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What are the “Four Noble Truths” about?

Arjuna C. B. Ranatunga

The Four Noble Truths form the crux of the Buddha's teachings. They are the focus of his first (formal) sermon, given shortly after his enlightenment, and they recur as a subject throughout his discourses, as recorded in the texts of Buddhism. When they were first taught, a light was said to appear in the world. “The Wheel of the *Dhamma*” was set in motion; a movement was begun.

Essentially, they encompass the subject of suffering (or the unsatisfactoriness of life) and the release from it. Expanded upon, however, they form the basis of what came to be popularly known as the Buddha's 84,000 teachings. One important text reveals that to see one of the four truths is to see them all. So they all actually interpenetrate and coalesce. In this sense, looking at them is like looking at different facets of a cut diamond. We can look at them from different sides, but they are ultimately the same gem.

The four sides or truths are usually presented as: suffering; the cause of suffering; the end of suffering; and the path leading to the end of suffering.

The first truth

The first truth is the truth—or reality—of *dukkha* (Pali; Sanskrit: *duḥkha*). The term is difficult to translate, as it has a wide breadth of meaning. It includes “suffering,” as well as the pain, anguish, and

deep unsatisfactoriness of life. It includes things like relationship breakups, putting up with things we don't like, growing old or sick, or not getting what we want. The Buddha summarized it by saying that *dukkha* is life with grasping, clinging, attachment. We suffer because we graspingly identify ourselves with things that are impermanent and subject to change, unaware of their being inherently inconstant. Rebirth comes into this, too, since it is seen as part of *dukkha*: to be born is to undergo all of the aforementioned forms of suffering.

The second truth

The second truth stresses that the cause of suffering is, at root, ignorance and "craving." We crave for things to be other than they are, like seeing "the grass to be greener on the other side," while unaware that it is not. It is a kind of discontent, a thirst, an itch. It can cause us, if unchecked, to have an endless flow of desires, attachments, and aversions, which can extend even into future lives. The resulting process of repeated birth and death is called *samsāra* in Buddhism. It is further fueled by the three defiling "poisons" of greed, hatred, and delusion (from which stem countless other defilements).

The third truth

The third truth concerns the end of suffering. It proclaims that, when ignorance and craving are eradicated, mental suffering or *dukkha* can no longer exist. This latter principle of cause and effect lies at the very heart of Buddhism. The resulting state of being released from *dukkha* is known as nirvana (Pali: *nibbāna*). It is the ultimate happiness in Buddhist thought, the liberation of the mind, and liberation from rebirth. It is a form of purity and right release, the extinction of craving, ignorance, and all defilements. It is supramundane in nature.

The fourth truth

The fourth truth is the path. It is known as the Noble Eightfold Path, because its development ennobles a person. It encourages a progressive and simultaneous development, in ethical conduct, and meditative calm and insight. It is a “middle path” which avoids the extremes of attachment to sensual indulgence on the one hand, and to self-mortification on the other—neither being too hard on ourselves nor too soft. The Buddha once said that the Noble Path is developed through friendship, companionship, and comradery with admirable people, and that this process of socialization was the whole of the holy life because it enabled people to follow the path.

The eight elements within the Path are: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditative concentration. These factors need to be worked on individually as well as together, to convert each factor from its wrong form to its right one.

Right understanding or view consists of recognizing that one's actions have karmic consequences, the existence of a hereafter, our duties to our parents, and the existence of knowledgeable teachers and contemplatives. At a higher level, it is insight into the noble truths. Right thought or resolve involves directing one's thoughts toward non-clinging, kindness, and compassion. Right speech involves not lying, not speaking harshly, not speaking divisively, nor gossiping frivolously. Right action involves not killing living creatures, not taking what's not given (stealing), and not misconducting oneself sexually. Right livelihood involves earning one's living in an honest and upright way, not being overly greedy, nor harming others (human or animal) in one's pursuit of making ends meet. Right effort involves mental cultivation, replacing negative and unwholesome states of mind with positive and wholesome ones during the day and in meditation. Right mindfulness is anchored ethically, and involves developing mindfulness or awareness of: the body's nature, postures and movements, and breathing; feeling tones; mind states; and significant realities such as components of body and mind, mental hindrances, awakening factors, and the

Four Noble Truths. Right concentration is singleness or unification of mind, in the *jhānas*: deep states of meditative absorption and calm.

There are thus aspects of both wisdom and conduct within these Four Noble Truths. They combine an accurate diagnosis of our fallible human condition, with a principle providing release from this condition (the principle of ethical and psychological cause and effect), as well as prescribing a path toward this release. Together they lead to the fulfillment of one's obligations, as a Buddhist, and to the embodiment of the Enlightened Life.

About the author

Arjuna Ranatunga studied Medicine at Cambridge University and studied Buddhism at Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka, as well as at Sunderland University in the UK. He is the administrator of several online Buddhist groups.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 15 (can we know what the historical Buddha taught?), 19 (what is reborn), 23 (nirvana), 24 (enlightenment), and 55 (vows/precepts).

Elsewhere

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What is the role of lay Buddhists?

Alice Collett

Traditionally in Buddhism, the laity, those who are not ordained as monks or nuns, have two roles or duties. Firstly, they should follow the five ethical precepts, sometimes known as lay precepts. These are described in the answer on ethical vows/precepts and focus on not harming others and oneself. The second main duty of the laity is to offer support to monastics. This is known as *dāna*, which means “giving.” In some modern Theravada countries, a third duty for laity is added, which is to practice meditation. When a man or woman decides to become a monk or nun, they traditionally give up all family ties and social responsibilities, and any paid employment. As they do not work, they need to find material and financial support by other means. The laity’s traditional role is to offer this: to provide food, medicine, robes—all the things a monastic might need to sustain themselves and live simply. Where monks and nuns carry out a daily alms-round, the idea is that the lay householder—often the wife, who manages the household—would put in the monastic’s bowl any leftover food she had. Traditionally, she should not go out of her way to prepare fresh food for the monastics, as part of monastic renunciation is that they live off what would otherwise be discarded. Also, monastics should eat whatever is put in their bowl, and not have desire for anything other than what they are offered.

When Buddhism became established in China, this type of “begging” was not considered appropriate, and many monasteries in East Asia were built in remote locations that made a daily alms-round impractical. Different practices evolved, a new standard being that a kitchen was built as part of a monastery complex and the laity came to the kitchen to cook for the monastics, then served them at a formalized mealtime each day. This way of offering *dāna* has now become standard in many modern Buddhist countries around the world. The Japanese, however, did take up the alms-round again, which is called *takuhatsu* in Japan. So, while the idea of the laity providing material support for the monastic community remained a central facet of lay life, the exact parameters of how this was enacted changed as Buddhism was adopted in various countries, for both practical and social reasons.

Providing material support to monastics and adhering to the lay precepts comprise the traditional role of the laity in Buddhism, but there have always been exceptions to this. This is one side



Lay Buddhist pilgrims preparing Auspicious Flags for Tibetan New Year at the sacred sight of Rewalsar, Himachal Pradesh, India

Cathy Cantwell. 1982

of the reciprocal relationship; the laity provide material support for monastics and monastics offer religious services in return, including teaching. But what happens if a lay person becomes, for example, more able at meditation than the monks and nuns, or progresses more quickly on the path than the monastics around them, going against the traditional model? In such cases, this dynamic is partly reversed, as the lay person is in a position to offer instruction. And it is not prohibited for this to happen, nor is it considered outside of the possible roles a lay person may have. There are several instances of this in early Indian Buddhist texts. For example, in one narrative, the lay woman *Viśākhā* proves herself to be more able than the monks at meditation and so offers them instruction. The best-known example of a layman being in a more advanced state than the monastics around him is in a Mahayana text called the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* ("The Teachings of Vimalakīrti"). In this text, which is intended as a criticism of formalized, institutional monasticism, the layman Vimalakīrti proves himself time and again to be more able than the monks. This happens so frequently that the monks are reluctant to go and visit him, as they know they will be admonished in some way or another, and any incompetencies made manifest. And this is what happens. Monk after monk reticently goes to visit Vimalakīrti and begins a conversation with him. Each episode culminates with the layman Vimalakīrti chiding the monk. At one point, a large crowd arrives at Vimalakīrti's house, and one monk wonders where they will all sit. Vimalakīrti says to him, "Did you come here for the sake of a chair? Or for the sake of the Dharma?"

Throughout the history of Buddhism, although the monastic-lay dichotomy remains at the heart of the tradition, variations and adaptations to it have arisen. The Tzu Chi movement in modern Taiwan, founded and led by the nun Cheng Yen, is largely a lay movement within which members are engaged in employment—for example, making handicrafts to sell—and the movement is funded in this way. In the Triratna Buddhist Community, founded in the United Kingdom but now an international movement, those who are ordained do not renounce in the traditional way, so can

still marry and do need to work to earn a living. In this case, the monastic–lay split is less in evidence. While there is disagreement within and between Buddhist traditions about what may or may not constitute genuine ordination, the variety of roles for laity are not usually problematic, especially as they generally continue to center around the prescribed roles of supporting the monastic community and ethical practice.

About the author

Alice Collett is Director of The South Asia History Project, University of Wolverhampton, UK. Her research focuses on the religious history of ancient India, especially the history of women.

Further reading

In this book

See Chapters 3 (ritual), 14 (devotion to the Buddha), 26 (why Buddhists meditate), 30 (monasticism), 32 (monastic rules), 35 (gender equality), 36 (preaching), and 58 (marriage and family life).

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Banks Findly, Ellison. *Dāna: Giving and Getting in Pali Buddhism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2003.

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What vows do Buddhists take?

Nick Swann

Buddhists tend to talk in terms of “precepts” (guiding rules) or “trainings” rather than “vows” (solemn promises), as this gives a sense of making an effort to change behavior rather than entering into a pact to behave a certain way. Say, for example, you decide that you want to run a marathon. The very thought of it might be quite exciting in itself, as you daydream about crossing the finish line and the feeling of achievement. However, you are unlikely to finish unless you train. You will need to develop the discipline to run a few times each week, in ever-increasing distances, regardless of the weather or how tired you feel after a busy day. You may need to moderate your diet and eat healthier food. Similarly, if a Buddhist wishes to get closer to nirvana, then they might have to make certain adjustments to their lifestyle to help them unpick attachments to *samsāra* (the cycle of repeated births and deaths). Of course, if a trainee marathon runner skips a training session and spends an evening on the sofa eating ice cream instead, then that does not mean that they will never reach the finish line on race day, but it might make for harder work further down the line. Similarly, if a Buddhist slips up, it does not mean that they will never reach nirvana, but it will probably delay progress to a greater or lesser extent. Furthermore, as you make progress you start to feel benefits and the training itself becomes enjoyable and fulfilling.

It is not necessary to take any precepts in order to be a Buddhist ("taking refuge" in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is enough for this) but many Buddhists do, voluntarily. The number of precepts and the attitude toward them varies across different Buddhist cultures and also depends on whether one is a lay Buddhist or a monk or nun. The focus of this "answer" is on lay precepts.

The five basic precepts for lay people are:

- avoid killing (onslaught on living beings);
- avoid taking what is not given;
- avoid sexual misconduct;
- avoid wrong speech;
- avoid intoxication.

The term "avoid" can bring to mind the term "thou shalt not," but the precepts are not commandments; and, as well as avoiding these negative activities, Buddhists are encouraged to cultivate their opposites. So, while avoiding killing, one also cultivates loving-kindness and compassion toward living beings; while avoiding taking what is not given, one cultivates generosity and non-attachment to material things. While three of these precepts are pretty self-explanatory, sexual misconduct and intoxication need a little clarification. The definitive act of sexual misconduct is cheating on your partner. Sex itself is not considered intrinsically "wrong"; but the pain that infidelity causes the wronged party is. All Buddhist cultures agree on this, but beyond infidelity what constitutes sexual misconduct varies. Avoiding intoxication is different from the other precepts and is not considered such a serious downfall if breached. The purpose is to keep the mind clear, but there is also a sense that if one is intoxicated there is a risk of breaching other precepts, too. Typically, this relates to alcohol consumption but it can extend to psychotropic drugs.

Some devout lay people opt to take extra precepts on special days such as when there is a full or new moon (the days when monks and nuns gather to recite their *vinaya* rules).

These extra precepts are:

- avoid singing and dancing (i.e., trivial entertainment) and adornments such as perfumes and garlands (including jewelry and makeup);
- avoid sleeping on high or luxurious beds, or sitting at the head of a table without invitation;
- avoid eating at an inappropriate time (usually this means fasting after the midday meal).

The extra precepts last until dawn the following day. If you add

- avoid handling money

to the above eight precepts, and split singing/dancing and adornments into two separate precepts, then effectively you have the ten rules of a novice monk or nun. Note that *any* intentional sexual act constitutes “sexual misconduct” if one has become a monk or nun.

As well as the above precepts, Mahayana Buddhists—lay and monastic—take the bodhisattva vow. This is a vow proper and the only one that is considered to last from one birth to the next: a solemn promise to delay entering final nirvana (Sanskrit: *parinirvāṇa*) while there are still beings suffering in the round of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*).

In addition to the bodhisattva vow, Vajrayana practitioners—again, lay and monastic—take tantric vows referred to as *samayās* (Sanskrit; “binding promise”). There are a bewildering number of these—up to 10,100,000. However, there are fourteen main (root) *samayās*, the four most important of which are:

- to maintain respect and trust in one’s guru;
- not to contradict the Buddha’s teachings;
- to respect one’s fellow tantric practitioners (one’s “*vajra* brothers and sisters”);
- not abandoning love and compassion.

The eleventh-century Bengali monk Atiṣa reportedly said that he never broke the precepts but at least once a day he thought or

did something that broke his bodhisattva vow, after which he was quick to repair it. However, while he no doubt had little trouble keeping the root *samayas*, he described trying to keep all of the many tantric vows as like trying to keep a plate free of sand during a sandstorm. Nevertheless, Atiṣa saw the benefits of tantric practice as being worth the challenge, and it is possible to repair breaches of the lesser vows by meditating on the deity Vajrasattva and reciting his hundred-syllable mantra at least twenty-one times daily. Beyond that, it is hard to make generalizations regarding tantric vows because with many of the outer Tantras a practitioner can choose how much commitment to make to the practice at the time of the initiation. Inner Tantras, on the other hand, will typically involve daily commitments in terms of prayers, visualizations, and mantra practice.

About the author

Nick Swann is a Senior Lecturer in Buddhist Studies at University of South Wales, UK. His research interests include Buddhist Ethics, Buddhist Tantra, and Anthropology and Religion.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See Chapters 32 (monastic rules), 34 (lay Buddhists), 39 (contemporary divisions), 44 (bodhisattva vow), 47 (Tantra and sex), 58 (marriage and family life), 62 (compassion), and 64 (attitudes to sex).

Elsewhere

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Are Buddhists active in ecological movements and protecting the environment to mitigate climate change?

Alex Owens

In 2018 the UN released a statement saying that the tipping point for extreme weather and human displacement was 2030 unless we make some radical global changes. Like every major world religion today, Buddhists have taken a stance on the climate emergency we now face and have developed various movements and initiatives to combat it. Therefore, in short, yes, Buddhists are active in ecological movements. However, the ways in which various well-known Buddhists have reacted to this emergency differ.

Throughout the different textual traditions of Buddhism, a significant amount of attention is paid to how we should engage with the world. For instance, the *Mettā Sutta* of the Pali Canon, which focuses on loving kindness, states:

Whatever living beings there may be—feeble or strong (or the seekers and the attained) long, stout, or of medium size, short, small, large, those seen or those unseen, those dwelling far or near, those who are born as well as those yet to be born—may all beings have happy minds.

This passage suggests that we should have loving-kindness for all beings, no matter what they are. Loving-kindness is understood by the Theravada school as an opening-up of benevolence or compassion toward others. We can suggest from this that Buddhists must engage in protecting the environment today as our actions, as humans, are negatively impacting the habitats of every single species on the planet, including ourselves.

Similarly, the popular text the *Dhammapada* states: "Even as a bee gathers honey from a flower and departs without injuring the flower or its color or scent, so let a sage dwell in his village" (verse 49). We can see how easy it is for Buddhists today to interpret these texts in a way that supports mitigating climate change. The way in which we, as a species, have treated the planet lies in direct contrast to the image above. Metaphorically speaking, we have gathered the honey, uprooted the flower, and polluted the soil, leaving nothing for those who come after us. Therefore, it has become essential for Buddhists today to engage in ecological movements in order to try and counteract the environmental situation in which we now find ourselves.

From talks presented at "Mind and Life" conferences, writing forewords to books on Buddhism and the environment, and staging interviews with large media corporations, Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, has embodied compassion and right action toward the environment. The Dalai Lama's global popularity and his call to action has reached millions of people worldwide. He presents the climate emergency not just as a Buddhist problem but a global one. Through the fame he has acquired, the Dalai Lama has spread the message of environmental action through the language of Buddhism, particularly in terms of interdependence. Interdependence is the notion held by many Buddhists about the interconnected state of the universe and has been adopted as a central idea by many eco-Buddhists today.

An equally important promoter of Buddhism's engagement with ecological movements is the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Thich Nhat Hanh is perhaps most well known for repackaging "mindfulness," particularly for an American and European

audience. However, he is also a significant figure in promoting Buddhists' engagement with protecting the environment. For instance, one of the fourteen precepts of his Order of Interbeing is: "Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion." In a similar way to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh links his respect for the environment to an understanding of interdependence. He suggests that Buddhists must aim to protect the environment as, ultimately, we are connected to it on many levels and, similarly, it to us.

Thich Nhat Hanh developed his own understanding of interdependence with reference to the environment through the notion of interbeing. Interbeing can be explained in terms of a piece of paper. The piece of paper that you are reading only exists because of a large interconnected web of events and other entities that helped form it. This paper came from a tree. That tree was reliant on the soil in which it grew, the seed from which it originated, and the rain to provide it with the water it needed to grow. For this page to exist everything needed to be exactly the way it was. This leads Thich Nhat Hanh to explain that every piece of paper contains a cloud within it. This is interbeing. It is because of this innate connection with everything that Thich Nhat Hanh developed engaged Buddhism and promoted active involvement in mitigating the environmental crisis we find ourselves in.

Another way in which Buddhists are protecting the environment today has been developed by Joanna Macy and David Loy. Macy is a well-known environmental activist and writer, and Loy is both a Zen teacher and a founding member of the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center. In his recent book *Ecodharma*, Loy, alongside Macy, has developed what they call the "vows of the ecosattva." The ecosattva builds on the notion of the bodhisattva of the Mahayana tradition but does so specifically with environmentalism in mind. Loy explains that we can all achieve a state of heightened awareness by seeing the knock-on effects of every action we, on a personal level, and as a species, have on the

environment around us. The development of the ecosattva vows by Macy and Loy demonstrate that not only are Buddhists active in ecological movements but that they are also constantly innovating ways of engaging with environmental practices to fit with current discourses, outside of the tradition.

The climate crisis is something that affects each and every one of us today. Although environmental concern was present in early Buddhist texts, this concern meant something different when the texts were compiled. It was more localized in scale and far removed from today's global crisis. So, modern Buddhist ecological activists have had to innovate, engaging with debates outside of their tradition in order to create new Buddhist models. To answer the question, then: yes, Buddhists are active in ecological movements, and, through figures such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, the tradition as a whole is increasingly seen as "green."

About the author

Alex Owens is a PhD student based at Lancaster University, UK. His work is on Buddhism's engagement with the West, religion, and the environment, and his recent thesis focused on the genealogy of the Indra's Net metaphor.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See Chapters 13 (bodhisattva), 27 (mindfulness), 43 (Dalai Lama), 44 (bodhisattva vow), 55 (vows/precepts), 60 (engaged Buddhism), and 62 (compassion).

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