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## The truth about the four noble truths

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### Introduction

Subsequent to the first century CE, the Four Noble truths have encapsulated both the theory and the practice that comprise the foundation of Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> These Truths elaborate upon the concept of suffering, more specifically, the definition of noble suffering, the cause of suffering, how to extinguish suffering, and how to circumvent the cycle of rebirth.<sup>2</sup> *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* and *Buddha* are two edifying sources that incorporate two seemingly different ideas about where suffering arises and how to rid one's life of suffering. Karen Armstrong's *Buddha* emphasizes that the basis of suffering is remaining entangled in desire and ensnared by ego, and that one should divest oneself from egotism in order to extinguish suffering<sup>3</sup>; however, this definition excludes other aspects of suffering. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* illustrates the idea that ignorance paves the way to suffering, and that the extinction of suffering involves broadening one's mind in order to perceive that which is beyond the illusions that life presents.<sup>4</sup> The foundation of craving is ignorance, which ultimately leads to suffering. Thus, one has to dissolve ignorance in order to see beyond desires and egotism, which then allows one to experience an extinction of suffering and to evade the perpetual cycle of rebirth.

In order to gain liberation and serenity, one must first learn to detach oneself from one's surroundings, and then one can be released from self-centeredness. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* asserts

There is the Tathagatagarbha [Buddha-Womb- the pristine mind under cover of illusion]. One cannot see this. But if one does away with illusions, one may indeed enter. It is thus. By the raising of such a mind [i.e. by cultivating such an attitude of mind], one gains freedom from all things.<sup>5</sup>

This source discusses that by expanding one's mind with knowledge regarding how to stop fixation on one's surroundings, one can perceive beyond the illusions that life fabricates and ultimately gain freedom. *Buddha* embraces

Then and only then will he experience the "exultation", "joy", and "serenity" which, according to the Pali texts, come to us when we divest ourselves from egotism and liberate ourselves from the prison of self-centeredness.<sup>6</sup>

This source maintains that in order to experience freedom and exultation, one must become disengaged from egotism and eventually become selfless.

<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Lopez, "Four Noble Truths," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/214989/Four-Noble-Truths>.

<sup>2</sup> "On the Four Truths," in *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, ed. Tony Page, trans. Kosho Yamamoto (dol@yandex.ru, 2007), 97, excerpt from *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* (c. 100 CE), pdf.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Armstrong, "Parinibbana," in *Buddha* (New York: Penguin Group, 2001), 84.

<sup>4</sup> "On the Four Truths," in *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, "Parinibbana," in *Buddha*, 85.

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However, this source does not take in to consideration the underlying impact of ignorance. When in a state of ignorance, one does not understand that attachment ultimately leads to suffering. Once there is a sustaining attachment to one's surroundings, one begins to desire and crave, and as a result one repeats the cycle of rebirth. Only when one obtains knowledge by following the Tathagata, or Buddha, can one separate oneself from one's surroundings and abandon cravings. Therefore, one does not become enmeshed in suffering, but rather this pathos becomes obliterated.

If one refuses education and practices nothing, then one will not extinguish egotism or become selfless, and will therefore endure the cycle of rebirth for countless eternities. When referring to the enlightenment of the Buddha, *Buddha* states, "Once egotism had been snuffed out, there would be no flames or fuel to spark a new existence, because the desire which bound him to samsara had been finally quenched."<sup>7</sup> In this secondary source, the emphasis focuses on the idea that once one conquers egotism, nothing else binds one to the cycle of rebirth. *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* avers, "If a person practices... selflessness and emptiness, such a person repeats birth and death for innumerable ages to come and suffers from sorrow."<sup>8</sup> *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana* highlights that notion that practicing altruism is irrelevant to extinguishing suffering and escaping the cycle of rebirth. Instead, this source exhibits an inherent embracing of the importance of knowledge and states that one must refrain from practicing emptiness. The primary source also states

A person annuls what is right and won't allow it to live. On account of this, that person does not know "Dharmata" [essence of Reality]. Not knowing this, he repeats birth and death and suffers greatly.<sup>9</sup>

This clarifies that if one neglects the fact that one's surroundings do not represent the definite reality that one lives in, then one will not experience an extinction of suffering, but rather one will continue to experience the cycle of rebirth. In order to escape suffering, one must acquire knowledge so as to understand that one's surroundings are not real; then one will recognize the essence of reality. Once one becomes disentangled from one's surroundings, there no longer exists anything to crave or desire, thus eradicating egotism. When one reaches a state of resolute selflessness and practices the Four Noble Truths, one possesses the capability to elude the cycle of rebirth.

*Buddha* emphasizes that the basis of suffering is remaining enmeshed in desire, while *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra* holds ignorance as the cause of suffering. Ignorance is derived from egotism and desire. Once one possesses the capability to see beyond the illusions that life presents, one ceases to be an egotistical being. As soon as one becomes selfless, one can elude suffering, and ultimately, the cycle of rebirth.

## Reference

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "On the Four Truths," in *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.