

Week 1: The Four Noble Truths

Buddhism level 2: Buddhist wisdom – Doctrinal Dharma

Meditation

5 or 10 minutes to settle into body, let go of the day. use the breath? arrive in the room. Emphasise: don't need to do anything, let go of any wanting for a few minutes, no right experience to have, just let the flow of experience flow on.

Reflect on what's brought you here.

Intro to the module

Division of Dharma into worldview / framework of understanding & practices (but not separate).

Last module looked at framework largely through images (wheel, spiral, mandala)

This module look at more conceptual expressions. Traditional buddhist wisdom/doctrine.

core of the Buddha's insight, how he chose to express his enlightened insight.

This is not an academic exercise: we want to introduce people to personal reflection on the relevance of Buddhist teaching to people's lives. Exercises will enhance this reflection in different ways.

Personal intros

start with self, tell us name, perhaps how long you've been coming to the Buddhist Centre, what your experience is, what you want or expect from the course.

Intro to Centre

loos, tea break, etc. dana, handout dana booklet (or at end)

WHAT'S YOUR QUESTION?

Tell story of hitchhiker's guide.

If Buddhism might provide the answer, what's your question? What's brought you here?

Exercise: in 2/3s – can you put your question into words?

Or maybe you don't have a question you can formulate; do you have a sense of what you're looking for, moving towards, or moving away from?

Take feedback

THE BUDDHA'S QUESTION

So let's see how much overlap there is between ours & the Buddha's question.

Do you remember the 4 sights of the Buddha?

His big question was how do you deal with the fact of old age, sickness & death, all of which he saw as embodying dukkha, or suffering

Wandering mendicant seemed to provide a possible solution. So that was the quest he followed; the end of dukkha

When he found the answer, one of the main formulations he gave was the Four Noble Truths

Brainstorm 4 NTs onto flipchart

FIRST NOBLE TRUTH: DUKKHA

why do we begin with consideration of dukkha?

Something we all have in common. Not a dogmatic truth or pronouncement about life, but a practical observation. By definition, it's our major problem in life.

Tease out the strategic importance of the teaching of dukkha.

"By beginning with the fact of pain, Buddhism involves the whole emotional nature of man from the outset. Recognition of the first Noble Truth comes not as a pleasant intellectual diversion but as a terrible emotional shock. The scriptures say that one feels then like a man who suddenly realises that his turban is in flames. Only a shock of this kind is strong enough to galvanize the whole being into action... Pain is the common ground whereon meet prince and peasant, mill-hand and millionaire, old and young..."

Sangharakshita, Where Buddhism begins and why it begins there

Brainstorm

What ways do you understand dukkha:

eg. suffering, unsatisfactoriness, stress, frustration, misery, pain, an ill-fitting cart-wheel, a bumpy ride (bring out the image)

How does this relate to your "question"? Is there a link?

"There is this noble truth of *dukkha*: birth is *dukkha*, ageing is *dukkha*, sickness is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are *dukkha*, association with the loathed is *dukkha*, dissociation from the loved is *dukkha*, not to get what one wants is *dukkha* — in short, the five aggregates [all elements of unenlightened experience] affected by clinging [*upadana*] are *dukkha*." (trans. Nanamoli)

First Noble truth is really a call to reflect on our life, to notice the inextricable element of dukkha; motivation to act

Tea break

The other noble truths: in brief, with an eye on introducing the remainder of the course. Introduce as doctrines with rejoinder that these doctrines aren't easy to understand.

SECOND NOBLE TRUTH: CAUSE OF SUFFERING IS CRAVING

A level on which 2 NT makes sense: wanting things to be other than they are makes it impossible to go along with reality as it is happening.

What the Buddha discovered was that the reason that beings suffer is that they do not know their own real condition. They think that reality is one way, when actually, it is another, and the key element of that distorted understanding and perception of reality is that each of us perceives ourselves to be the centre of our reality. Each of us thinks that we are some sort of fixed, independent, real entity... Once we perceive ourselves as a separate, real being ... we come into disagreement with the universe; when we are in disagreement with the universe, we fight with the universe. When we fight with the universe, we lose. The only way we can get out of that is not just by believing that we are one with the world or something, or going against our habitual perception of ourselves as separate from the world, but it is by investigating our habitual perception, analysing it, and experiencing its falsity, which we can empirically do.

Robert Thurman, BBC talk

The essential cause of suffering, the Buddha says, is craving, the natural but painful desire for things to be other than they are. If we can let go of that desire, if we can accept the rise and fall of experience as it is – not just in our heads, but in our heart of hearts – the problem of suffering will be solved.

Sangharakshita, Living with Kindness

3RD NOBLE TRUTH – COMPLETE HAPPINESS IS POSSIBLE

Dwelling on dukkha wouldn't be very valuable if there were not a way of transcending it. But the Buddha said it's possible, and called Enlightenment

Happiness as opposite of dukkha. Not talking of the happiness of getting something you want (more like pleasure). More like a deep equanimity, contentment, feeling so "big" that don't experience a small self lacking anything

Japanese poet Ryokan expresses a joy in his simple mountain life:

*Desire nothing, and you're content with everything.
Pursue things, and you're thwarted at every turn.
Wild greens can stave off hunger.
A simple robe serves to cover the skin.
Going for a solitary stroll
I fall in with the deer.
When the children from the village sing, I join
right in at the top of my lungs.
I cleanse my ears in the sound of water*

*tumbling over rocks,
And gladden my heart with the whisper of pines
high on the mountains' peaks.*

RYOKAN

Unconditioned happiness as not fighting reality, not wanting things to be other than they are: contentment.

Tell story of the Buddha's happiness: his happiness competition with King Bimbisara. But note, he still experienced physical pain while embodied – difference is how he responded to it.

There are moments in all of our lives when we catch a glimpse, no matter how fleeting, of the deep freedom that is the nature of letting go. We emerge from bouts of obsession or anxiety, letting go of the thoughts and fears that have gripped us, and we feel ourselves emerging into a sense of freedom. We open a clenched fist, breathe out after moments of holding our breath, feel able to relinquish some demand or goal that has consumed us. In all of these moments we have a taste of freedom.

Christina Feldman, Radio programme on third of Four Noble Truths

Exercise

Sometimes we experience strong happiness because we've got something that we deeply want. Other times, we have more of a deep contentment because our wanting has, for some reason, subsided. Can you think of examples of one or both of these? Is there a difference in quality between them?

4TH NOBLE TRUTH – THERE IS A PATH TO CESSATION OF SUFFERING

There is a set of do-able practices, a way to live life that brings about increasing freedom from self-caused suffering

Usually summarized in Noble Eightfold Path

Even more tersely in Three Training: ethics, meditation, wisdom

HOME PRACTICE

Notice moments of dukkha in your life (whatever translation worked) and notice what causes if any (especially internal conditions) were responsible. Is it true that dukkha arises from wanting things to be different from what they are?

Try, in these moments, to turn towards the experience of unpleasantness rather than fighting it. What happens if you let yourself experience it fully?

NB. This is not to say we should stop trying to change things for the better in the future, or remove ourselves from discomfort; but it is about being fully present to the present moment experience without resistance.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

“Where Buddhism begins and why it begins there”, Sangharakshita, essay in “Crossing the Stream” (copies available in CBC lending library)

A good reference for this module and the next is “What is the Dharma?” by Sangharakshita
Much on the web. Eg.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/beliefs/fournobletruths.shtml> 4 radio talks

<http://www.buddhanet.net/4noble.htm> thorough piece by Ajahn Sumedho

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/truths.html> many references to original suttas.