

Wisdom and the Four Noble Truths

Introduction to Reading for May 29 Class

MN 141, 2.5-11, 63*, 28, 43, 146, 44, 1

(optional: 109, 9, 148; *63 is a repeat from October reading)

*Just as the footprint of any living being that walks
can be placed within an elephant's footprint...
so too, all wholesome states can be included
in the Four Noble Truths.*

MN 28.2

One who is wise understands wisely. What does one understand wisely?

'This is suffering,'

'This is the origin of suffering,'

'This is the cessation of suffering,' and

'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.'

MN 43.3

The Buddha's awakening came through his realization of the Four Noble Truths. This involved his key discovery of the causal link between craving and suffering on one hand and the relationship between a course of practice and the ending of that suffering on the other hand. The implications of this discovery are huge. These truths became the foundation for all his teachings; it is said that all Buddhist teachings are elaborations of them. What makes these truths "noble" is when they are the truths of a person who has so effectively applied them that he or she is "ennobled", that is, liberated.

The Four Noble Truths provide the standard definition of Right View. While it is relatively easy to understand them conceptually, the challenge of Buddhist practice is applying them to our deepest habits of clinging in order to uproot the tendencies for greed, hate, delusion and fear. For this, two things are helpful. First, it is useful to have a fuller understanding of each of the truths as well as the practices associated with each one. This entails developing both right view and wisdom. Second, it is helpful – perhaps necessary – for one's mind to be clear and settled enough for that wisdom to penetrate the subtle psychological drives underpinning one's un-liberated condition.

The first four readings for this month are about the Four Noble Truths. The remaining suttas are wisdom teachings that explicate some of the key concepts of Buddhist practice. As you read these suttas, please apply them to your own life to discover the particular situations where these teachings are true for you.

*Then the Blessed One gave the householder Upali progressive instruction, that is, talk on giving, virtue, heavens; he explained the danger, degradation, and defilement in sensual pleasures and the blessing of renunciation. When he knew that the householder Upali's mind was ready, receptive, free from hindrances, elated, and confident, he expounded to him **the teaching special to the Buddhas**: suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path. (MN 56.18)*