

Biggest footprint of the elephant - on the Four Noble Truths

According to the Buddha, the greatest truth in the world is the Four Noble Truths. He likened the Four Noble Truths to an elephant's footprint, which encompasses all other smaller footprints. We can say that the Four Noble Truths are the most important and fundamental doctrine in Buddhism.

So, what are the Four Noble Truths?

Dukkha (Suffering)

Cause of Dukkha

Cessation of Dukkha

The Path to the Cessation of Dukkha

The term Dukkha has a broad scope of meaning, traditionally translated as suffering, stress, uneasiness, and more. However, understanding the etymology of this term sheds light on its meaning. Dukkha is constituted by the negative prefix "du" and "kkha" (the axle hole). It conveys the meaning of a bad wheel. Imagine driving a car with a crooked wheel – your journey would be bumpy, out of tune, or even dangerous. This is how Buddha sees life in the world.

Through the clarifying of Dukkha, Buddha exposed the true reality of life systematically and fundamentally. However, if Buddha had only spoken about this first truth, circumstantially there wouldn't be much difference between him and modern media reporters who continually deliver depressing news. And we know modern media and journalism have no real answer to the world's problem of suffering. Even politicians and social scientists lack fundamental solutions.

What sets Buddha apart is not just his observation of the world's suffering, but also his revelation of its cause and the possibility of its cessation. He provides true resolution and hope.

Buddha taught that the cause of suffering is craving. What is craving according to Buddha? It is the craving for sensuality, the craving to become (greed), and the craving not to become (aversion).

Craving for sensuality means excessively seeking happiness externally. However, such outward happiness is limited and fragile due to its conditional nature. All conditions are impermanent and unsubstantial, making the pursuit of conditional happiness through sensuality unreliable.

Regarding greed and aversion based on craving, there isn't much explanation needed. We all see and know what's happening in the world. Excessive greed and aversion between people and nations lead to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. If craving remains within us, there will be no end to Dukkha.

The Third Noble Truth teaches about the cessation of Dukkha. What is the cessation of suffering? It's the end of craving itself. Therefore, we can say that the culmination of Buddhist practice is nothing but the end of craving.

How can we achieve the end of craving? The answer lies in the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Fourth Noble Truths delivered by Buddha. The Noble Eightfold Path consists of:

Right View

Right Intention

Right Speech

Right Action

Right Livelihood

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

These eight elements are all stepping stones to cross over the stream of Dukkha.

Let us discuss each of the eight elements one by one next time.

Finally, I would like to end this article with one reminder: Please don't misunderstand Buddhism as a pessimistic doctrine. It's quite the opposite. Actually, what the Buddha taught is true happiness and the path to that happiness.

The deeper we understand the Four Noble Truths, the closer we are to true happiness.

With metta,

Bhante Anuttara