

UNITED WISDOM

The Four Noble Truths as a Structure for Inquiry

World and Consciousness

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What this article is about

Imagine someone who has entered a familiar argument again. Afterwards, they decide, “I just need to calm down.” An hour later, another thought arrives: “I need to prove I am right.” Both promise quick relief. Yet neither has answered the questions: what exactly was painful, how does the tension develop, what might cease to sustain it, and which actions are actually available?

The four noble truths are often remembered as four propositions about suffering. In Buddhist teaching, they are also associated with different tasks: understanding, relinquishing, realising, and developing. This article considers their religious meaning and offers a limited contemporary application: a way to avoid collapsing different questions into one ready-made answer. We will neither turn the Buddhist path into a psychological technique, declare all pain the result of a mistaken attitude, nor promise liberation after reading. We will ask what changes when an experience requires inquiry, its conditions require discernment, and a possible path requires particular work rather than a general instruction to “become calmer.”

1. Four propositions and four different actions

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, SN 56.11, sets out the truth of dukkha, the truth of its arising, the truth of its cessation, and the truth of the path. Dukkha is usually rendered as “suffering,” “unsatisfactoriness,” or “stress”; no single translation exhausts all its uses. In the same discourse, each proposition has a task associated with it: suffering is to be understood, its origin relinquished, cessation realised, and the path developed. SN 56.11, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

This distinction is easily lost if we read the four truths only as statements to agree with. We can know their names and continue to confuse the actions. We might, for example, try to eliminate a painful feeling before understanding what is happening, endlessly investigate a habit we have already decided to relinquish, or want a result without developing the available conditions for it to arise.

Our contemporary example is someone facing a difficult conversation. They say, “I want it all to end.” Different wishes may be hidden within that statement: ending a particular quarrel, understanding a recurring pattern, repairing the relationship, or leaving it. If none is

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distinguished, every piece of advice becomes too general. Silence can end today's conversation while sustaining tomorrow's problem.

Four different questions slow that transition down. What am I trying to understand? What do I consider it possible to stop sustaining? Which change do I actually mean? What needs to be developed to make it more possible? This sequence is our editorial adaptation, rather than an account of the entire Buddhist teaching. Its purpose is disciplined inquiry, rather than a claim to the religious promise.

Different tasks do not make life linear. In an actual inquiry, we have to return: a new action reveals that the initial explanation was incomplete; clarification changes the outcome we want. A framework is useful only insofar as it helps us notice these transitions. If it makes us force experience into predetermined boxes, it already obstructs its purpose.

2. Understanding suffering does not mean agreeing to endure it

The first truth names birth, ageing, death, separation from what is wanted, encountering what is unwanted, and not obtaining what is wanted; its brief general formulation concerns the five aggregates subject to clinging. This is a particular religious account of the human condition. “Everything is bad” impoverishes it and loses the direction of the teaching that follows. SN 56.11, the formulation of the first truth.

In our everyday application, understanding begins by specifying the experience. “They do not respect me” might mean that someone was interrupted, an agreement was broken, consent was not sought, or desired praise was withheld. These events differ. The differences help determine whether we need a conversation about rules, a reconsideration of working together, acceptance of another person's disagreement, or additional information.

Clarification must not become an interrogation of oneself. Someone is entitled to say for now, “I am struggling, and I cannot explain it.” Sometimes that describes the situation more accurately than a ready-made theory about its cause. The absence of an explanation does not make the experience less real or deprive anyone of the right to seek support.

Likewise, understanding does not require remaining in every circumstance. If a participant in our hypothetical conversation is being threatened, the task is not to investigate their irritation more deeply in the middle of the threat. Safety and the possibility of leaving matter in their own right. One set of actions is useful in a calm disagreement; another is needed in a dangerous situation.

Imagine a more ordinary episode: an employee attends a meeting where their proposals are systematically ignored. They may notice both the external rules governing who gets to speak and their own expectation of immediate recognition. Acknowledging the latter does not cancel

the former. If inquiry produces only “change your attitude,” an important part of the picture remains invisible.

“Understanding” is therefore not a synonym for submission. It is an attempt to distinguish the event, the experience, the interpretation, and what remains unknown. That work sometimes leads to patience, sometimes to objection, sometimes to a change in conditions. Its outcome is not prescribed in advance. Otherwise, the first task would be merely preparation for a decision convenient to someone else.

3. The arising of suffering and premature blame

The second truth in SN 56.11 names craving associated with further becoming; it distinguishes craving for sensual pleasure, for becoming, and for non-becoming. The modern instruction “just stop wanting anything” does not convey this distinction. It also confuses a religious explanation with the evaluation of every everyday desire. SN 56.11, the formulation of the second truth.

We can want water, fair pay, or an end to harm. The presence of a desire does not show that someone is to blame for their difficulty. It does not entitle us to tell an unpaid worker that the problem is their attachment to money. Such an explanation shifts attention too quickly from a broken agreement to the worker's inner state.

A person seeking a cause can readily become their own accuser: “If there is suffering, I must be living wrongly.” Yet that formula combines several unsupported transitions: from an experience to its sole cause, from a cause to blame, and from blame to personhood. In our contemporary cases, each transition needs grounds of its own.

Imagine someone waiting for a friend's reply. They might send another message, check their phone twenty times, and begin reading the silence as proof that nobody needs them. Here it is reasonable to investigate which actions sustain the tension. But without a conversation, we cannot know why the other person has not replied. A hypothesis about our own sequence does not reveal someone else's motive.

One useful distinction is that a condition someone can change is not necessarily the sole cause. If they stop constantly checking their phone, that may change their evening, but does not guarantee the restoration of the friendship. If they clarify an agreement, the other person can still decline. A limited choice remains a choice without becoming control over the whole outcome.

A more careful question follows: “What in my participation is sustaining this particular difficulty now?” It neither replaces inquiry into external conditions nor assumes that everything depends

on the person. It can identify one available part of the work. In some cases, an honest answer will be “I do not know yet” or “The main obstacle is currently beyond my control.”

An explanation can also be tested by asking what difference another answer would make. If the friend did not reply because the message never arrived, checking delivery is useful. If they want distance, checking the phone will not resolve the issue. If there was never an agreement to reply, expectations need to be discussed first. The same unpleasant feeling accompanies different situations here. That is precisely why we cannot immediately infer one cause and one correct next step from it.

Sometimes someone has tried several solutions yet continues choosing the same explanation because it provides a sense of certainty. It then helps to consider the results of those attempts. Did they actually change the condition thought to matter, or did only the description change? That examination may be harder than offering fresh advice: it requires acknowledging the limits of the initial picture. Without it, every recurrence risks becoming confirmation of a thought chosen in advance.

4. Two arrows and the limits of a metaphor

The Sallatha Sutta, SN 36.6, distinguishes physical pain from the mental reaction associated with it through the image of two arrows. A disciple and an untrained person may experience a painful feeling, but the text describes different relationships to it. This is instruction within a religious tradition, rather than a medical classification of the causes of pain. SN 36.6.

Contemporary use of that image requires care. “You shot the second arrow yourself” can sound like blaming someone for any reaction to loss or harm. It may also suggest that the right spiritual state removes the need for treatment, support, or a change in a dangerous environment. Neither conclusion is needed for our reading.

Take a limited hypothetical example of being turned down for a job. There is a fact: another candidate was chosen. Something remains unknown: all the grounds for that decision. Further thoughts arise: “Nobody will ever hire me”; “Everyone saw that I am worthless.” Those thoughts need not have been voluntarily invented. Yet noticing them gives someone the opportunity to ask what supports each conclusion.

They may discover that one conclusion needs new information, another is too broad, and a third is connected with earlier experience. That does not make the rejection pleasant. They may still feel disappointment and doubt. The practical result here is discernment, rather than a duty to stop feeling immediately.

It also matters that the rejection might belong to an actually unjust system. Inner inquiry then does not cancel the external question. It may be necessary to learn about the selection

conditions or choose a different environment. The second-arrow image is useful only when it leaves the first visible.

That is the metaphor's limit. It helps formulate a question about an added interpretation, but does not explain all of a particular person's pain. If a listener uses it to stop listening, the thought becomes a means of distancing themselves. Attentive reading requires the capacity to restore complexity where a convenient image has reduced it.

5. Cessation and the wish for immediate relief

The third truth concerns the cessation of craving, rather than a promise of permanent good cheer. T. W. Rhys Davids's historical translation of 1881 conveys this part in terms of relinquishing craving and becoming free of it; its outdated terms and annotations must be distinguished from the translated text itself. Buddhist Suttas, chapter II, §§7–8.

In a contemporary conversation, “cessation” readily becomes a demand: “I want nothing to trouble me any more.” Every unpleasant feeling is then treated as a failure. Someone adds another task of control to their original difficulty. For inquiry to remain honest, we need to specify exactly what is supposed to cease.

Return to our recurring argument. Perhaps the aim is neither to win nor to remove disagreement forever, but to stop responding to a remark with an insult. That is a limited change that can be described and observed. It does not guarantee that the other person will become kinder or that the relationship will survive.

There is another possibility: someone wants to end a relationship in which conversations lead to no change. That decision cannot automatically be called spiritual immaturity. This article has insufficient grounds to make it on the reader's behalf. It can only help distinguish the desired outcome from the actions sustaining the previous sequence.

Partial relief should not be presented as complete liberation either. Today someone answered a message differently: that is an observation about one episode. Tomorrow, circumstances may change. Speaking about lasting change requires further observations, rather than confidence gained from one successful attempt.

Respect for the teaching's religious scope matters here. Buddhist liberation cannot be reduced to improved messages or workplace conversations. Our application concerns a particular distinction in everyday life. Acknowledging that limit makes it possible to read the tradition without claiming its ultimate achievement.

6. The path involves more than an inner state

The eightfold path includes right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. SN 45.8 explains its components separately; right speech, for example, concerns refraining from lies, divisive, harsh, and idle speech. This is an ethical and contemplative framework, rather than a single technique of attention. Magga-vibhanga Sutta, SN 45.8.

For a contemporary reader, it is particularly significant that activity does not disappear behind discussions of consciousness. We can think extensively about calmness and continue speaking in ways that make another person's participation in dialogue impossible. We can experience an exalted state and fail to keep a simple agreement. Describing an experience does not replace assessing behaviour.

Our hypothetical example is a discussion of shared work. One participant tries to speak gently, but continually changes deadlines without warning. Another voices complaints sharply, yet identifies a real problem. Looking only at tone makes the first person's behaviour seem better. Looking only at the breach makes the manner of speaking disappear from view. Both distinctions are needed here.

In our limited application, the path can be understood as a set of conditions that need sustaining. For a single meeting, those might be a clear agenda, available time, an opportunity to disagree, and an accurate record of the decision. Having those conditions does not prove the participants' moral perfection, however. It simply makes a particular task easier to understand.

There is an important difference between developing a capacity and forcing it. Listening requires time, opportunities to correct what has been heard, and recognition of the limits of one's energy. A demand to be attentive at all times does not create that capacity. Sometimes shortening or rescheduling a meeting is more useful than performing a state one does not possess.

This application does not equate workplace organisation with the Buddhist path. It uses the distinction between intention, action, and supporting conditions. Readers may use that distinction without adopting the entire religious framework, provided they do not present their particular experience as the fulfilment of its promise.

The conditions of the path in our example are distributed among people. If one prepared a clear agenda and another allowed no time to discuss it, the result cannot be judged solely by the first person's inner effort. The organisation of the environment matters. At the same time, someone can notice that their own promises also create conditions for others. Their right to pause is compatible with the need to give notice when shared work is expected of them.

That perspective helps distinguish limited resources from a refusal to act. Someone may want to speak attentively yet currently lack the energy for a long meeting. They can choose a shorter format or another date. That is a particular decision about available participation. It differs from constantly promising to become ready someday, without any visible conditions, timescale, or possibility of reconsideration.

7. Why a single cause rarely settles the question

AN 3.61 criticises teachings that explain all experienced life exclusively through past action, creation by a supreme being, or the absence of causes and conditions. The text connects those comprehensive explanations with difficulties in meaningful effort. This provides an important basis for resisting a simplified fatalistic reading. Tittha Sutta, AN 3.61.

Our contemporary conclusion from this way of framing the question is limited: an explanation that fits every outcome sometimes ceases to help distinguish actions. If everything happened “because it was meant to,” we do not learn which information was missing, where a decision occurred, or what might change. Yet this objection itself requires particular examination; it does not refute every religious belief.

Imagine an educational task. Someone fails an examination and explains it solely through a lack of ability. Someone else insists that only the teacher is to blame. Incomplete preparation, the questions asked, assessment conditions, and an unfamiliar format may have played a part. Until those circumstances are distinguished, arguing about the sole culprit offers little help for another attempt.

That does not mean distributing responsibility equally. Conditions may be unequal, participants have different power, and some actions matter more. Attention to several conditions must not dissolve a serious breach into the general phrase “everyone had an influence.” A grounded account of particular responsibility is compatible with declining a single universal cause.

The question of a next action does not require a complete explanation of the entire past either. Sometimes knowing that a particular skill is missing or that an agreement is not being kept is enough. Yet the scope of our knowledge should be stated honestly: it grounds a limited decision, rather than a final theory of the event.

Such an approach preserves the possibility of reconsideration. If an action fails to produce the expected result, we can examine the hypothesis rather than declare the person insufficiently diligent. New evidence changes the picture. That is why a structure for inquiry may be more valuable than an appealing answer that no subsequent experience can clarify.

8. Questions that help and questions that entangle

The Sabbasava Sutta, MN 2, distinguishes appropriate from inappropriate attention. Questions that can keep someone entangled in views include speculation about their own essence; appropriate attention is associated with the four truths. The text addresses monastic practice. It must not be turned into a general ban on philosophical questions about personhood. MN 2, the section on seeing.

In our contemporary application, a question can be tested by the distinctions an answer might reveal. “Why do I always ruin everything?” already contains a universal accusation. “At what point in this conversation did I stop listening to the other person?” permits different answers and may change the next choice. The latter is not necessarily more pleasant, but is usually more precise.

Some questions look substantial yet merely repeat what came before. If someone already knows they did not obtain necessary information, a tenth reflection on their insecurity will not produce that information. Perhaps the next step is to ask for it, make a trial attempt, or decide to postpone acting. The duration of analysis alone does not show its depth.

The cost of a question also matters. Some topics need time, quiet, and trust. Raising them in the middle of a tense meeting may be inappropriate. Someone can choose a pause and need not explain everything immediately. Being able to decline is a condition of honest inquiry, rather than an obstacle to it.

Attention to a question's consequences does not mean selecting only comfortable answers. Sometimes we have to learn that a desired outcome is impossible, that our own action mattered more than we wished, or that support is limited. A precise question can provide uncomfortable but usable clarity.

Yet it need not end in immediate action. Deciding to learn more, not to continue today's argument, or to acknowledge that no choice is available can also be described. What matters is distinguishing a meaningful pause from a promise used to change nothing. That requires observable circumstances, rather than judging another person's character from a distance.

A further criterion for a useful question follows: it leaves room for an answer that changes the initial plan. Clarifying the desired benefit of a conversation may reveal, for example, that agreeing on a deadline matters more to someone now than explaining their entire relationship history. If the inquirer continues pursuing a deep cause while ignoring that answer, they are following their own programme. Respect for a person is also expressed through the ability to narrow the task.

Finally, answering a question does not mean accepting all its assumptions. Readers can say, “That cause is not present in my case” or “This framework does not describe my experience.”

Such an answer should not be treated as resistance to truth. In the contemporary application proposed here, it is a reason to reconsider the question and sometimes to stop applying the framework to that case.

9. What this means in practice

For reflection on your own, choose one small episode in which tension has subsided enough to consider it without hurry. There is no need to begin with bereavement, a threat, or the most painful event. This article offers questions for reflection, rather than treatment or a replacement for necessary help.

The first question is “What exactly was difficult?” It helps to name the event and the experience separately. For example: “During the meeting, my question went unanswered; I felt irritated and concluded that my participation was unnecessary.” Three different elements are already visible. The conclusion may prove right or wrong; for now, it is something to examine.

The second question is “Which conditions and actions sustained the difficulty?” Perhaps the meeting was overloaded, the question was unclear, the participant responded sharply, or decisions really were being made without them. Do not choose only an internal or only an external cause in advance. If information is missing, preserve that as something unknown.

The third question is “What would I like to stop sustaining, and which limited change matters?” For example: stop trying to prove my importance by raising my voice and obtain a clear answer about my role. These are connected but different tasks. The first concerns one's own action; the second requires others to participate. One does not guarantee that the other will be resolved.

The fourth question is “What needs to be developed or organised for that?” It may take a short written formulation, a separate meeting, a prepared example, or a decision to leave an unsuitable collaboration. A manageable step differs from the general demand to become better. It can be taken, its result considered, and, if necessary, revised.

After an attempt, return to what can be observed. Was the question heard? What changed in the actions? What result appeared? If nothing changed, do not automatically blame yourself for insufficient awareness. Perhaps the hypothesis was incomplete, an external condition remained unchanged, or the chosen step did not fit the task.

These four questions do not equal the four truths in their full religious meaning. They borrow the distinction between tasks while retaining a much smaller scope. We can understand one episode without claiming to have completed a path of liberation. Clarity is a significant intermediate result, but must be kept apart from action and its consequences.

To assess a limited change, compare comparable circumstances. A calm conversation after a holiday and a difficult meeting at the end of an overloaded week differ in more than the chosen action. That does not cancel the value of the successful episode. It helps us answer more carefully what changed, which conditions might have contributed, and what else needs to be learned before reaching a general conclusion about ourselves or another person.

At the beginning of the article, someone wanted either to calm down or to prove they were right. They may now have a third possibility: understanding which particular question they are trying to answer. Sometimes calmness does follow. Sometimes a firm conversation is needed. Sometimes they have the right to stop. The value of discernment lies in prescribing none of those outcomes in advance.

Sources and passages used

1. Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, SN 56.11. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1993; the four truths, their associated tasks, and the framework of the path. A compact account without verbatim quotations.

2. Sallatha Sutta, SN 36.6. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997; the two-arrow image and the distinction between pain and the reaction to it.

3. T. W. Rhys Davids, Buddhist Suttas, chapter II. Sacred Books of the East, XI, 1881; §§7–8 and 9–20. Used as a historical translation, without accepting all its annotations and comparisons.

4. Magga-vibhanga Sutta, SN 45.8. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1996; the components of the path and speech.

5. Tittha Sutta, AN 3.61. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997; criticism of comprehensive explanations of experience and their consequences for action.

6. Sabbasava Sutta, MN 2. Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997; appropriate attention, questions about selfhood, and the four truths.

Tags

Buddhism, four noble truths, dukkha, craving, cessation, eightfold path, attention, causality, suffering, discernment, inquiry, responsibility, action, practical reflection.