

The Four Noble Truths, Karma, and Merit

The Four Noble Truths: “First” Teaching of the Buddha

*The “Wheel-Turning Discourse” spoken at Deer Park to his first five disciples

1. There is suffering
2. Origin of suffering: Craving
3. Cessation of Suffering (Get rid of craving)
4. Means of cessation: Eightfold Path

*Another way of describing the Four Noble Truths

1. Dilemma: Human suffering
2. Cause of dilemma: Craving, ignorance
3. Solution: Get rid of cause (craving)
4. Method to solve dilemma: Eightfold path

***The Four Noble Truths can also be seen as an attempt to answer the following series of hypothetical questions about human suffering by proposing a number of answers:**

*Question: Why does suffering exist?

*Answer: Suffering is caused by craving the five aggregates:

1. physical form
2. feeling
3. perception
4. mental formations (concepts)
5. consciousness

*Question: Why does craving the five aggregates cause suffering?

*Answer: Each one of these has the three marks:

1. impermanent: (Pali: *anicca*. Sanskrit: *anitya*)
2. no-self: no single, permanent, self-sufficient essence. (Sanskrit: *anatman*)
3. unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*)

*Question: Why do the three marks cause craving?

*Answer:

-Suffering arises from a conflict between

- 1) The (false) expectation that things are permanent, coupled with the desire that such permanent things will make us happy, and
- 2) The impermanent reality of things (as described by Buddhism).

-This conflict is the result of ignorance (Sanskrit: *avidya*) about the nature of reality (the three marks pervade the five aggregates).

*Question: If everything is subject to the three marks, what exactly is there, and how does it arise?

*Answer: Human beings arise through the interaction of the five aggregates, which are formed in the “chain of dependent arising.”

*Question: Why do people continue to be reborn in samsara and thus continue suffering?

*Answer: Karma (moral/amoral) action effects and creates more life.

*Question: How can one stop being reborn in samsara, and thus cease suffering?

*Answer: Must control karma by:

- Meditation (*dhyana*): training mind to 1) be calm, thus eliminating desire, and 2) to understand workings of karma
- Merit (*punya*): karmic savings earned by acting ethically, including donation to sangha