

The Four Noble Truths as Personal & Social Praxis

Jonathan S. Watts
Keio University
Tokyo, Japan

The Four Noble Truths

- 1) a statement of truth
- 2) a way of analyzing a situation – both on the individual and social levels
- 3) an injunction to experience

The Four Noble Truths, and all Buddhist teachings in fact, are best understood **not as beliefs** but as recommendations for how **to investigate and experience our lives**. In a common daily Theravada chant, the Buddha's teachings, that is the Dharma, are summarized as:

To be realized by oneself (*sanditthiko*)
Timeless in practice and fruition (*akaliko*)
Inviting others to come and see (*ehipassiko*)
Leading ever deeper into the heart (*opanayiko*)
Experienced personally by the wise (*paccatam veditabbo vinnuhi*)

When you need to evaluate an idea or a teaching and see its worth, you can always **test it out on these above aspects of dharma**.

The 1st & 2nd Noble Truths

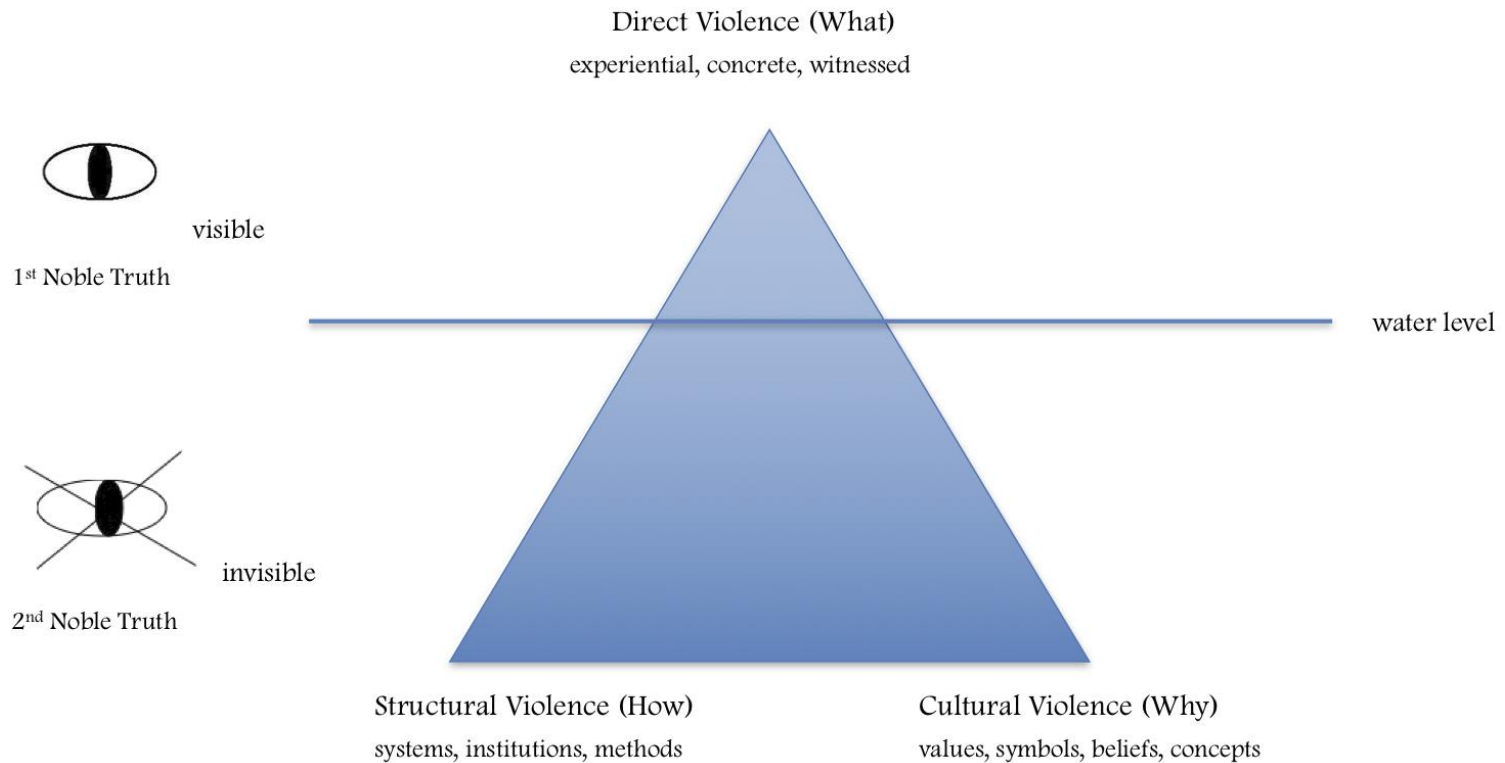
The 1st Noble Truth

- 1) Existence is *dukkha* (suffering, dissatisfaction, dis-ease)
- 2) What is the problem?
- 3) How is it *directly* experienced (direct violence/ direct *dukkha*), both on the individual and social levels?

The 2nd Noble Truth

- 1) The cause of suffering/*dukkha* occurs through an interdependent causal process which begins with ignorance and desire/craving/attachment.
- 2) What are the structural and cultural sources of violence/*dukkha*?
- 3) How do we discover the causes, conditions and processes that create the problem/*dukkha*?

The Iceberg of Dukkha



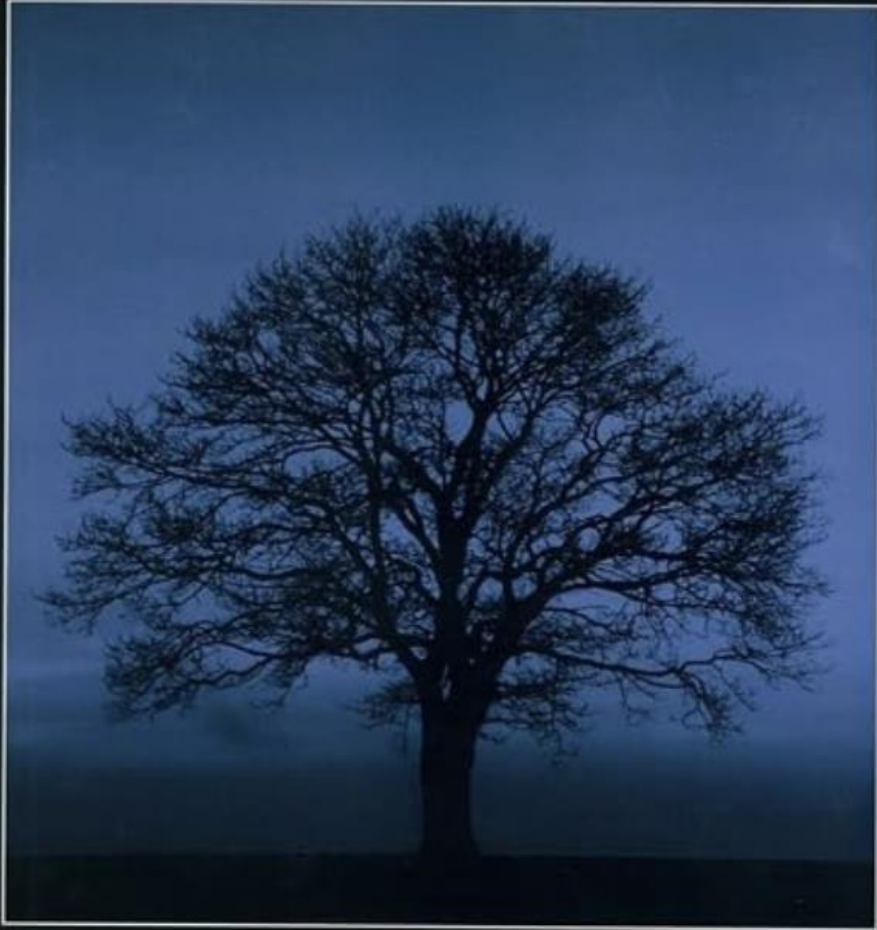
Direct Violence/Dukkha = the problems, violence, and dukkha which are clearly seen and directly experienced, as opposed to the underlying structural and cultural causes

Structural Violence/Dukkha = systems, institutions, and methods which lead to harm to our basic human needs of a) survival, b) well-being, c) identity, d) freedom, and e) nature

Cultural Violence/Dukka = the values, symbols, ideas, and beliefs (found in religion and ideology, language and art, and science) used to justify, or legitimize direct or structural violence.

A BUDDHIST HISTORY OF THE WEST

Studies in Lack



DAVID R. LOY

ECODHARMA

*Buddhist
Teachings
for the
Ecological
Crisis*

DAVID R. LOY

AUTHOR OF MONEY, SEX, WAR, KARMA

Eco-Dharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis

by David Loy

Is Climate Change the Problem?" 1st Noble Truth

- 1) the planet's sixth great extinction event, an apocalypse?:
“an apocalypse is “an uncovering,” the disclosure of something hidden”.
- 2) There is an “intersection” of these environmental issues with social justice concerns such as racism, ethnicity, gender, neocolonialism, and class.
- 3) More than a technological problem, or an economic problem, or a political problem, it is also a collective spiritual crisis
- 4) Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche:
“Enlightenment is like falling out of an airplane. The bad news is that there is no parachute. The good news is that there is no ground.”

Are We and the World Broken?

The Means-Ends in Modern Society (David Loy)

- ❖ The problem of means and ends: the never-ending promise (teleology) of capitalism and communism
- ❖ the promise of resolving a brokenness in the future if we sacrifice good means for better ends (=modern utilitarianism)
- ❖ **Capitalism & Communism are forms of broken Christianity:** faith became “private”, rationality and science became “public” and a violent dualism was born
- ❖ **Tribal Nationalism & Religious Fundamentalism as forms of broken ancient religion:** Return to an ancient golden era, no need for struggle, ritual healing
- ❖ **Buddhism:** teleological striving to resolve *dukkha* with a sense of completeness in the present

2nd Noble Truth: Is the Eco-Crisis Also a Buddhist Crisis?”

“Is It the Same Problem?”

- 1) Some Buddhist teachings discourage us from social and ecological engagement
- 2) Modern Buddhism offers new perspectives on mental distress and new practices to promote this-worldly well-being but still individualistic and disengaged
- 3) A third understanding of Buddhism is: deconstructing and reconstructing the sense of self, or (more precisely) the relationship between oneself and one's world and hence doing the same with economic and political systems
- 4) This reconstruction replaces the “three poisons” of greed, ill will, and delusion with generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom that recognizes our interdependence.
- 5) Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh: “The Buddha attained individual awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop the course of destruction.”
- 6) There is actually such a movement happening now, which is like our collective immune system responding to this dis-ease

The 3rd & 4th Noble Truths

The 3rd Noble Truth

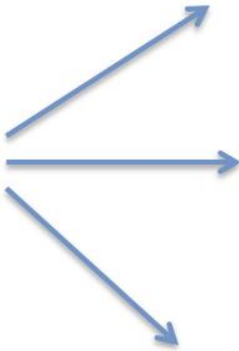
- 1) Nirvana is the ending of the causes and conditions of *dukkha*.
- 2) What is the vision?
- 3) What does it feel like to live in a peaceful, non-violent society?
How is it experienced?

The 4th Noble Truth

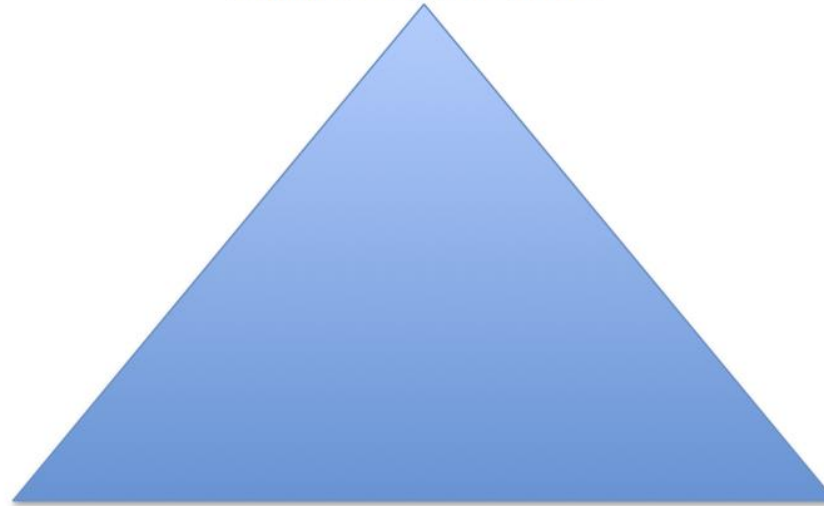
- 1) There is a way to realize this ending of *dukkha*, specifically the Buddha's Eightfold Path.
- 2) What is the way to realize our vision?
- 3) How do we experience this vision?
 1. ethical treatment [respect and non-harming] of oneself and others (*sila*)
 2. the inner development of the heart and mind (*samadhi*)
 3. being able to recognize what is helpful to oneself and others, and non-harmful (*panna*)

Diamond Pyramid of Nirvana

Eye of Discriminating Wisdom
sees in all directions



Vision/Holding Actions
Shamatha as Social Welfare



Alternative Social Structures

Shifts in Consciousness & Culture

Vipassana as Social Transformation

- **Holding Actions** aim to hold back and slow down the damage being caused by the political economy of the Industrial Growth Society.
- **Transforming the Foundations of our Common Life** (Gaian Structures) through developing and implementing life-sustaining systems and practices.
- **Shifts in Perception and Values** arise as we recognize and honor our grief for our world, uprooting notions of the essential separateness of the self from other humans, the world, and the deeper energies of reality.

The 3rd Noble Truth

“What If It’s Too Late?”

- 1) Joanna Macy’s “Work That Reconnects” emphasizes that: our grief for what is happening to the earth is not the final collapse of our aspirations for it, but necessary for those who aspire to follow the path of spiritual engagement.
- 2) She integrates grief into a transformative spiral that starts with coming from gratitude, which enables us to honor our pain for the world, leading to seeing with new eyes, and only then going forth to engage in what she calls “The Great Turning.”
- 3) Thich Nhat Hanh’s response to the possibility of our own extinction encourages us to “touch eternity with our breath”, for in that eternity there is no birth and no death.
- 4) There is the inevitable impermanence of everything yet we strive onward undeterred by life and death

The 4th Noble Truth

“What Are We Overlooking?” & “What Shall We Do?”

- 1) Great spiritual masters went into the wilderness for insight and its primordial power instead of its utilitarian benefit. This helps us do the above of deconstructing our views and opinions.
- 2) Buddhist teachings do not tell us what to do, but they tell us a lot about how to do it. (Middle way between teleology and stagnation) The 4 Brahmaviharas and paramitas
- 3) Eco-Dharma:
 - a) practicing in the natural world,
 - b) exploring the eco-implications of Buddhist teachings, and
 - c) embodying that understanding in the eco-activism that is needed today.

Bodhisattva as Ecosattva (no burnout)

- 衆生無邊誓願度 Sentient being are numberless, I vow to liberate them
- 煩惱無盡誓願斷 Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them
- 法門無量誓願學 Paths of Truth are infinite, I vow to master them
- 仏道無上誓願成 The enlightened way is unsurpassed, I vow to attain it.

Resources: Joanna Macy

Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age



Joanna Rogers Macy

WORLD AS LOVER WORLD AS SELF

Joanna Macy



Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal