

The Four Noble Truths in their Three Aspects

by Ajahn Sumedho

There are three aspects to each of the four noble truths, as we learn in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the *Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion Sutra*, the first sutra spoken by the Buddha after his awakening. Recognizing these, then developing a deep understanding of them and finally penetrating them fully is an essential practice for many Buddhists, especially in the Theravada tradition.

THE FIRST ASPECT

For the First Noble Truth, 'There is suffering' is the first insight. What is that insight? We don't need to make it into anything grand; it is just the recognition: 'There is suffering'. That is a basic insight. The ignorant person says, 'I'm suffering. I don't want to suffer. I meditate and I go on retreats to get out of suffering, but I'm still suffering and I don't want to suffer.... How can I get out of suffering? What can I do to get rid of it?' But that is not the First Noble Truth; it is not: 'I am suffering and I want to end it.' The insight is, 'There is suffering'.

Now you are looking at the pain or the anguish you feel - not from the perspective of 'It's mine' but as a reflection:

'There is this suffering, this dukkha'. It is coming from the reflective position of 'Buddha seeing the Dhamma.' The insight is simply the acknowledgment that there is this suffering without making it personal. That acknowledgment is an important insight; just looking at mental anguish or physical pain and seeing it as dukkha rather than as personal misery—just seeing it as dukkha and not reacting to it in a habitual way.

THE SECOND ASPECT

The second insight of the First Noble Truth is 'Suffering should be understood.' The second insight or aspect of each of the Noble Truths has the word 'should' in it: 'It should be understood.' The second insight then, is that dukkha is something to understand. One should understand dukkha, not just try to get rid of it.

We can look at the word 'understanding' as 'standing under'. It is a common enough word but, in Pali, 'understanding' means to really accept the suffering, stand under or embrace it rather than just react to it.

With any form of suffering—physical or mental—we usually just react, but with understanding we can really look at suffering; really accept it, really hold it and embrace it. So that is the second aspect, 'We should understand suffering'.

*There is the statement, then the prescription,
and then the result of having practised.*

THE THIRD ASPECT

The third aspect of the First Noble Truth is: 'Suffering has been understood.' When you have actually practised with suffering—looking at it, accepting it, knowing it and letting it be the way it is—then there is the third aspect,: 'Suffering has been understood', or 'Dukkha has been understood.' So these are the three aspects of the First Noble Truth: 'There is dukkha'; 'It is to be understood'; and, 'It has been understood.'

This is the pattern for the three aspects of each noble truth. There is the statement, then the prescription and then the result of having practised. One can also see it in terms of the Pali words *pariyatti*, *patipatti* and *pativedha*. *Pariyatti* is the theory or the statement, 'There is suffering.' *Patipatti* is the practice - actually practising with it; and *pativedha* is the result of the practice. This is what we call a reflective pattern; you are actually developing your mind in a very reflective way.

A Buddha mind is a reflective mind that knows things as they are.



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