

## Buddhism and Society - Aspects of the Four Noble Truths and Spiritual Friendship

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### Abstract

The doctrine of Four Noble Truths, which is the core teaching of Buddhism, has been compared to the fourfold remedial method used in traditional Indian medical systems which is identifying the disease, the cause of the disease, the cure and the remedy for curing the disease. The Buddha, who realized the nature of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering, also taught them to the world with the sole purpose of removing the suffering encountered by living beings. Therefore, the significance of Buddhist doctrine depends mainly on its application to real life rather than on simply studying it for an accumulation of knowledge.

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist remedial method is to achieve supreme happiness by means of the complete cessation of defilements, which are the causes of suffering. Though it is the main goal of the Buddhist path, it should be emphasized that one must also pay attention to the relative happiness of our present life, by overcoming the causes of our individual and the suffering created in society by ourselves.

The relative suffering of our day to day life should be understood through the life process itself. We create suffering not only for ourselves but also for our fellow members of society by means of the behavior expressed through our mental, verbal and bodily actions when they are not directed in the proper way.

The remedial methods prescribed by the Buddha for curing suffering consist of eight constituents which can be used to lead our behavior in the right direction to achieve the individual and social happiness which we are looking for.

This paper intends to explore the way how the core teaching of Buddhism can bring forth peace, well-being and happiness to mankind with the help of a spiritual friends as a guide, like a doctor who can give advice to his patient to gain recovery.

**Keywords:** Buddhism and Society, Four Noble Truths, Spiritual Friendship

## Introduction

When we look at modern human society with a critical eye, it is quite obvious that society is full of miseries created by its members due to the fact that they do not have proper guidance to achieve both individual and social happiness. As the Buddha said the desire of human beings is to experience happiness and to escape from suffering. Without understanding the nature of the problems that we are creating in our individual as well as social life, we cannot understand their causes and the solution to them. The Buddha presented his core teaching, the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, following the medical diagnostic system employed by doctors in their treatment of patients. The first truth, that is to say, the Truth of suffering, is compared to the diagnosis of the problem (suffering). The second truth is to identify the cause of the problem, which should then be removed. The third truth is understanding there can be an eradication of the problem, and the last truth is the remedial method that should be used to remove the problem.

Though the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths appears to be very simple and easily realizable, it is, in the real sense, very profound and deep, especially, for ordinary people who find it hard to understand. That is why the Buddha said that this doctrine is for the wise and not for ordinary people in the *Anguttara Nikāya Atthaka Nipāta, Anuruddha Sutta*. In this respect, we need spiritual friends whose guidelines would be more important to understand suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The Buddha was the most excellent spiritual friend, and presented his guidelines throughout the forty-five years of his mission.

The Buddha himself played the role of a teacher and *kalyāṇa mitra* (spiritual friend and guide) throughout his career; his skillful teaching was seen as like a doctor who attends to his sick patients to gain recovery from illness. This is the main responsibility that the Buddha emphasized while teaching the Dhamma i.e., to show the right way to live a moral life, in order to eliminate suffering and to achieve happiness.

The Buddha was not only a spiritual guide by pointing out his guidelines, but also has shown what has to be done for others in compliance with his guidelines through his own example. The Buddha's visit to the sick Mahā Kassapa and Mahā Moggallāna who were undergoing severe pain due to disease is recorded in the *Bojjhanga Suttas* of the Pāli Canon in the *Samyutta Nikāya*.

On another occasion the Buddha visited a sick monk called Pūtigatta Tissa and served him by his own hand compassionately. There, the Buddha not only taught his students how to serve ill patients through preaching the Dhamma with a caring attitude, but

also has given an example for his students by serving the sick monk.

The Dhamma is a living teaching based on the Laws of Nature. It concerns a person's moral values and ethical practice. As nutritious food is necessary to support the body for spiritual practice, thus, in the Vinaya texts, it appears that medical treatments generally consisted of herbal medicines, food stuffs like honey, meat, fish, oil and sugar etc. (Tsomo, 2006, p.177). In the Vinaya texts, which are concerned with community life, his disciples were taught to stop all evil thoughts, false speech and unwholesome actions. On the other hand, the Lord Buddha encouraged his disciples to do wholesome deeds with right view and mindfulness, along with consideration for oneself and others while living in community.

Generally in modern society, the Buddhist community should be provided with the five proper basic needs of nutrition, food, proper shelter, clothing, medication and education according to the conditions and the environment. If a person lacks appropriate nutritious food, sleep, clothing, medicine and education, in return it may affect his physical and mental health. Besides that, proper care and concern are just as important. Therefore, receiving proper education and training is the best way for the prevention of suffering, rather than hoping for a cure.

### Literature Review

Piyadassi Thera (1960) said: man needs a *kalyāṇamittatā*, good friendship, because like good medicine it is a basic cure for the ills of the world. Conversely, the basis and nutriment of all good is shown to be good friendship which is also emphasized by the Buddha to Ananda in the *Samyutta Nikāya Upaddha Sutta* that good friendship is very important for the holy life. Friendship furnishes one with the food of the sublime dhamma, which in turn produces confidence and trust in the Triple Gem. It is similar to most people who need an alarm clock to wake up every morning and nutritious food for building up a healthy body and a fresh mind.

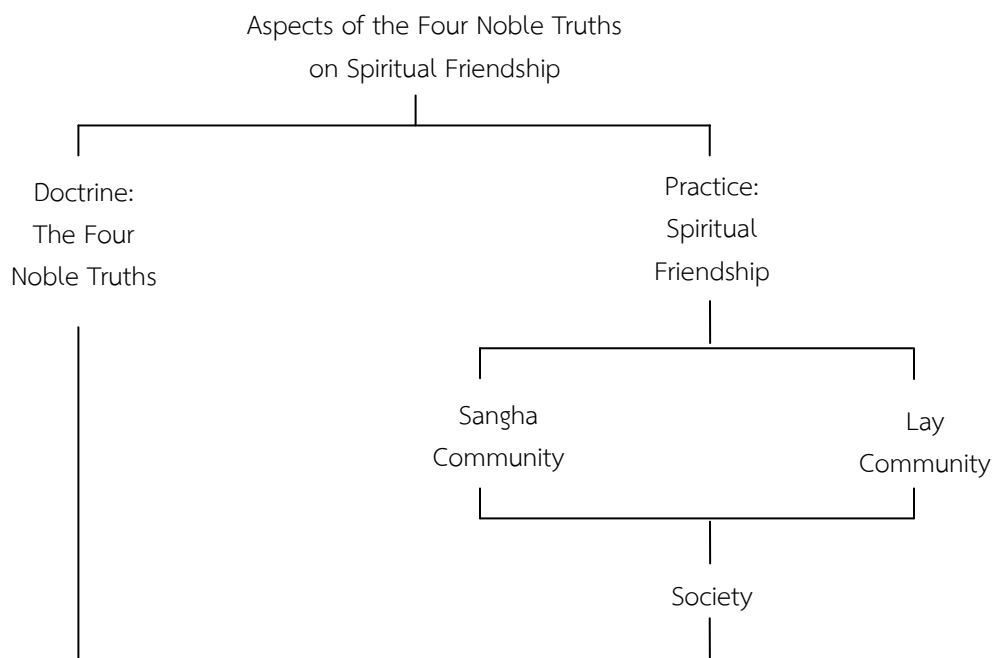
Under certain circumstances, due to one's health condition, some may recover immediately after taking the medicine; some may need a longer time and for some the medicine may not work at all. But for a doctor, he has to try his best to help, as mentioned in the *Bojjhanga Paritta Sutta* in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (Vol V p.2). The doctor not only provides the medicine but also encouragement to his patient. Therefore, healthy communication and disciplinary activity in our daily life is important for refreshing the mind and body.

## Objective

The Four Noble Truth has been discussed and interpreted by different traditional Dhamma teachers and scholars. In this paper my objective is to highlight onto the importance of the Four Noble Truths to Spiritual Friendship:

1. To clearly understand the Four Noble Truths.
2. To educate man with the doctrine on the right Path to end suffering with the help of a good guide.

## Framework



**Picture 1** Balance application on knowledge and practice

## Method

This paper is an analysis on a body engine which needed a balance diet on food and nutrient to up keep a healthy body and mind in order to live happily and peacefully. An honest and discipline person can maintain a healthy body and positive mind with low cost budget then a poor health person. He is not only benefited to his own study as well as his career and life, but also to his family, friend, community and society.

## Result

The commitment in one's refuge to the Triple Gem is as valuable as recovering from illness. Buddhism is a religion; but it is, in the real sense, an education that one has to have a strong faith and commitment to end suffering by practicing with right intention. The Eight-Fold Path was taught by the Buddha as the method to achieve cessation from suffering. A comparison between the needs of the patient and the four noble truths can be shown as follows in table 1:

**Table 1: A comparison on Buddhist and Scientific outlook on the Four Noble Truths**

No.	Scientific Outlook	Buddhist Outlook
1.	The patient need to know what type of sickness he has	Suffering
2.	The patient needs to know the cause of his sickness	Cause of Suffering
3.	That the disease can be cured	The End of Suffering
4.	The remedial course to be employed	The Path to End Suffering

## Concept

The Four Noble Truths is the core teaching of the Buddha, basically they express the following:

The First of the Noble Truths

How is Dukkha defined? Dukkha is a Pāli word, having the following common translations: suffering, dissatisfaction and pain. Sharon Salzberg is right when she said: suffering does not necessarily mean grave physical pain, but rather the mental suffering we undergo when our tendency to hold onto pleasure encounters the fleeting nature of life, and our experiences become unsatisfying and ungovernable. (Sharon Salzberg, 2016) What really Dukkha mean then? It is for one who can feel and understand both happiness and suffering, that is, one would like to hold onto the feeling of happiness, and on the other hand, one would like to prevent suffering, but the world doesn't work that way.

It has been clearly explained by the Buddha that all existing phenomena are subject to change; they are formed by conditions, and have no underlying self-existent entity. Therefore the Buddha preached the doctrine of the three characteristics, they are: Anicca (impermanence), Dukkha (suffering) and Anatta (non-self) to describe the reality of existence. In the broadest sense of the term dukkha is characterized by impermanence, suffering and soullessness.

### The Second of the Noble Truths

How is the cause of suffering defined? The cause is nothing else but the craving occurring in the mind due to ignorance about the real nature of the things. The real nature of things is none other than suffering or Dukkha. The Buddha said life entailed suffering because one cannot get long term satisfaction from what is constantly changing. One feels suffering because one is unable to accept the changes that are characterized by the nature of impermanence.

The Buddha encouraged his disciples to examine the cause of suffering in order to be able to remove it. Once the Buddha was living at Rajagaha, at Veluvana, the Bamboo garden; at that time Mahā Kassapa who was living in Pippali Cave, was sick, stricken with a severe illness. Then the Buddha came and visited Mahā Kassapa, the Buddha took his seat, and spoke to him, saying:

"Well, Kassapa, how is it with you? Are you bearing up; are you enduring? Do your pains lessen or increase? Are there signs of your pains lessening and not increasing?"

Mahā Kassapa replied: "No, Lord, I am not bearing up, I am not enduring. The pain is very great. There is a no sign of the pains lessening but of their increasing.

After hearing what Kassapa had said, the Buddha preached the seven factors of enlightenment (Mindfulness, Investigation of the Dhamma, Energy, Happiness, Calm Concentration and Equanimity) to him. Upon hearing the teaching from the Buddha, Mahā Kassapa rejoiced and rose from his illness. (Piyadassi Thera, 1960, p.2-4)

Mahā Kassapa's illness vanished after hearing the sermon given by the Buddha, and he received a shower of blessing from the Lord. Certainly it was Mahā Kassapa's own confidence that helped him and the light of wisdom together with right thought and concentration that dispelled the illness. While his mind was peaceful and relaxed the feeling of suffering vanished, just as a dark room will be enlightened immediately by a candle light.

### The Third of the Noble Truths

How to defined happiness? The third Noble Truth expounded by the Buddha refers to the complete cessation of suffering, which is considered as the ultimate or supreme happiness. The first Noble Truth of suffering covers everything in the world which is arisen because of causes and conditions. The characteristics underlying what has arisen because of causes and conditions are impermanence, suffering and soullessness. Even worldly happiness which we experience is due to causes and conditions. Hence, there cannot be permanent, everlasting happiness due to the reason that they also have the characteristics

of impermanence, suffering and soullessness. However, complete eradication or cessation of the causes and conditions of life and therefore continuation after death is considered to be the supreme happiness as there is no production of birth. Wherever there is birth, one cannot avoid the suffering. That is why the cessation of suffering or in other words Nibbāna is known as the supreme happiness.

#### The Fourth of the Noble Truths

How to define the Path to the end of suffering? The eight principles of the Middle Path is the prescription given by the Buddha to end suffering. If one who wants to end suffering it is necessary for one to fulfill the required quality of awareness, apperception and right effort. Right view is the leader who plays the duty of leading the process of healing, purification and higher evolution in life. With the understanding of the fact that the five aggregates are just a heap of constantly changing, suffering and not-self components, one is moving towards the goal of supreme happiness.

On the other hand, *The Seven Factors of Enlightenment* by Piyadassi Thera (1960, p.11) has been stresses a lot on having a Kalyāṇa-mitta who is able to help the practitioner as a spiritual guide while walking on the Path. In the Buddhist concept of spiritual friendship it is applicable to both sangha and lay relationships. Why it is so important to have a spiritual friend while walking on the Path? The reason is that a spiritual friend can be his guide when in need, and with his care, concern and encouragement, one can be expected to develop & pursue the noble eightfold path with confidence. Spiritual friends played a very important role in the Buddhist community. This is what the Buddha said to Ananda: Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997). Therefore, the requirement of true friendship – trust, sincerity, honesty, encouragement, concern and care – are the key requirements to develop right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Then to realize things as they truly are, insight meditation (vipassanā) is a necessary requirement. Without the help and guidance of a spiritual friend it would be a difficult task to engage in vipassanā meditation, which one cannot see things as they truly are. (Piyadassi Thera, 1960, p.25).

#### Conclusion

Facing constant change in life is tiring and frustrating; hence, man is happier to live according to their own patterns and habits. But in the Buddhist opinion that people create not only suffering for themselves but also cause their suffering due to the fact that they do

not understand suffering properly or the cause of suffering. Therefore, it is inevitable to have spiritual friendship to make them aware of these factors and lead them towards the achievement of happiness for all.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2006, p.181-183) said: Life is valued because it is a basis for the mental cultivation that is necessary for awakening. Though it is normal for ordinary people to spend a lot on medication fees and extra time for looking after the aged and sick patient, as far as the spiritual path is concerned, it is compulsory for one to engage in those kinds of activities if one is looking for ultimate happiness. That is why the Buddha gave praise and honour to this caring for and helping the needy, and then extolled this type of compassionate behavior as a gift of loving-kindness.

The Buddha acted as a model for his disciples, and taught the discipline needed to become an Enlightened One. A Spiritual Friend is the giver of a meditation subject that will lift one up in wisdom. Finally, the power of compassion and wisdom can therefore be developed from awareness, keeping a positive attitude to overcome difficulties in every stage and experience in life for both oneself and society.

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