

The Dharma: The Teachings of the Buddha

Summary: After achieving enlightenment, the Buddha gave his first sermon, teaching his disciples about suffering and the way to escape it. This teaching includes the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Noble Path. The truths that the Buddha revealed are called Dharma.

The Buddha's sermons and teachings pointed toward the true nature of the universe, what is known within Buddhism as the *Dharma*. He gave his first sermon on the outskirts of the city of Varanasi at a deer park called Sarnath. This first sermon presents an overview of suffering and the way out of suffering. It is called the "Four Noble Truths." The Buddha is often described as a physician who first diagnoses an illness and then suggests a medicine to cure the illness. The "Four Noble Truths" follow this pattern:

1. Life involves suffering, *dukkha*.

The "illness" that the Buddha diagnosed as the human condition is *dukkha*, a term often rendered in English as "suffering" or "unsatisfactoriness." The Buddha spoke of three types of *dukkha*. First, there is the ordinary suffering of mental and physical pain. Second, there is the suffering produced by change, the simple fact that all things—including happy feelings and blissful states—are impermanent, as is life itself. Third, there is suffering produced by the failure to recognize that no "I" stands alone, but everything and everyone, including what we call our "self," is conditioned and interdependent.

2. Suffering is caused by desire and grasping.

The Buddha saw that the impulse to crave, desire, or grasp something one doesn't have is the principal cause of suffering. Because of the impermanence and continuous change of all that we call "reality," the attempt to hold on to it is as doomed to frustration as the attempt to stake out a piece of a river.

3. There is a way out of suffering.

This is the good news of the *Dharma*. It is possible to put an end to ego-centered desire, to put an end to *dukkha* and thus attain freedom from the perpetual sense of "unsatisfactoriness."

4. The way is the “Noble Eightfold Path.”

To develop this freedom one must practice habits of ethical conduct, thought, and meditation that enable one to move along the path. These eight habits include:

- Right understanding: Truly and deeply knowing, for example, that unwholesome acts and thoughts have consequences, as do wholesome acts and thoughts.
- Right intention: Recognizing that actions are shaped by habits of anger and self-centeredness, or by habits of compassion, understanding, and love.
- Right speech: Recognizing the moral implications of speech; truthfulness.
- Right action: Observing the five precepts at the foundation of all morality: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not clouding the mind with intoxicants.
- Right livelihood: Earning a living in ways that are consonant with the basic precepts.
- Right effort: Cultivating this way of living with the attention, the patience, and the perseverance that it takes to cultivate a field.
- Right mindfulness: Developing “presence of mind” through the moment-to-moment awareness of meditation practice, including mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of walking, and mindfulness of bodily sensations.
- Right concentration: Developing the ability to bring the dispersed and distracted mind and heart to a center, a focus, and to see clearly through that focused mind and heart.