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# The four noble truths

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The original teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni formulated in the Benares Sermon. They are generally summarized as such:

1. Life is suffering (*dukkha* in Pali)
2. The cause of suffering is ignorance which leads to greed and hatred.
3. Stopping suffering is possible: peace or nirvana is realized when ignorance, greed and hatred stop directing us.
4. There is way to reach this which includes eight aspects: right understanding, right thought, right words, right actions, right lifestyle, right effort, right attention, right meditation.

We often say: the Dharma is zazen. Zazen is just sitting, which seems relatively simple, but this zazen is obviously not a type of exercise, nor a relaxation technique, it is the manifestation of awakening, and at the same time, the way to realize it.

This awakening of Buddha was expressed by Buddha himself, initially as the Four Noble Truths. It was the first time that he spoke, during his first sermon in Sarnath, near Benares, approximately two months after his awakening. At first he hesitated to transmit it, thinking that what he had realized in zazen was so completely different from the common mind, that no one would understand it. Then after hesitating for a while, he decided to transmit it, and to teach it to his five ascetic companions.

Before concentrating and awakening in zazen, Buddha had tried mortification practices, then realized that they didn't lead to anything. At that time in India, everyone was convinced that liberation and awakening were only possible through self-inflicted mortification. This was the general opinion for religious persons. Either prayers, ceremonies on one hand, or mortification on the other. They were the two main paths. He abandoned that, in order to practice zazen. At first when his companions saw him coming, they didn't respect him because they thought that he had literally given up the quest for the Way. That's why at the beginning he had to explain to them how he had attained awakening. He first affirmed that he had attained awakening, then, before speaking about the contents of the awakening, the meaning of awakening, he spoke about the Middle Path, in other words, the practice.

So he criticized the ordinary path, for those who think that happiness consists in pursuing objects of desire, which is the path of our modern materialistic civilization, by saying that it never led to solid happiness, and then he said that mortification didn't either. He expressed the Middle Path which is called the Eightfold Path, meaning the practice of the precepts, ethics, meditation and wisdom, in three chapters. In Zen it's called *kai jo e*.

What is interesting in this approach is that Buddha felt the need to show the way, how he reached his awakening, not what he saw through his awakening but how he got there. What is

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interesting for us when we teach Zen is to first show the path, the practice, and then let people discover little by little the horizon extending before us through the practice. We will speak about the Eightfold Path at the end, and we will go back to the Four Noble Truths as he explained them .

The first truth, traditionally, is suffering, which is called *dukkha*, described by Buddha in the Benares sutra as : birth, illness, old age and death, which are *dukkha*. Hence, being separated from that/those which we love, is *dukkha*, having to tolerate that/those we don't love is *dukkha*, and also the five aggregates are *dukkha*, and therefore suffering. People who don't feel Buddhist and wish Zen would not be a part of Buddhism have some reticence about the idea that life and even birth, are suffering. This seems to be a pessimistic philosophy to them, even a sort of negation of life. Life means suffering so therefore one must try to put an end to living. In fact *dukkha* has a much broader sense, a deeper one. It is important to understand that it is not only the acceptation that everyone recognizes, like illness, old age and death, (everyone agrees with that), and also that having to bear things we don't like, or losing that which is dear to us, is painful.

So that the five aggregates of attachment are *dukkha*, this takes on another dimension. Because the five aggregates are in fact the whole of existence. Everything which exists is in the field of the five aggregates. The first being matter, form, which includes the body, and also all of the material world , the world of forms, and the relationship between the body and the world around us. The first aggregate, *rupa*, is the body and its relationship with the whole universe. The following four aggregates are more specifically what would be called ego, personality, the person, (who perceives pleasant and unpleasant sensations, perceptions), who has makings of the mind, desires, will, and finally consciousness, which is consciousness of the other aggregates. All of this makes up a person, and when Buddha said : "the five aggregates of attachment are *dukkha*", this seems to consider that all life is *dukkha*. Everything which exists is *dukkha*. It is reality for Buddha. But that doesn't mean it is a question of pain, or constant suffering. This means that *dukkha* also signifies impermanent, without substance, conditioned, therefore limited, *dukkha* means all of that. It also means impermanent, unsatisfying, and understanding this means realizing the Buddha mind, the Awakened mind.

For example, at the beginning of the *Gakudo-yo-jinshu*, Dogen says : " the Buddha mind, the awakened mind, appears in the contemplation of impermanence." If this impermanence is not constantly present in the mind, there is no *bodaishin*, and without *bodaishin*, true awakening cannot happen.

The cause of *dukkha* is just in *dukkha*; that means that there is no original sin, or I don't know what other kind of grievous fate outside of man. The origin of *dukkha* resides, as it is stated in the Benares sutra, in greed, in the desire for sensory objects, and also in the desire for existence, and the desire of inexistence.

This last idea can be considered as a desire for annihilation, not living any more, like someone who thinks that by committing suicide, he will no longer suffer. In the desire for inexistence, there is the desire for unbearable circumstances to no longer exist or to live where these unbearable circumstances no longer exist. It's a matter of everything having to do with rejecting, wanting to push away, pushing away *dukkha* for example. It is a self sustaining phenomena, since *dukkha* exists within itself. If we try to understand what the origin of *dukkha*

is, it cannot be said that thirst itself is the origin, since thirst is conditioned itself, linked to causes, to ignorance, and to sensory organs' contact with their objects. One enters there, if one wants to try to see the origin of suffering in the description that Buddha gave of the Twelve linked chain of causation through which one can see that the origin is ungraspable. Nevertheless, Buddha announces possible cessation.

As for this cessation, Buddha proclaimed that he had experienced and realized it. He described it as ceasing of thirst, meaning abandoning it, renouncing to it, becoming liberated from it. This liberation is called nirvana, extinction. Could we have this experience? I think so. In the Zen practice, this is the experience of the *hishiryō* state of consciousness, the *hishiryō* consciousness in zazen which Master Sosan described as : neither craving nor hating, neither choosing nor rejecting. It is what Buddha called cessation, nirvana.

But nirvana is not only a peaceful psychological state. It also means realization of ultimate truth which cannot be grasped through concepts, and therefore cannot be described. This is where the great theme is in the teachings of Zen, the only important thing is awakening. But awakening cannot be described; that to which one awakens cannot be explained. In Zen, the origin of Dharma transmission cannot be found in the sermon on the Four Noble Truths. Rather, it is in the famous scene when Buddha, after having preached, stops, takes a flower and turns it between his fingers. Mahakashyapa smiles and Buddha says the famous sentence : "I possess the Eye of the Treasure of the true Law and the Serene Mind of nirvana, and now it is transmitted to Mahakashyapa".

This serene mind of nirvana is the intimate experience which we can have when we truly practice *hishiryō* conscience in zazen. It is the essence and cannot be explained. Because although there is a practice which leads us to it, the realization is not caused, or conditioned by it. The practice does not become the cause for realization. This is a very delicate point. It is difficult to explain. All words, notions and concepts function in duality. Wanting to explain something which is not something, an experience which cannot be boxed into concepts by using words, is impossible. We are in a paradoxical situation, when we believe to have said what we mean, and we are trapping ourselves and fooling others. Because we believe that what cannot be grasped, can be.

The last aspect of the Benares sutra is the famous description of the Eightfold Path, which the Buddha actually did at the beginning, (like I said) and that Buddha called the Middle Path. It includes eight practices :

- The right understanding of the Dharma, meaning reality seen through an awakened practice.
- The right thought which includes wisdoms and compassion which manifest themselves when one is no longer trapped in one's ego.
- The right speech, sincere and benevolent.
- The right action, in harmony with awakening as it is expressed in the precepts.
- The right lifestyle : the way to meet one's needs without harming living beings.

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- The right effort : energy which one puts into stopping that which causes suffering and into practicing that which is good for others and for oneself.
  - The right attention : being vigilant, attentive to oneself and to others, to what we do, conscious of the consequences of our actions and words.
  - The right meditation : the practice of concentration and observation which harmonizes us here and now with the Dharma – cosmic order.

One last thing : the Four Noble truths are not at the same level; everything must be included, but the second one, for example, requires more than just understanding - understanding what the source of suffering is. One must put all of one's energy, to get to the end of this suffering, to extract and annihilate the causes of suffering. The same for the extinction of suffering - nirvana - is not something just to be thought about, a state which one can dream of, or a metaphysical reality which one tries to define even negatively. It must be realized.

As for the Eightfold Path, it is insufficient just to explain it or to understand it; it has to be practiced. Throughout a whole life and maybe even more, with great energy and not believing that the Middle Way consists of practicing calmly. The Middle Path, which excludes mortifications, doesn't exclude effort, and on the contrary, implies constant effort so that the Four Noble Truths do not remain as abstract concepts and so that they become the concrete reality of our lives.