. There is no complete happiness except the state of enlightenment.

When we are babies, we want our mothers to comfort us. But our instinct is for real happiness. If we think carefully, we realize that whether we are Theravadan, Mahayana or tantric practitioners or even if we are non-Buddhists, we are actually searching and hoping for the enlightened state. Earning money is actually as a means to achieve the goal of happiness, i.e. the state of enlightenment but in our confusion, we follow the misconception that wealth itself is happiness and unfortunately, when we attain this, we become arrogant. In our confusion, which we can label as ignorance, we are unable to see the difference between temporary happiness and ultimate happiness.

People go into relationships for happiness but often end up fighting. When they first meet and become partners, they think that if they get married, the whole world would be sheer bliss, with no suffering. Instead, under the guidance of ignorance, confusion and afflictions, they often end up angry with each other and become enemies. It is therefore necessary for us to understand the fundamental advice of the Buddha to have a clear understanding of the Four Noble Truths.



## Two fundamental aspects of the 4 Noble Truths

The first is the inter-dependent nature of reality. The second is non-violence.

Let me start with non- violence: This means you should try to benefit others and if you cannot do so, then at least not harm others. We need to live a life based on this principle. We need to have an open mind, understanding that our happiness is dependent on others and others' happiness is dependent on us. Our happiness is interdependent on one another. In this way, non-violence is one manifestation of interdependence. As Buddhists, we have to keep this in mind. We need to realize the interdependence of all things.

The character non-violence is about compassion, loving-kindness, forgiveness and includes accommodating others, being gentle and the most important thing is to have a pure heart. This cannot be seen by others. Your heart has to be white, totally pure, by thinking positive thoughts of yourself and others. Otherwise, if you go into a state of depression, suspicion or fear, you might harm yourself and others too.

If you practice in this way, the natural result is that there will be peace and happiness for all. Upon this premise of the 4 Noble Truths, the other teachings on sutra and tantra are built. In order to progress in your spiritual practice, it is necessary before getting into the elaborate details of the 4 Noble Truths, you understand the levels of interdependence or also known as dependent arising.



There are 3 levels when studying about *interdependence*:

The first one is the causal level of interdependent existence. For example, there are righteous parents and therefore there are beautiful children; there are rice farms, bountiful grains; there are florists, so flowers are available. You can find numerous examples of casual results. The key point is that is that if you create the causes of happiness, there is the result of happiness. If you create the causes of suffering, you will experience suffering. This is the causal level of interdependence. In our conventional life, we have a range of experiences. Our body experiences softness or roughness; we have feelings of misery or happiness. When you see something pleasant, you transmit a happiness-message to your mind. If you see something ugly, you transmit an unpleasant-message to your mind. These are all in the category of the causal level of interdependent existence.

The second level of interdependent existence is the interdependence or relationship between parts of an object or aspects of an object. For example, as there is a north, we can point to a south. As there is a west, we are able to show what is east. As there are high mountains, we can point to lower formations and call them “low ground”. Concepts of big and small are part of this interdependent nature of things that arise from the relationship between parts or aspects of an object.

Now the third level of interdependent existence is even more subtle, namely our perceptions of existence. Depending on how we perceive things based on our own views, beauty or ugliness arise in our minds. Beauty can only be experienced through the perception of the viewer [i.e. not everyone will see the object in the same way]. If from your mental perception, you dislike someone, the phenomena of that person as an “enemy” will arise and an unpleasant image of that person will come into existence for you. But if you flip it over to another way of perceiving, you could perceive that person as a precious, loved one. Therefore, there is an interdependence or a relationship between one’s perception and existence.



## *WHOSE TRUTH?*

Having understood these three levels of interdependence, you will find it easier to understand in greater depth, the 4 Noble Truths.

The whole purpose of Buddha Shakyamuni's First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma on the 4 Noble Truths was to eradicate sufferings and help beings actualize their wish for ultimate happiness.

There are 2 different traditions of teaching the 4 Noble Truths. One tradition first describes the nature of suffering, followed by the causes of suffering and then the explanation on the cessation of suffering and finally the Path to be adopted to achieve the cessation of suffering.

The second tradition has a different sequence. It explains the causes that lead to suffering, then the nature of sufferings, the path and cessation. However, as we are beginners, I will adopt the first approach i.e. provide an explanation on suffering first.



### **The 1st Noble Truth of Suffering**

- (i) The general sufferings of samsara
- (ii) The specific suffering of the 6 realm beings

and

### **The 2nd Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering**



Some students don't like to hear about suffering. It is important to understand suffering in order to be rid of it. The Buddha explained that in order to cure any sickness, it has to first be diagnosed. One needs to recognize what one is afflicted by. Only then can the cure be established and the patient inspired to know that he can be cured because it is only then that the patient will make the effort to consume the medicine. In the same way, without knowing that we are suffering, we will not search for the cause of that suffering and in turn, we will not search for the cure or be inspired to seek liberation from suffering and thus remain in misery and dissatisfaction.

When investigating the 1st Noble Truth of suffering, we need to consider the 3 general sufferings of samsara and then the specific sufferings of the 6 realm beings of samsara.

### (i) The 3 general sufferings of samsara

The **suffering of suffering** is quite easy to understand. If we have a gastric attack, we will feel pain. Pain is an example of the suffering of suffering. However, if we only experience suffering without understanding the nature of suffering, we are no better than animals because animals also experience the suffering of suffering and can even express feelings of pain. What they cannot do, which we as humans can, is to understand the true nature of the suffering of suffering. So here, we are talking about the first noble truth of suffering.

The second type of suffering is the suffering of change. All forms of samsaric pleasure is the suffering of change because that pleasure or happiness does not last and eventually leads to unhappiness. If we are hungry, we eat food and we feel our hunger relieved. This relief does not last as we get hungry again or if we eat too much, we feel discomfort. Such temporariness of samsaric happiness illustrates the suffering of change. We must appreciate the fact that whatever pleasure we now experience is a result of past virtue or good karma.

## Editor's Note

Like the slim arrow that strikes its target, this concise book “Whose Truth?” pierces our lack of awareness of the relevance of the Buddha’s 4 Noble Truths to our lives; of the fact that there ARE Two Truths!

Having interacted with the lay community for many years, Geshe Tenzin Zopa understands only too well, that most of us lack the perseverance to engage in the extensive study and meditation needed to distill the real meaning of the Buddha’s teachings. It would be lost on us if these teachings were delivered in a dry, technical, scholastic manner as is taught in the monastery. Instead, with great patience and skill, Geshela presents the Four Noble Truths and interweaves them with explanations on the Two Truths (of conventional and ultimate truth) in a manner that is easy for us to understand - especially for those of us who are into quick fixes, compact messaging and instant enlightenment.

Though words are few, the meanings go deep. Take the time to read, contemplate and meditate on what this book unveils.

With prostrations in respect and gratitude to Geshela for being our compass to help us find our way into these profound teachings.

This book is dedicated with devotion to the excellent health, long lives and fulfilled wishes of HH Dalai Lama, Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Khenrinpoche and Geshela for their providing us the alphabet to understand Dharma.



# Content

1. The Four Noble Truths	1
- Truth of Suffering	
- Truth of the Causes of Suffering	
- Truth of Cessation	
- Truth of the Path	
2. The Two Truths	29
- Conventional Truth	
- Ultimate Truth	
3. Question & Answer Session on Emptiness	49
4. Acknowledgements	57



However, when we do positive actions, if we are not motivated by the aspiration for liberation from samsara, that action will produce some temporary positive results in the future but it will not become the cause of the total freedom from suffering and remains vulnerable to the suffering of change.

It is like when we buy new clothes, we feel good at first. But after one week, when we see a newer piece of clothing, we lose interest in the earlier one. Similarly in a relationship, when the happiness of a couple declines after marriage, when the couple see each other day after day, there is the danger of them getting bored or irritated with each other.

We are totally under the control of the suffering of change. Even as Sangha, if we do not understand the suffering of change, there is the danger of disrobing. At first, as new monks, we feel happy. Then we see lay people's life as seeming to have some advantages. If we do not understand the suffering of change, if we are not mindful of how we may want something today and want something else tomorrow, we could give up all that we have learned in the teachings.

The suffering of change is most obvious in the objects of desire, including things like our reputation, our possessions. Can you differentiate between the new robe I wore on the first day at the Centre and the robe I wear now? Some people worry about how others will think of them from the clothes they wear. They fear that if they don't wear new clothes or fresh clothes all the time, people will think poorly of them. So even a small matter like the change of clothing brings with it the suffering of change, the attachment to one's ego, one's pride and fear about how others perceive us.



Our ego suffers so much even from small things. We are constantly suffering and creating negative imprints which become fresh causes of future suffering. We simply do not realize that we are under the total control of ignorance. Buddha has given us the solution but we do not apply it.

If only we could understand the suffering of change. For example, we used to go shopping often but during a recession, we shop less and this upsets us. When somebody talks about having bought something new, we feel a pinch inside. Think carefully. We feel unhappy at this because we don't understand the suffering of change. If we are not careful, sometimes our holy objects also become causes for suffering of change – for example, you may have a simple clay statue of Kuan Yin. Then, you get connected to Tibetan Buddhism and now see a big, brass, gold-faced statue (of Kuan Yin). Straightaway, you buy the big one and throw the old one away. This is a very bad thing to do. It is being attached to the material aspect of the statue and the act of throwing away the old one on account of having a new one is yet another example of the suffering of change. Whichever statue that is on our altar is very precious. How can we gain any blessings from our prayers when we discriminate between holy objects in this way?

By understanding the suffering of change, we gain the mind of satisfaction, we gain the mind of contentment. This way, we begin to value what we have; we start to feel that what we have is good enough; we gain wisdom through this; we reduce grasping and we will not offend or harm others.

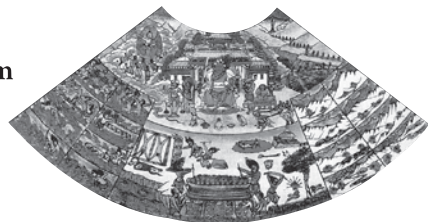




The third type of general suffering is **pervasive suffering**. Pervasive suffering is the suffering that arises due to our having contaminated aggregates (form, feeling, consciousness, cognition and karmic imprints). For example, by having the form of a human, we are only able to bear certain levels of heat and cold. Anything beyond that brings on suffering. A flower is also part of the truth of suffering in the sense that the happiness we feel from looking at a flower is only temporary because eventually, we will perceive the flower fading and dying. All phenomena that exists (or we should rightly say, perceived to exist) within the samsaric world is born from delusion and karma and therefore carries with it the inevitable seed of suffering. This is the pervasive suffering that underscores all sufferings.

(ii) The specific sufferings of the 6 realm beings.

*Hell-realm beings*



There are 8 hot hells and 8 cold hells with different degrees of suffering. At this moment, putting my hand into the fire will be painful enough for me to scream out in pain. Yet this is not even one percent of the pain that is experienced in hell. It is said that in the course of evolution, the universe will be destroyed by fire. The name of this fire is the aeon fire and is the hottest fire ever known. But the heat of the hell existence is a zillion times hotter than that. One minute of existence in hell would be like 100 lifetimes of torture for us. We say that creating one heinous crime or committing the 10 non virtues will create causes for us to experience eons in hell. If we fail to let Dharma to influence our deeds, it would be like walking on the edge of a cliff, constantly in danger of falling over the edge.

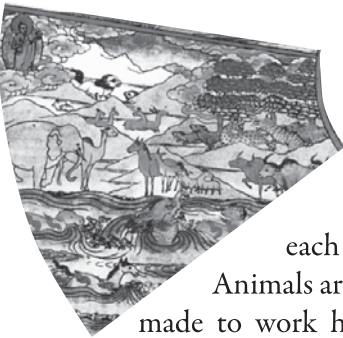
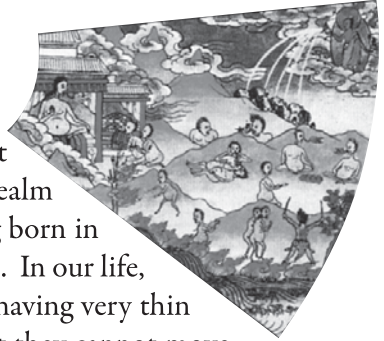
The cold hell likewise involves unbelievable pain. If you hold wrong views such as nihilistic thinking or believe that the law of cause and effect does not operate, you create causes for a cold hell rebirth. An example of a cold hell rebirth is where one's flesh cracks due to the extreme cold and birds with



poisonous beaks attack the flesh at these flesh cracks, causing great pain. This is not said to scare you but to show the consequence of our actions. If we understand this, we will put effort to avoid the causes for a hell experience.

### *Hungry ghost realm*

I feel I have to contradict the understanding in our local community regarding hungry ghost and hell beings. To be born in the preta realm (hungry ghost realm) is not the same as being born in the hell realm. It is a totally different existence. In our life, we have seen some people before they die, as having very thin necks and their stomachs are bloated such that they cannot move. This is the image of a hungry ghost. If you take actual birth in the ghost realm, you will experience suffering of extreme thirst and hunger. Food cannot go through one's very thin neck; even if you try to drink 100 gallons of water, there remains the sensation of burning hunger and thirst. From afar, hungry ghosts see a beautiful lake of fresh water and they run towards it for relief but the moment they get there, it turns into blood and all that they scoop from this lake would be needles and thorns. The unbelievable suffering of the preta realm is caused by strong grasping and miserliness in previous lives.



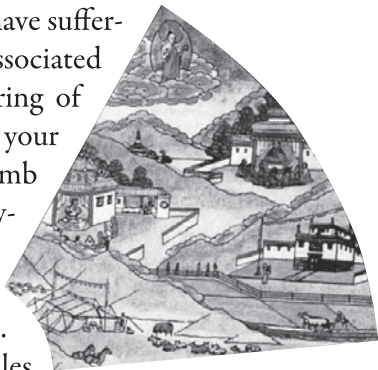
### *Animal realm*

The suffering of the animal realm is the suffering of ignorance and fear, where animals eat each other, with bigger animals eating smaller ones. Animals are subject to heat and cold, hunger and thirst and made to work hard. Just look in the Discovery Channel on animals. The causes for an animal rebirth is disrespect to the Dharma.



### *Human realm*

We think this a happy existence but we too have suffering. In the first place, there is the suffering associated with birth, with aging and then the suffering of death. The moment you are conceived, your suffering starts. Think of the smell of the womb and you live there for 9 months. During delivery, the baby feels totally squeezed between two Mount Merus and there is unbelievable pain because the baby's flesh is so fragile.



Every sensation to the baby is like needles wounding him. After being born, all three types of suffering, namely, the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change and pervasive suffering are experienced.

Nowadays, due to karma, everything has degenerated and the suffering more intense. For example, cancer seems more common than the flu. When I give consultations, many people talk about having cancer. Then there is the suffering of aging. When we see a single white hair appear, we experience unease and suffering. At the time of death, we suffer even more due to our going through the internal and external dissolutions of the elements in our body. Then when the dissolutions associated with one's consciousness arise e.g. of the 80 conceptions, we experience torture in our mental continuum at the speed of 200 km per hour.

A human rebirth is only described as the optimum human rebirth when one has the 8 freedoms and 10 endowments (which include being born human having full faculties and senses, to be born with access to Dharma. Please refer to the previous publication on "Karma" - GTZ2). The cause for such a optimum human rebirth is observing the 10 virtues. However, if a human rebirth is not meaningfully applied to committing virtue, then negative karma will accumulate and a rebirth in one of the lower realms is certain.





*God (deva) and demi-god (asura) realms*



Although these forms of existence have certain powers, these realm beings are not spared from suffering too. A month before dying, these beings can see themselves going to the lower realms, including the hell realms because of the exhaustion of previous positive karma. They then start to experience all forms of anguish and suffering over the impending lower-realm rebirth.

Now, all these sufferings would not happen without causes or reasons. What is the fundamental cause for suffering? This is what the 2nd Noble Truth – the Cause of Suffering discusses.

The fundamental cause of all suffering comes from delusions and karma. Ignorance is the principal delusion and when this delusion cooperates with the other delusions (anger, attachment, pride, doubt, wrong view), causes are created for these unfavorable rebirths and experiences in the six realms.

All negative thoughts are born from delusions. Think of our delusions as a factory. Ignorance is the boss, who gives instructions to the workers (our aggregates, including our body, speech and mind) to manufacture a product called karma/action. Ignorance is very powerful and skillful because for most of our lives, we are managed by this ignorant mind.



Everything in our life is guided by the ignorant mind, which causes us to mess up our efforts, our work, our relationships, our businesses. This concept of ‘I’ that we spend so much time on, is the greatest opportunity for the ignorant mind to control and manage us. The ignorant mind tricks us by telling us, “I am serving you [when I am being self-centred and committing harm onto others]. I am benefiting you.” Due to Dharma teachings, we may be more cautious but the ignorant mind is persuasive. We may have one moment of wisdom but then the ignorant mind comes in to convince us to commit actions which create all types of suffering to come. Ignorance and the other afflictions are the fundamental causes of suffering, by producing karma which give rise to suffering-results.

From here, we start to see why without understanding the 1st Noble Truth (suffering) and the 2nd Noble Truth (cause of suffering), we will continuously create causes for misery and remain in suffering cyclic existence (samsara).

The teachings on the 12 links of dependent origination explain how ignorance initiates action and sets into motion, the cycle of 12 links, resulting in birth, aging and death and more suffering. The teachings make you search for answers and finally we will ask ” How can I be free from this disaster, free from this problematic cycle?” Once we realize that there IS this freedom, we will ask, “What is the nature of freedom and what is the path to attain it?” This will then inspire us to commence our study on the 3rd and 4th Noble Truths of the Path and Cessation, respectively.

We have discussed the first two noble truths, the Truth of Suffering and the Truth of the Causes of Suffering. Now we will through the Truth of Cessation and Truth of the Path.



When one refers to the Truth of Cessation, one is referring to Liberation or Nirvana. What is liberation/nirvana? It is a state where one is free from all delusions and samsaric suffering. In Buddha's scriptures it is stated that (i) the nature of our mind is clear, luminous and has the ability to know. The afflictions/delusions in our minds and the confusion that arises from them are just temporary and (ii) We have to first understand emptiness in order to understand nirvana. So these 2 statements are very important.

Nirvana or Liberation (a state free from delusions and suffering) is possible because the nature of our mind is fundamentally clear and luminous. Obscurations are temporary and not the actual nature of the mind. They are just temporarily dominating or blocking our mind and is in the nature of impermanence. Since it is impermanent, it is changeable and since it is changeable, it can be changed through the creation of causes and surrounding conditions. Hence, our being able to regain the purity and clarity of mind is dependent on causes and conditions and as long as one applies purification practices (which operate as causes and conditions), one can eliminate negativities and remove delusions. This way, we are then able to actualize the true nature of our mind - that which is clear, luminous and knowing.

The 3rd Noble Truth of Cessation comes through the study and application of the practices known as the 5 Paths and 10 Grounds. There are stages of cessation/liberation.