

The End of Suffering (5 of 5) Fourth Noble Truth

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Today I'm going to conclude the five-part series on the Four Noble Truths to the End of Suffering.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the noble truth of the practice, the way, the method that leads to the end of suffering. The practices that lead to it are described as the Eightfold Path. These are amazing practices that are not exactly only practices. They are states of being, qualities of character almost, that can build up inside us so that at some point they are not practices, but rather who we are. They're so integrated into the fabric of our being, our character, our personality, that they are no longer practices. But at first they are practices.

I make this point because the process is not importing a practice from outside. It might feel like that way at first. But it's really learning to awaken something inside that can flow through us, that can be our own. Of course we're this way.

The Eightfold Path begins with: I'll be present for suffering. Of course I'll attend to it, because to not do that will make it worse. If, on occasion, attending to suffering does make it worse, then maybe that's not the right call for now. Something else is needed – some other preparation work. But at some point in this Four Noble Truth process, there's a “yes” to being present for suffering. This is right view.

We are present for it so that we can start seeing its cause in attachment and craving. We are present so that we can notice the moments and then the longer periods where the suffering is no longer there. We appreciate that suffering is not constant. The more attentive we are in the present moment, the more we can see that suffering waxes and wanes. When it decreases, that's something important to see. And if it decreases enough – sometimes by accident, sometimes because we're distracted – it shows us that we're not necessarily stuck in what we call suffering. So we are willing to say “yes” to attention. This is called right view. Attention to suffering.

As we become more sensitive to ourselves, we experience right attitude or right resolve. This quality means to avoid being cruel or unkind, and to avoid being attached and caught up in all kinds of addictive, sensual behaviors and actions. There's a sense that there is something deep within us that does not want to harm ourselves or others through acts of cruelty. So care and compassion become prominent. We don't want to be unkind. We want to be friendly. We don't want to be caught up in addictive behaviors; rather, we want to be free of them.

As we practice, it follows that we want to be careful with right speech. Our speech should be kind. Our speech should at least avoid lying. Our speech should not be harsh or include slander. Not because it's a “should” that we have to take on, but because it grows out of this practice of sensitivity to suffering, to stress, and to the “ouches.”

Of course we don't want to create more stress for ourselves. We don't want to create something that's going to harm us. With the heightened sensitivity we have, we feel that harsh, lying, or slanderous language harms something within ourselves. It diminishes and limits us.

The Eightfold Path also includes right action, which directs us to avoid killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. These actions also limit us, harm us, and cause difficulties. If we want to continue heightened sensitivity of mindfulness with attention to suffering and the end of suffering, we want to live in a way that doesn't go against the grain. We want to live in a way that doesn't decrease our sensitivity, but actually increases it to be more attentive and careful.

We take a similar approach with the way we live our life, specifically with right livelihood and lifestyles. We are careful with them to avoid causing harm.

We also exercise right effort, which is to be very careful of our inner states of mind and states of being. We can feel the difference between unwholesome ways of being and wholesome ways. Healthy states of mind and unhealthy states. We can keep growing because we know that unhealthy states of mind decrease our sensitivity to the path and to the freedom of the end of suffering, while wholesome states of mind increase our sensitivity.

We also develop right mindfulness and right concentration. These activities support our movement to greater presence and sensitivity to our experience here and now.

The Fourth Noble Truth consists of doing those practices that cultivate the conditions for a greater attentiveness and sensitivity. In this way wisdom can arise within us. Deeper understanding can grow. We become sensitive to and inspired by a “yes” to suffering, being present for it. We see the cause of it, and also the cessation of it. We are led to letting go more deeply. We want to let go of all the things that are involved with some kind of self-harm. We let go of ways in which we contribute to our suffering, our anguish, our distress, and our anxiety – the whole gamut that's under the umbrella term *dukkha* (suffering) – and the emotional pain that we contribute to it.

And so, knowing that there are these eight practices that point us back to ourselves, not taking us away, we ought to be very careful how we practice them. We are not holding on to them like a life ring, keeping us afloat. Or as something to do that takes us away from ourselves. The practices of the Eightfold Path really help us be here in awareness and attention. They give us heightened sensitivity to this life of ours. These eight practices create the conditions for our greater capacity to understand, have clarity, and be present. They help us develop strength behind our mindfulness, our presence, our dedication to the path to end suffering.

It's not just for ourselves that we walk this path. We can also do it for others. As we develop along Buddhist practice, at some point it doesn't make a lot of sense to keep doing it if we only do it for ourselves. At this point, the inspiration comes to keep doing this practice for the benefit of others. So you can be a conduit to benefit. You can be an inspiration. You can be someone who doesn't cause harm. Someone who lives for the welfare and happiness of others.

The steps of the Eightfold Path do not cause awakening, but they lead to liberation. They are a gradual path that leads to heightened care and sensitivity, a heightened wholesomeness, and a heightened letting go, that supports us to eventually see and experience the end of suffering in a very dramatic and full way.

At that point, the Eightfold Path takes on a very different flavor, a very different nature. Because at some point, it's really clear that the Eightfold Path is not a set of practices anymore. They are ways of living that emerge almost naturally, almost part of who we are – that we live this way rather than we have to do them. And that's an amazing tipping point that brings a tremendous amount of happiness.

The next four days I'll start a new four-part series called “For Happiness”. I'm calling it “The Four Truths of Happiness” or “The Four Noble Truths of Happiness” because it directly ties into the fruition of the Four Noble Truths.

Thank you very much for being here today. May it be that you take some of this “Yes” – this faith, inspiration, enthusiasm, or confidence you have in mindfulness – and see if you can bring it into your life so that you naturally find yourself more sensitive and more aligned with the Eightfold Path.

