

The Four Truths: The Essence of Buddha's Teachings – The Second Noble Truth

With the second truth, we reflect on the origin or causes of suffering. In terms of the image that compares the four truths to the Buddha as the doctor and ourselves as the patient, we are moving from discovering the patient's condition to giving a diagnosis of their condition. The origin of suffering was described by the Buddha in his first teaching:

What is the origin of suffering? It is the craving that perpetuates existence, which is attended upon by the passion for enjoyment, and which finds pleasures here and there. That is the origin of suffering.¹

Craving is presented here as the most obvious cause of suffering but it is not the only one. The origin of suffering can also be said to consist of karma and destructive emotions, which will be discussed in the teaching given by Ringu Tulku Rinpoche.

The primary cause of suffering that the Buddha identifies is a fundamental ignorance of the true nature of reality, which leads us to grasp at a mistaken idea of self or identity. The first teaching is from Sogyal Rinpoche. It presents many key points about the truth of the origin of suffering according to the Basic Yana as well as the Dzogchen teachings.

PLAY VIDEO: The truth of the origin of suffering

(18 min)

Sogyal Rinpoche, Haileybury, 10 April 2013

Questions for study

- Describe the example Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche uses to show that the cause of suffering needs to be addressed if we are ever going to put an end to suffering.
- What problem is caused by grasping at self-existence?
- What do you understand from the phrase “‘I’ is merely a designation”?
- What are the three poisons? Why are they considered to be afflictions?

Further reading: Read the sections from chapter eight of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* called ‘The Wisdom that Realizes Egolessness’, ‘Ego on the Spiritual Path’, and ‘The Wise Guide’ (pages 120-125 of the English edition).

¹ *Lalitavistara Sutra*, chapter 26, verse 62.

Karma and afflictive emotions as causes of samsara

We have seen from the previous teaching that afflictive emotions arise from the strong sense of 'I' to which we cling. Before we watch the next teaching, try this contemplation to see whether you can discern what relationship your own negative emotions may have to your own sense of 'I' and 'other'.

—First go back in your mind to an incident that aroused a strong negative emotion, something like jealousy, anger or craving.

—Now try and re-experience it as fully as possible. Remember the 'storyline' of how you and others were and how things played out. How did you justify your emotion to yourself?

—Now go back over this again, but this time remove the strong sense of 'I'. What happens when you do that?

—What do you notice about the strength of the emotion being felt when you remove 'I'? What conclusions do you reach from this contemplation?

In the next teaching, Ringu Tulku Rinpoche traces how an initial sense of duality in our minds causes us to perceive the world in terms of a separation between self and others. This gives rise to the whole process of cause and effect beginning with attachment and aversion, which results in karma, eventually leading to us experiencing the fruits of our actions.

A word about Karma: The Sanskrit word *karma* literally means 'action', but it also refers to the process of cause and effect whereby positive actions result in happiness and negative, harmful actions lead to suffering. The results of karma depend primarily on the mind.

Therefore, actions arising from our intentions which are governed by afflicted or negative emotions will lead to suffering, while karma arising from actions governed by wholesome or virtuous tendencies in the mind will result in happiness.

(You could also read the sections from chapter six of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* called 'Karma', and 'The Good Heart' (pages 96-99 of the English edition).

PLAY VIDEO: The truth of the origin of suffering: karma and mental affliction (9 min)

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, Dzogchen Beara, 1 June 2002

Answer the following questions:

—Having watched the teaching, describe the causal process beginning with an initial experience of duality between self and other, ending with the eventual creation of karma.

— Ringu Tulku describes karma as ‘a habit’. What do you understand from this? How does this habit get stronger over time?

Contemplate this quote from Padmasambhava:

“If you want to know your past life, look into your present condition; if you want to know your future life, look at your present actions.”

—Choose a particular attitude or emotional reaction that arises in you sometimes. See if you can trace how this tendency might be the product of past actions and experiences.

A self-centred attitude leads to greater suffering

Previously, we heard Khandro Rinpoche pointing out that an awareness of the suffering of others opens the compassion in us and reduces our own experience of suffering. We will now look at the next and final part of this same teaching. It looks at a subject that naturally follows on from the previous point: the ignorance that arises as a result of becoming absorbed or obsessed with ourselves, increases our focus on our own suffering and magnifies our pain.

PLAY VIDEO: Self-absorption causes suffering

(9 min)

Khandro Rinpoche, Mindroling Monastery, 19 April 2020

—Describe the contemporary social conventions and attitudes that encourage the ignorance of self-absorption.

—What factors define the difference between self-absorption or self-obsession and self-nourishment? How could you apply this differentiation to yourself?

—What are the pitfalls connected with protecting the self all the time?

—What qualities mentioned at the end of the teaching can help us foster a spirit of renunciation and overcome self-absorption and the suffering it brings with it?

How to do something about the suffering we experience

His Holiness the Dalai Lama writes:

The reason why Buddha laid so much emphasis on developing insight into the nature of suffering is because there is an alternative—there is a way out, it is actually possible

to free oneself from it. The stronger and deeper your insight into suffering is, the stronger your aspiration to gain freedom from it becomes.²

In the next teaching Patrick Gaffney suggests some ways to contemplate suffering as a way of helping us deepen our understanding of suffering and strengthen our determination to become free of it.

PLAY VIDEO: Some points on contemplating suffering

(4 min)

Patrick Gaffney, Haileybury, 9 April 2013

Contemplate the following two statements, beginning and ending the contemplation with meditation:

—“It's really important to remember the third noble truth, that cessation is possible. It is not only possible, but it is where we are going.”

—We taste the possibility of freedom and a passion to be free when we begin to see through the illusory world we have built for ourselves. Through our practice, we begin to be aware of the cloud-like level of thoughts and emotions which can dissolve, and the more we find ourselves in a natural kind of space.

Reflect on these two questions on your own or discuss them with others:

—How confident do you feel when you reflect on the third noble truth? Are you able to feel that cessation is indeed possible? Why or why not?

—Can you recall instances perhaps when you have been practicing, when there has been a taste of the possibility of an end to suffering?

² From *The Four Noble Truths*, (London: Thorsons, 1997), page 39.