

Buddhism: The fourth noble truth: Astangikmarga

The fourth noble truth, as seen already, lays down that there is a path (mārga)—which Buddha followed and others can similarly follow—to reach a state free from misery. Clues regarding this path are derived from the knowledge of the chief conditions that cause misery. The path recommended by Buddha consists of eight steps or rules and is, therefore, called the eightfold noble path (aṣṭāṅgika-mārga). This gives in a nutshell the essentials of Buddha Ethics. This path is open to all, monks as well as laymen. The noble path consists in the acquisition of the following eight good things:

Right views (sammādiṭṭhi or samyagdr̥ṣṭi)—As ignorance, with its consequences, namely, wrong views (mithyādr̥ṣṭi) about the self and the world, is the root cause of our sufferings, it is natural that the first step to moral reformation should be the acquisition of right views or the knowledge of truth. Right view is defined as the correct knowledge about the four noble truths. It is the knowledge of these truths alone, and not any theoretical speculation regarding nature and self, which, according to Buddha, helps moral reformation, and leads us towards the goal—nirvāṇa.

Right resolve (sammāsaṅkalpa or samyaksāṅkalpa)—A mere knowledge of the truths would be useless unless one resolves to reform life in their light. The moral aspirant is asked, therefore, to renounce worldliness (all attachment to the world), to give up ill-feeling towards others and desist from doing any harm to them. These three constitute the contents of right determination.

Right speech (sammāvācā or samyagvāk)—Right determination should not remain a mere 'pious wish' but must issue forth into action. Right determination should be able to guide and control our speech, to begin with. The result would be right speech consisting in abstention from lying, slander, unkind words and frivolous talk.

Right conduct (sammākammanta or samyakkarmānta)—Right determination should end in right action or good conduct and not stop merely with good speech. Right conduct includes the Pañca-Sīla, the five vows for desisting from killing, stealing, sensuality, lying and intoxication.

Right livelihood (sammā-ājīva or samyagājīva)—Renouncing bad speech and bad actions, one should earn his livelihood by honest means. The necessity of this rule lies in showing that even for the sake of maintaining one's life, one should not take to forbidden means but work in consistency with good determination.

Right effort (sammāvāyāma or samyagvyāyāma)—While a person tries to live a reformed life, through right views, resolution, speech, action and livelihood, he is constantly knocked off the right path by old evil ideas which were deep-rooted in the mind as also by fresh ones which constantly arise. One cannot progress steadily unless he maintains a constant effort to root out old evil thoughts, and prevent evil thoughts from arising anew. Moreover, as the mind cannot be kept empty, he should constantly endeavour also to fill the mind with good ideas, and

retain such ideas in the mind. This fourfold constant endeavour, negative and positive, is called right effort. This rule points out that even one high up on the path cannot afford to take a moral holiday without running the risk of slipping down.

Right mindfulness (*sammāsati* or *samyaksmṛti*)—The necessity of constant vigilance is further stressed in this rule, which lays down that the aspirant should constantly bear in mind the things he has already learnt. He should constantly remember and contemplate the body as body, sensations as sensations, mind as mind, mental states as mental states. About any of these he should not think.

Right concentration (*sammāsamādhi* or *samyaksamādhi*)—One who has successfully guided his life in the light of the last seven rules and thereby freed himself from all passions and evil thoughts is fit to enter step by step into the four deeper and deeper stages of concentration that gradually take him to the goal of his long and arduous journey—cessation of suffering. He concentrates his pure and unruffled mind on reasoning (*vitarka*) and investigation (*vicāra*) regarding the truths, and enjoys in this state, joy and ease born of detachment and pure thought. This is the first stage of intent meditation (*dhyāna* or *jhāna*). When this concentration is successful, belief in the fourfold truth arises dispelling all doubts and, therefore, making reasoning and investigation unnecessary.

From this results the second stage of concentration, in which there are joy, peace and internal tranquillity born of intense, unruffled contemplation. There is in this stage a consciousness of this joy and peace too. In the next stage, attempt is made by him to initiate an attitude of indifference, to be able to detach himself even from the joy of concentration. From this results the third deeper kind of concentration, in which one experiences perfect equanimity, coupled with an experience of bodily ease. He is yet conscious of this ease and equanimity, though indifferent to the joy of concentration.

Lastly, he tries to put away even this consciousness of ease and equanimity and all the sense of joy and elation he previously had. He attains thereby the fourth state of concentration, a state of perfect equanimity, indifference and self-possession—without pain, without ease. Thus he attains the desired goal of cessation of all suffering, he attains to arhatship or *nirvāṇa*. There are the perfect wisdom (*prajña*) and perfect righteousness (*śīla*).