16 Characteristics of the Four Noble Truths

The four noble truths encompass all Buddhist teaching. In the Mahayana tradition, each noble truth possesses four characteristics, making sixteen in all. These characteristics can be meditated on:

Truth of Suffering

1. Impermanence

Buddhism often refers to this first characteristic, impermanence, in connection with death. If we have some idea of impermanence, we can handle death more easily. However, the main reason to seek an understanding of impermanence is to understand that attachment to the five aggregates is suffering.

To understand suffering, we have to understand how different levels of impermanence work. Generally, we understand that things come and go – that things are impermanent. They arise due to causes and conditions, remain until their lifespan is finished, and then they are extinguished. Beyond this, however, there is a more subtle level of impermanence – this level is called changing moment by moment. This refers to the fact that things do not stay the same even for one moment.

The aspect of impermanence that is the most difficult to understand is the fact that when phenomena come into being due to causes and conditions, those same causes and conditions that produce them, at the same moment, contain the seeds of their own destruction. Take for example the impermanence of a table. The table, right at the beginning, comes into being through the power of other things – it cannot produce itself. In the same way, everything is other-powered. Everything relies on other powers, other factors to come into being, and that dependence makes things subject to disintegration. The simple fact that we are under the control of other forces induces a subtle level of suffering.

In looking at the world as a whole, our present unenlightened existence is totally under the power of ignorance and delusion and totally given to uncontrolled change. For this reason, we can understand that our present unenlightened state is dukkha.

2. Suffering

From the Buddhist view, our present existence came into being due to ignorance and afflicting emotions. Afflictive emotions arise due to the mind being either attracted toward an object or repelled by it. So the two types of afflicting emotions are attraction and aversion. The terms as they are used here have a much deeper and more subtle meaning. The mind, misconceiving the mode of existence of the object by seeing the object as existing from its own side, instinctively either moves toward the object or away from it, depending on whether the object supports or threatens the mind’s own sense of a concrete, unitary self.
We experience aversion toward something that damages our sense of self, and attraction to something that bolsters our sense of self. This can be extremely subtle. (Next time you enter a crowded room, watch how you instinctively warm to certain people and avoid others, even if you do so with no more than a flick of your eyes.)

In our present unenlightened state, just having the five aggregates is suffering because they are produced by the fundamental confusion of ignorance and afflictive emotions, and therefore there is no basis for pure happiness in them. Our basic composition is imperfect.

3. Emptiness

Emptiness refers to the emptiness of a self that is permanent, unitary, and indivisible reality. Many people have a notion of a soul or “self” as something individual, and believe there is some unchanging thing within our ever-changing aggregates – something separate from both body and mind – that holds the essence of “me”. In reality, there is no “I” separate from the aggregates.

We are always identifying with the “I”, and we always associate the “I” with one of the aggregates. It is this attachment to the aggregates that should be understood to be suffering and abandoned. In order to understand that, we have to understand that this thing we call “I”, according to Buddhist philosophy, is only the combination of ever-changing physical and mental phenomena and events.

4. Selflessness

Selflessness refers to the lack of existence of any self-supporting, independent, substantially existing person. This is not how we see things – in contrast, we instinctively feel that we are more than just the combination of mental and physical aggregates; we are certain that there is something there that is a self-supporting identity, a self that is self-sufficient, substantial reality.

Selflessness refutes the wrong notion of a self that can be found within the five aggregates and yet is still self-sufficient or substantial.

Finally, it is important to remember that it is our attachment to the five aggregates that causes suffering, not the aggregates themselves. Contemplating these four characteristics one by one, we come to understand our lives more clearly – and we learn to differentiate between our normal perceptions and how things really are.
Truth of Origin

The four characteristics below explain the origin of our suffering by showing how karma and delusions act together to bring it about.

1. Causes

This refers to the fact that contaminated karma and delusions are constantly arising within our mental continuums, and because of their nature they have the quality of being the causes of suffering. We need to clearly understand this. (Many causes and conditions make up and determine our existence, but this second noble truth points to the fundamental cause.)

2. Origin

Origin indicates that afflictive emotions and contaminated karma are the actual origin of suffering, not just intermediate links in a chain of cause and effect. They have the characteristic of being the origin of suffering.

3. Strong Production

Strong production means that delusions and karma are more than just passive ingredients in the creation of suffering; they act forcefully as its main causes.

4. Condition

Condition indicates that karma and delusions are more than just the main causes of suffering, they are the contributory causes as well. In other words, they are the whole business – the entire reason we suffer.

Truth of Cessation

1. Cessation

Cessation describes the noble truth itself – it is the ceasing of all delusions and ignorance, not only temporarily but forever. These negativities will never again occur in the mindstream.

2. Pacification

Cessation pacifies the torment of suffering, bringing the result of nirvana or enlightenment, complete and never-ending peace.

3. Being Superb

Because cessation is the ultimate goal of all spiritual paths, it is considered to be superb, the third characteristic, in the sense of being supreme in bringing about the source of all health and happiness. It is the quality of real trustworthiness, never changing or turning into something different or less supreme.
4. Definite Emergence

The fourth characteristic of cessation is that it will definitely bring us out of samsara, and so this characteristic is called *definite emergence*. By realizing the truth of cessation of suffering, we are totally released from samsara and free from all suffering and delusions.

**Truth of the Path**

1. Path

Path is the means by which we progress, such as the noble eightfold path or the five paths (found in the Mahayana tradition: the paths of accumulation, preparation, seeing, meditation, and enlightenment). These practices are "paths" that will lead to cessation in the same way that certain streets will lead to our desired destination.

2. Awareness

Awareness is the ability of these paths to lead us to a full and complete understanding of what the root of cyclic existence is, and thus lead us to escape it. We become aware of both the depth of our problems and the means of escape.

3. Achievement

Achievement is seen from the perspective of the *resultant* state, which means that through these various paths we can *definitely* achieve the result of liberation or enlightenment. (Awareness means to know that is right and what is wrong, whereas achievement means the actual practice that gets you there – awareness is what gets you there, and achievement is what you get.)

4. Deliverance

Deliverance destroys the main cause of samsara. The noble eightfold path has the quality of deliverance – delivering us from the bondage of our conditioned existence.

**Source**: Notes excerpted, and adapted, from Geshe Tashi Tsering, *The Four Noble Truths* [The Foundation of Buddhist Thought, Volume 1] (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), pages 42-48, 100, 120, 146-147.