

Still Learning

Bringing Buddhism to life for your school

Teachers' Notes

The Four Noble Truths

The Four Noble Truths are set out in a style used by Indian medicine at the time of the Buddha—'what is the illness?', 'what is the cause?', 'what is the prognosis?', 'what is the cure?'. The illness the Buddha is diagnosing is the suffering of all beings.

1) Life involves suffering

The Buddha wasn't saying that all life is suffering—obviously there are pleasant things in life that we can enjoy. He was saying that nobody is without suffering in their life—that life inevitably involves suffering. We get what we don't want, we don't get what we do want, we get sick, we get old, and we die. Everyone knows what it is to experience suffering.

2) Our suffering comes from our craving.

The Buddha was saying that we experience such suffering because we want things to be different from how they really are. We want to push away what is painful, and grab what is pleasant. But because we will never be able to rearrange the world to permanently suit our preferences, we will inevitably experience suffering. So it is this craving attitude towards life which is responsible for our suffering.

(N.B. The Buddha did talk about suffering which is just to do with having a human body, such as physical pain. But we usually make this a lot worse for ourselves by our attitude of aversion to the pain.)

3) The Truth of Enlightenment

The Buddha said that there was a way to remove this craving that causes our suffering, and that is by attaining enlightenment. An enlightened being sees the world as it really is, and therefore does not expect it to behave to suit his/her needs and desires, and is content whatever state he/she is in.

4) The Noble Eight-fold Path

The Buddha gave us a practical path to follow in order to gain enlightenment. We start by developing our vision of how we want to be, and then the rest of the path gives us ways to transform ourselves to be more like our vision. This includes looking at what we do for a living, how we speak, how we act, and whether our emotions are positive.

(See Teachers' Notes on 'The Noble Eight-fold Path' for more details.)

Food for thought...

What is craving? What does it feel like to experience craving? Is it pleasant? Would it be nicer to be free from craving?

Can I think of a time when I've suffered because I've really wanted something? Maybe I didn't get it, or it wasn't what I thought it would be like when I did get it. How did it feel?