**The Four Noble Truths**

Notes by Professor Karunadassa

The Four Noble Truths are given in brief, in the first discourse named the ''Turning of the Wheel of Law'' (Dhammacakkappavatthana-sutta), delivered at Isipatana, in Benares, by the Buddha after His Enlightenment. It is interesting to note how the Sutta begins showing the futility of the two extreme practices prevailed among the truth seekers of the day. The first of the two practices mentioned in the discourse was based on annihilation (ucchedavada) and the other was on eternalism (sassatavada).

**Avoid Two Extremes**

The two extremes are to be avoided by a truth-seeker. Addressing the five ascetics with whom He had association when He practised austere asceticism as the Bodhisatta, the Buddha says, that there are two extremes to be avoided by a recluse, seeking realization. The two extremes are self-indulgence (kamasukhallikanuyoga) and self-mortification (attakilamathanuyoga). Because attachment to worldly enjoyment in any aspect of sensual pleasures, is low (hino), common (gammo), belonging to ordinary man (pothujjaniko), ignoble (anariyo), and connected with misery (anatthasamhito). Self-mortification is suffering (dukkho), ignoble (anariyo) and connected with misery (anatthasamhito). Although five adjectives have been used for the former and three for the latter with reference to the basis of ideology on which they were founded for the purpose of realizing truth, the two extreme practices are comparatively useless. (The word 'anatthasamhita' also means futility). The Buddha points out the Middle Path (Majjhima Patipada) lying between these two extremes, produces vision and knowledge, leading to peace, higher knowledge, enlightenment and Nibbana.

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The discourse summarizes the eight factors of the Middle Path and moves on to reveal the Four Noble Truths: The Suffering or Unsatisfactoriness (dukkha), the Cause of Suffering ( dukkha samudaya), the Cessation of Suffering (dukkha-nirodha), and the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (dukkha-nirodhagamini-patipada). The discourse reveals that the Four Noble Truths each is three circled and twelvefold function (tiparivattam dvadasakaram). With regard to each truth, there is the knowledge of the (sacca-nana), the knowledge that it is to be comprehended (kicca-nana), and the knowledge of comprehension (kata-nana) which arose in the Buddha thus making the knowledge twelvefold by three aspects of each truth.

**Why ‘Noble Truth’?**

Why are they called ‘Noble’ and 'Truths'? Buddhaghosa, the famous commentator explains the First Noble Truth in no less than fifteen ways. According to him these are called Noble Truths because the Noble Ones, the Buddhas etc., penetrate them. Besides, Noble Truths are the Noble One’s truths. Or alternatively, they are called Noble Truths because of the nobleness implied by their discovery. And further, to be noble is to be not unreal, the meaning is, not deceptive, according as it is said: 'Bhikkhus, these Four Noble Truths are real, not unreal, not otherwise that is why they are called Noble Truths'. (Vis., XVI, 14-22). Therefore, the adjective ‘ariya’ is used in this context to mean 'noble' and not to convey any ethnic or racial sense at all. What is meant by the word truth (sacca) has been used in various meanings in the Pali Canon. When it is said: 'Let him speak truth and not be angry, it is verbal truth. In the same way, the word has been used in the sense of truth of abstinence, views, ultimate truth and noble truth. (Vis., XVI, 26) A truth is a factual statement, which is correspondent with the real state of affairs and coherent with what exists factually. These truths are factual, real, and can be experienced as veritable truths.

**Therapeutic Approach**

The Dhamma is compared to medicine. Very often, the Buddha's preaching of the doctrine, to the suffering world, is compared to the administration of medicine to the sick by a physician. Therefore, the expounding of the Four Noble Truths in the first sermon can be understood on the analogy of a pathological analysis of affliction and cure. Therein the present predicament of man is in doctrinal aspects and analyzed in the First Noble Truth with its physical and psychological aspects shows how those afflictions are woven into the fabric of our existence. The discourse gives in brief the physical aspect of affliction stating the facts of birth, old age, disease and death. Association with the unpleasant, separation from the pleasant and not receiving what is desired is the psychological aspect of affliction. Then the fivefold grasping of the five aggregates is stated as the doctrinal aspect. The Second Truth which exists in time form of desire, the root cause of our present suffering is abandoned when the Third Truth, the state of suffering being redeemed from afflictions by regaining health is described, which is Nibbana, the Supreme Bliss. In the Fourth Truth, the remedy to ameliorate the affliction is as prescribed by way of the Noble Eightfold Path. It is quite clear that the theory of causality also applies to the analysis of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

The approach of Buddhism when taken as a whole is therapeutic in character. It analyses causes and conditions of the present predicament of human existence and suggests remedial measures to be followed for the alleviation of it. Because of the scientific methodology followed by the Buddha in the first sermon, the Cambridge psychologist, Thouless, says that it is very much like a modern lecture on bacteriology, where the disease, the cause of the disease by the mortification of the bloodstream of bacteria and viruses and then the cure and destruction of the invading bacteria and viruses by injecting antibiotics and other medicinal substances to the blood stream of the patient is explained. The therapeutic approach is so fundamental to early Buddhism, Thouless does not hesitate to name it as a system of psychotherapy.

The commentator Buddhaghosa too elucidating the implications of the Four Noble Truths, the simile in question has also been drawn among other similes. For he says: '' The truth of suffering is like a disease, the truth of origin is like the cause of the disease, the truth of cessation is like the cure of the disease and the truth of the path is like the medicine'' (Vis., XVI, 87). Assuredly, Buddhaghosa was influenced not by Patanjali, but by an earlier reference in the canon itself, where the imagery of healer and medicine has been drawn to illustrate the Buddha and the doctrine. There Pingiyani says to Karanapalin: '' Just sir, as a clever physician might in a moment take away the sickness of one sick and ailing, grievously ill, even so, whenever one hears the master Gotama's dharma, grief, lamentation, suffering, sorrow and despair vanish'' (A., 111, 273). Thus, the therapeutic approach is a distinctive quality particular to the doctrine preached by the Buddha.

**Is Buddhism Pessimistic?**

The word 'dukkha' denotes and connotes the totality of our existence. However there are some writers, disturbed by the fact of 'dukkha' being discussed as the First Noble Truth in Buddhism, incline to hold the wrong view that Buddhism is pessimistic in outlook from the very beginning. Now what is pessimism? Pessimism is a gloomy view of life. A pessimist sees only the worst aspect of everything. He always anticipates defeat. Because of wrong notions haunting in his mind, he is afraid of facing the facts of life. Pessimism, being an inner check of free activity, overwhelms one with despair, frustration, inaction and inhibition. Contrary to hopelessness, which characterizes pessimism, optimism offers a bright view of hope. The optimist is locked up in fool's paradise, in a utopia for the time being. When he realises the fact of 'dukkha' which is woven into the very fabric of our existence, he is disappointed and depressed. When we come face to face not only with the world of experience, but also with our inner feelings, aspirations and proclivities, we are confronted with all sorts of problems. The non-recognition of the stark realities of life is indeed not a reason to ignore the facts of vicissitudes of life. Therefore Buddhism teaches us to understand things, as they really are (yathabhuta). Since the Buddhist approach is neither pessimistic nor optimistic it advocates realism lying between those two extremes. Besides, Buddhism does not stop at analysing the constituents of 'dukkha', on the contrary it shows an antidote to overcome it. The psychoanalyst, Freud, said that man is always suffering from an uncertainty, a fear expressed in terms of anxiety. This harrowing uneasiness of his mind overpowers his reason. The existentialist philosopher, Kierkegaard, emphasized man's fear that torments him when he is confronted with life's problems. He named that mental tendency as 'anguish' and declared that it can only be believed by transcendental faith in God. But two other existentialists, Heideggar and Jean Paul Sartre, totally denying the existence of God, said the honest encounter with dread and anguish is the only gateway to ''authentic'' living. Philosopher Kant was emphatic in stating that man is ever in a predicament. Yet nobody calls them pessimists. The concept of 'dukkha' is to be considered as a correct philosophy of life. For Thouless says: that primitive Buddhism must be understood as a system of psychotherapy. Acceptance of Christian faith may of course also give relief from mental burdens but this is only incidental whereas the therapeutic aim of Buddhism is fundamental. This is why we can feel that many of the teachings of the Buddha are relevant to our needs in a way that would have been impossible to our grandfathers, because we have accepted and become used to the aim of psychotherapy.

The Four Truths are connected to each other by way of causal relatedness. The right attitude to be developed towards suffering is explained in the Fourth Truth. The foremost position subscribes to right understanding in the path is significant in this regard. The right understanding of the real nature of life helps individuals model their attitude to life for the betterment of this life here and the life hereafter.

**Suffering inherent in the Five Aggregates as Objects of Clinging**

Buddhaghosa in winding up his long discussion on suffering says: ''It is impossible to tell it (all) without remainder, showing each kind of suffering, even for many eons. So the Blessed One said, 'In short the five aggregates of clinging are suffering in order to show how all that suffering is present in any one of the five aggregates (as objects of clinging). “In the same way, that the taste of the water in the whole ocean is to be found in a single drop of its water”.

(Vis., XVI, 60).

Recommended Reading

\* Ven. Rahula W - What the Buddha Taught, Chap. 1, pp. 16-29.

\* Ven. Piyadassi - The Buddha's Ancient Path, Chap. 3, pp. 37-53.

\* Thomas, E. J. - The Life of Buddha, Chap. VII, pp. 80-96.

\* Thouless, Robert H. - Christianity and Buddhism, (Buddhist Research Society, Singapore), p. 5.