The World of the Noble Truths

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When I was in school, I was taught that if you wanted to understand somebody’s thinking, you had to look for the structure, what underlying structure there was, in which all the points that this person was teaching or discussing, found their meaning, found their place. In the Buddhist teachings, you have two structures. One is the Four Noble Truths. The other is the Noble Eightfold Path. And they contain each other. The Fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Eightfold Path. And the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is the Four Noble Truths. This makes the point that the Four Noble Truths are not just a theory. They are a way of looking at the world, but they play a role in a path of action. Determining how you’re going to act. Because for most thinkers, the underlying structures start with first principles and then argue from those first principles to build a structure, like build a building. But the image the Buddha gives is of a path. What ties all those teachings together is not where you’re coming from, but where you’re going. He teaches that it is possible to put an end to suffering. And everything in his teachings has meaning in the quest to put an end to suffering. Because he’s not just offering four interesting facts about suffering, but he’s saying this is the important issue to focus on. And as you focus on this issue, everything else makes sense. Everything else finds its meaning. Because the truths don’t just sit there. They have duties. The truth of suffering, what is suffering, it’s clinging to the aggregates. That’s to be comprehended. We don’t usually comprehend our sufferings in that way. We think about why is this pain afflicting me? Why is this situation in the world outside afflicting me? But the Buddha is saying that suffering is the act of clinging to form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. It’s something we do. It’s not something we’re just on the receiving end of. We’re actively doing the suffering. He defines the clinging as desire and passion for these things. And the word he uses for clinging can also be used as feeding. Feed on these things. This is where the analysis gets really counterintuitive. Because in feeding, that’s one of our main pleasures of life, we think. But the Buddha is saying that feeding is really suffering. You’re dependent on something. You’ve got a hunger and it’s not yet satisfied. The cause of that suffering, he says, is again, is desire and passion. But in this case, it’s desire and passion that would lead to a state of becoming. That’s the word for craving that he identifies here. It can also mean thirst. So you see the basic analogy he’s got here. You’re thirsting for something. You’re hungering for something. That’s going to cause you to suffer. As you find what you want to eat. Again, it’s counterintuitive. We think that when we are thirsty or hungry, we find something to feed on. We’re happy. Actually, the feeding in itself means that we’re still feeling a lack. And we’re really dependent on something that we’re feeding on. That’s the suffering. Now the cessation of suffering would be to put an end to that desire and passion, that craving. He offers the Noble Eightfold Path as the path to follow. Now each of these truths has a duty, as I said, sufferings to be comprehended. The causes, or the origination, as the Buddha calls it, is to be abandoned. The cessation is to be realized. And you do that by developing the path. So understanding the Four Noble Truths is something to be developed as part of a larger path of action. So you can see the Buddha analyzes things in ways that go against the current of our ordinary thinking. It’s almost as if you go into another world when you’re taking on his teachings. Because he offers these Four Truths, as I said, not just as interesting facts, but as a structure, a framework for deciding what to do. If you know anything about the Buddhist teachings on becoming, you realize he’s putting you into a certain state of becoming. Becoming is an identity that you take in a world of experience, centered on a particular desire. The desire here, of course, is to put an end to suffering. And these become-ings the Buddha talks about, they can happen in the mind and the world outside that we know. That’s also a state of becoming. But we take on many different become-ings in the course of the day. You focus on wanting something and then you take on an identity within the world of what that thing is located. And the world has its customs, it has its laws about what works and what doesn’t work. And it’s the same way with the state of becoming that the Buddha is having you take on, as you take the Four Noble Truths as your framework. The four things that he identifies as leading to these become-ings. One is clinging to sensuality. Another is clinging to habits. And practices. Another is clinging to views. And another is clinging to a sense of yourself. And as we take on the path, we actually use these three kinds of clinging that create this world of the Four Noble Truths. The one kind of clinging the Buddha doesn’t recommend, of course, is clinging to sensuality. To make up for the fact that we ordinarily look for our pleasure in sensual fantasies. The Buddha says there’s a better place to look for pleasure. He offers the practice of right mindfulness and right concentration as we’re feeding the mind’s need for pleasure. It’s your nourishment on the path. But in this world of the Four Noble Truths, your views, of course, are shaped by the Four Noble Truths themselves and the duties they say, duties they carry. Those who are clinging to habits and practices. These are the practices we should do. Should try to comprehend suffering. Should try to abandon its cause. This, again, goes against a lot of thinking in the world. We usually try to think that we want to get rid of suffering, just start pushing it away. As for the cause of suffering, the different kinds of craving and desire and passion, those are things we like. We actually cultivate them. But here the Buddha’s saying, in this world, the world of the Four Noble Truths is going to lead you to the end of suffering. You have to seek craving, not as your friend, but as your enemy. Instead of palling around with our cravings, you have to start looking at them askance, to see that these are really the problem. As for your sense of self, it mainly comes down to feeling that you are competent to do this practice. You actually will lead, will lead you to the end of suffering. And then there’s the you in there that can keep this framework in mind and then look at your actions to see where they measure up and where they don’t measure up. Those are the roles that you play in this world. As I said, it’s so easy to forget this particular world, the world of the Four Noble Truths, and start going back to your old world, which has its other ideas, other shoulds, and views, and ways of finding pleasure. Now John Foon tells the story of how he had chronic headaches, and he tried Western medicine, he tried Chinese medicine, he tried Thai medicine, and nothing was working. And it got so that sometimes you couldn’t even sleep at night. The pain was so bad. It got to the point where he actually had to have a couple people staying in the room with him in case he woke up in the middle of the night and needed hot compresses or whatever. Then there was one night he happened to wake up in the middle of the night, set up, and the monks who were supposed to be looking after him were asleep. The first thought that went through his mind was, “Well, who’s looking after whom here?” He said, “Well, that’s their business. I’ve got my business I’ve got to take care of.” And suddenly he realized he’d been trying to get rid of the pain, get rid of the suffering, of the headache, which is not the duty in the context of the world of the Four Noble Truths. The duty there was to comprehend it. What was he clinging to? Where were his desires and passions aimed? What was he craving? And we looked at it from that point of view. Things opened up in his mind. He didn’t make any claims about what happened there, but the way he described it, it sounded like stream entry when you had your first glimpse of the Deathless. He came out of that and he realized that simply engaging with the senses is stressful. Nothing to do with the senses at all. And that’s the case of putting yourself into the world of the Four Noble Truths and realizing, “What are my duties within this context?” So when you’re suffering from something, ask yourself, “Am I actually trying to comprehend my suffering or am I doing something else with it? Am I developing it? Am I trying to abandon it?” You can abandon the cause, but the suffering itself is something that has to be comprehended first. So you understand, what are you clinging to? What are you feeding on? Why? What’s the allure? And what are the drawbacks? It’s in this context of trying to comprehend suffering and abandon its cause that the Buddha teaches those three characteristics or three perceptions. So they fit into this larger framework. All too often you hear it the other way around, that the world is described by these three characteristics and the Four Noble Truths are true because of the three characteristics. But that’s getting things backwards because the three characteristics don’t have any duties. You can say the world is inconstant. You can do all kinds of things with that idea. The world is stressful. And from there, many people conclude, “Well, there is no self.” Well, if there’s no self, who’s going to do the practice? Who’s going to benefit? Who’s going to be able to analyze what’s going well and what’s not? If there’s no self, there’s nobody doing anything. You get some people teaching, “Well, there is no choice at all. We have no free will at all.” Which is totally opposed to what the Buddha actually taught. He taught truths that are a call to action. He says with these truths, you can know what to do. And you’re capable of doing it. And they’ll take you to something beyond them. Because remember, the Four Noble Truths are part of the path. The path goes to the cessation of suffering. It’s not the same thing. These are means. And after all, you are in this world. Which is a kind of becoming. We’re here to put an end to becoming. Which means that the Four Noble Truths have to point to their abandoning. And they do. Right View looks at things in terms of how they’re put together. And everything that’s put together has its drawbacks. So you want to let it go. Then you realize, well, Right View itself is put together. So it has similar drawbacks. You don’t let it go, though, until the very last step of the path. But all the factors of the path, then, are things you have to abandon. Because they’ve delivered you to where you want to go. That’s what gives them meaning. Which is why I say this is a structure that’s built not on first principles, but on final principles and goals, attainments. To talk about other Dhamma as an Atta, A-T-T-H-A. Which is a Pali word that means meaning, goal, benefit. So this world of the Four Noble Truths delivers you to that Atta, that benefit, that goal. And they find their meaning in taking you there. So try to look at your actions in the context of that view, that world. Because then you know what to do. Of course, you can decide to take on other worlds. The Buddha’s not forcing this on you. But he is saying this is an opportunity. You can put an end to suffering. Total end of suffering. It would be good to take him up on that offer.

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