

An Overview of the Buddhist Path

The philosophy of Buddhism is contained in the Four Noble Truths.

The *truth of suffering* reveals that all forms of becoming, all the various elements of existence comprised in the "five aggregates" or groups of existence — also called the "five categories which are the objects of clinging" (*pañc'upadana-kkhandha*) — are inseparable from suffering as long as they remain objects of grasping or clinging. All corporeality, all feelings and sensations, all perceptions, all mental formations, and consciousness, being impermanent, are a source of suffering, are conditioned phenomena and hence not-self (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*). Ceaseless origination and dissolution best characterize the process of existence called life, for all elements of this flux of becoming continually arise from conditions created by us and then pass away, giving rise to new elements of being according to one's actions or kamma.

All suffering originates from craving, and our very existence is conditioned by craving, which is threefold: the craving for sense pleasures (*kama-tanha*), craving for continued and renewed existence (*bhava-tanha*), and craving for annihilation after death (*vibhava-tanha*). This is the *truth of the origin of suffering*.

The attainment of perfect happiness, the breaking of the chain of rebirths and suffering through the realization of Nibbana, is possible only through the utter extirpation of that threefold craving. This is the *truth of suffering's cessation*.

The methods of training for the liberation from all suffering are applied by following the Noble Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Living, Right Exertion, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration of Mind. The Noble Eightfold Path consists of three types of training summed up in: virtuous conduct (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*), and wisdom (*pañña*). This is the *truth of the way that leads to the cessation of suffering*.

The prevalence of suffering, and absence of freedom and happiness, is due to mankind's subjection to the three roots of all unskill and evil, and all unwholesome actions (*akusalakamma*), viz. lust, hatred, and delusion (*lobha, dosa, moha*).

Virtuous conduct casts out lust. The calm of true concentration and mental culture conquers hatred. Wisdom or right understanding, also called direct knowledge resulting from meditation, dispels all delusion.

All these three types of training are possible only through the cultivation of constant *mindfulness (sati)*, which forms the seventh link of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Mindfulness is called a controlling faculty (*indriya*) and a spiritual power (*bala*), and is also the first of the seven factors of enlightenment (*satta bojjhanga*). Right Mindfulness (*samma-sati*) has to be present in every skillful or karmically wholesome thought moment (*kusalacitta*). It is the basis of all earnest endeavor (*appamada*) for liberation, and maintains in us the sense of urgency to strive for enlightenment or Nibbana.

The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the *Satipatthana Sutta*, is the tenth discourse of the Middle Length Collection (Majjhima Nikaya) of the Discourses of the Enlightened One. There is another version of it, in the Collection of Long Discourses (Digha Nikaya No.22), which differs only by a detailed explanation of the Four Noble Truths.

The great importance of the Discourse on Mindfulness has never been lost to the Buddhists of the Theravada tradition. In Sri Lanka, even when the knowledge and practice of the Dhamma was at its lowest ebb through centuries of foreign domination, the Sinhala Buddhists never forgot the *Satipatthana Sutta*. Memorizing the *Sutta* has been an unflinching practice among the Buddhists, and even today in Sri Lanka there are large numbers who can recite the *Sutta* from memory. It is a common sight to see on full-moon days devotees who are observing the Eight Precepts, engaged in community recital of the *Sutta*. Buddhists are intent on hearing this Discourse even in the last moments of their lives; and at the bedside of a dying Buddhist either monks or laymen recite this venerated text.

Mindfulness of Breathing (*Anapana-sati*)

The subjects dealt with in the *Satipatthana Sutta* are corporeality, feeling, mind, and mind objects, being the universe of right Buddhist contemplation for deliverance. A very prominent place in the Discourse is occupied by the discussion on mindfulness of breathing (*anapana-sati*).

Mindfulness of breathing takes the highest place among the various subjects of Buddhist meditation. It has been recommended and praised by the Enlightened One thus: "This concentration through mindfulness of breathing, when developed and practiced much, is both peaceful and sublime, it is an unadulterated blissful abiding, and it banishes at once and stills evil unprofitable thoughts as soon as they arise."

Though of such a high order, the initial stages of this meditation are well within the reach of a beginner though he be only a lay student of the Buddha-Dhamma.

Though we have been breathing throughout our life, we have done so devoid of mindfulness, and hence, when we try to follow each breath attentively, we find that the Buddhist teachers of old were right when they compared the natural state of an uncontrolled mind to an untamed calf. Our minds have long been dissipated among visible data and other objects of the senses and of thought, and hence do not yield easily to attempts at mind-control.

Source: Excerpted from "The Foundations of Mindfulness: Satipatthana Sutta", translated by Nyanasatta Thera. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanasatta/wheel019.html> .

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