

# Chapter 2

## Mindfulness and the Four Noble Truths

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### 2.1 Introduction

The teaching of the Four Noble Truths is recorded as being the first teaching given by the Buddha after he attained enlightenment. It is arguably the most important of all Buddhist teachings and provides the foundation for the entire collection of discourses that the Buddha subsequently provided. Without exception, every aspect of Buddhist practice is somehow encompassed by this simple yet profound teaching, and no study or practice of any component of the Buddha's teachings—including mindfulness—is complete without a thorough comprehension of how it relates to the Four Noble Truths. In this chapter, we examine the significance and meaning of the Four Noble Truths and then discuss their individual and collective implications for understanding, practising, and working with mindfulness.

### 2.2 The Four Noble Truths

In the *Discourse that Sets the Wheel of Dharma in Motion (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya, 56:11)* that forms part of the *Connected Discourses on the Truths (Saccasamyutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya, 56)*, the Buddha is recorded as expounding the Four Noble Truths as follows (Bodhi 2000, p. 1844):

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1. Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.
2. Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.
3. Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it.
4. Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is this noble eightfold path; that is, right view... right concentration.

During subsequent teachings, the Buddha provided additional accounts and explanations of the Four Noble Truths (e.g. *Saccavibhanga Sutta* (The Exposition of the Truths Sutta), Majjima Nikāya, 141 (MN 141)). However, consistent with the generally accepted abbreviated form of the Four Noble Truths, for the purposes of this chapter, we will summarise and refer to them as follows:

1. Suffering exists
2. There is a cause of suffering
3. There is cessation of suffering
4. There is a path that leads to the cessation of suffering

The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* records that on the occasion when the Buddha first taught the Four Noble Truths (an event referred to as the “first turning of the wheel of Dharma”) at the Deer Park in Sarnath near Varanasi, the primary recipients of the teaching were the five aesthetes (the Buddha’s first disciples). However, a frequently overlooked observation concerning the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* is that the *sutta* also records that the earth-dwelling devas were recipients of this teaching. The inclusion within the audience of two very different types of being—those in human form and those of the deva realm—has important implications for understanding the significance of Four Noble Truths and of the Buddha’s teaching more generally. Most importantly, it implies that there are both outer and inner (or hidden) aspects to the Buddhist teachings that can be interpreted and transmitted on both exoteric and esoteric levels (Gampopa 1998).

Understanding that the Buddhist teachings are multilayered in their meaning and profundity is an essential take-home message for anybody wishing to comprehend, practice, or work with any aspect of the Buddhadharma. In fact, as illustrated and discussed in the section below that utilises deductive logical analysis (DLA) in order to investigate the theoretical and spiritual validity of the Four Noble Truths, each individual teaching given by the Buddha embodies the meaning and potency of the entire spectrum of the Buddha’s wisdom and knowledge (Gampopa 1998). It is probably for this reason that there exist reports of some of the Buddha’s followers directly ascending to liberation simply upon hearing the Buddha utter the

Four Noble Truths. Some examples are (i) the Venerable Añña Kondañña (one of the five aesthetics) who awoke to the “dust-free, stainless vision of the dhamma” (Bodhi 2000, p. 1846; the prefix Añña before the name Kondañña denotes “one who has understood” or “one who has realised”), and (ii) the householder Upāli who “saw the Dhamma, understood the Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma, attained the Dhamma; he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the teacher’s dispensation” (Nanamoli and Bodhi 2009, p. 485).

In addition to appreciating the spiritual significance and potency of the Four Noble Truths, a further essential take-home message concerning this teaching is that the statements that comprise the Four Noble Truths were never intended to be ambiguous. Indeed, not only were the noble truths intended to represent the Buddha’s experiential understanding and expression of the truth but they were also intended to represent statements of fact. For example, the Buddha’s statement that suffering exists does not just mean that there is the potential for suffering to exist, it means that with the exception of those beings that have realised the third noble truth (i.e. the cessation of suffering), all beings suffer (Shonin et al. 2015). Likewise, the noble truth of suffering does not mean that sentient beings suffer at certain times but not at other times, it means that sentient beings that have not ascended to liberation are continuously immersed in suffering.

## 2.3 Suffering Exists

In Western culture, suffering is generally construed as the experience of either somatic or psychological pain. Therefore, in the absence of such pain and whilst experiencing favourable socio-environmental conditions, individuals are generally not categorised as suffering or ill according to Western medical conventions (e.g. as defined by the World Health Organization). However, within Buddhism, the term “suffering” takes on a much more encompassing meaning. Irrespective of whether a sentient being is currently experiencing psychological or somatic pain, and irrespective of whether a sentient being considers itself to be suffering, Buddhism asserts that the very fact an unenlightened being exists means it suffers (Shonin et al. 2015).

This type of enduring latent suffering referred to above is known in Buddhism as *all-pervasive suffering* (Gampopa 1998). In essence, it is the suffering that arises due to an individual’s ignorance as to the ultimate nature of self and reality. Given that unenlightened beings have a distorted perception of reality, Buddhism asserts that they are deluded (Tsong-Kha-pa 2004). Accordingly, within Buddhism and to a large extent, the terms “suffering”, “deluded”, and “ignorant” can all be used interchangeably.

One means of conceptualising the Buddhist interpretation of suffering as a form of delusion (or ignorance) is by drawing parallels between the two conditions of mindlessness and hallucination. Mindlessness refers to a lack of present moment

awareness, whereby the mind is preoccupied with future (i.e. fantasised) conjectures, or past (i.e. bygone) occurrences (Shonin et al. 2014a). Therefore, an individual afflicted by mindlessness might be said to be engaging in the *non-perceiving of that which is*. Hallucination, on the other hand, can be described as being *the perceiving of that which is not*. Thus, given that both states involve an erroneous perception of the here and now, some of the current authors have previously argued that mindlessness is actually a form of inverted hallucination (Shonin et al. 2014a).

According to Buddhist thought, the overwhelming majority of people are deemed to be delusional (i.e. suffering) and in a permanent inverted hallucinatory state (Shonin et al. 2014a). However, as the twelfth century Tibetan Buddhist Gampopa (1998, p. 96) aptly pointed out, although all unenlightened beings (human or otherwise) experience all-pervasive suffering, they are generally ignorant of this fact:

Ordinary people will not feel the all-pervasive suffering as, for example, when one is stricken with a serious plague and a small pain in the ears and so forth is not noticeable. But the saintly beings—the noble ones beyond samsara such as the stream enterers and so forth—will see the all-pervasive suffering as suffering ....

In addition to all-pervasive suffering that might be described as a more subtle form of suffering, Buddhism recognises two other primary forms of suffering that are much more tangible. The first is known as the *suffering of change* and refers to the fact that whatever temporary happiness there might be, it simply cannot endure. As stated by the Buddha in his explication of the first noble truth, birth leads to the suffering of sickness and old age, and sickness and old age lead to the suffering of death. Being in love leads to the suffering of separation, and having possessions (e.g. wealth, health, reputation, family, friends) leads to suffering when one is ultimately parted from such favourable circumstances. In short, suffering is ubiquitous to the human condition, and the principle of impermanence means that just as with all phenomena and experiences, favourable circumstances are transient and are subject to dissolution (Dalai Lama 1995).

The third primary form of suffering recognised in the Buddhist teachings is that of the *suffering of suffering*. This is the most palpable form of suffering and is typified by experiences such as somatic pain, psychological distress, illness, hunger or starvation, thirst or dehydration, being too hot, and being too cold. Buddhism asserts that the human being comprises five aggregates (i.e. form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness; Sanskrit: *skandhas*; Pali: *khandhas*) and that each individual aggregate is likewise composite (Dalai Lama and Berzin 1997). For example, the first aggregate of form (or the body) in turn comprises the five elements of water, wind (i.e. air), earth (i.e. food), sun (i.e. heat/energy), and space (i.e. in the bodily cavities, between molecules, and so on; Shonin et al. 2014b). Due to the fact that the human body exists in reliance upon a delicate balance of innumerable causes, components, and conditions, Buddhism teaches that even a slight imbalance in these elements and components results in both the suffering of suffering (e.g. pain and discomfort) and, ultimately, the suffering of change (e.g. illness and death; Gampopa 1998).

## 2.4 The Cause of Suffering

As a means of operationalising (within Western psychological and scientific domains) Buddhism's position concerning the aetiology of suffering, we recently formulated the concept of *ontological addiction* (Shonin et al. 2013). Ontological addiction can effectively be considered a new category of addiction (i.e. in addition to chemical addiction and behavioural addiction) and is defined as “the unwillingness to relinquish an erroneous and deep-rooted belief in an inherently existing ‘self’ or ‘I’ as well as the ‘impaired functionality’ that arises from such a belief” (Shonin et al. 2013, p. 64). Due to a firmly embedded, yet scientifically and logically implausible belief that the self is an inherent and independently existing entity, Buddhism teaches that afflictive mental states arise as a result of the imputed “self” incessantly craving after objects it considers to be attractive or harbouring aversion towards objects it considers to be unattractive (Shonin et al. 2014a). Put simply, Buddhism asserts that because sentient beings believe they inherently exist, they constantly crave after objects and/or situations that they deem will better their predicament (Dalai and Berzin 1997). Not only is this craving itself a form of suffering but as explained by the Buddha, it also causes an unending torrent of sorrows to ensue:

Whoever is overcome by this wretched and sticky craving, his sorrows grow like grass after the rains. (*Dhammapada*, 24, 335; Buddhārakkhita 1986, p. 113)

In Buddhist terminology, the word craving has very similar connotations to the meaning of the word attachment, which is deemed to be an undesirable quality that leads to the reification of the ego-self. We have previously defined attachment as “the over-allocation of cognitive and emotional resources towards a particular object, construct, or idea to the extent that the object is assigned an attractive quality that is unrealistic and that exceeds its intrinsic worth” (Shonin et al. 2014a, p. 4). Thus, attachment takes on a different meaning in Buddhism vis-a-vis its construction in Western psychology where attachment (i.e. in the context of relationships) is generally considered to exert a protective influence over psychopathology (Shonin et al. 2014a, b). Based on a Buddhist construction of attachment, lower levels of attachment have been shown to predict greater levels of mindfulness, acceptance, non-reactivity, self-compassion, subjective wellbeing, and eudemonic wellbeing (Sahdra et al. 2010). Furthermore, the Buddhist attachment construct is positively correlated with avoidance (i.e. of intimacy), dissociation, fatalistic outlook, and alexithymia (i.e. an impaired capacity to identify or describe feelings; Sahdra et al. 2010).

It is important to understand that although there are many similarities between the Buddhist notion of craving/attachment and the connotation of these terms in, for example, substance misuse and behavioural addiction contexts, additional levels of meaning are implied by the Buddhist construction. Indeed, the type of craving referred to in the Buddhist model of suffering is incredibly deep-rooted and stems from a wrong view that has been developed and cemented over innumerable lifetimes of samsaric wandering (Tsong-Kha-pa 2004). Therefore, as stated by the

Buddha, sentient beings have a propensity for craving, and any path that does not facilitate the severing of craving at its roots will only result in a short-term reduction in suffering:

Just as a tree, though cut down, sprouts up again if its roots remain uncut and firm, even so, until the craving that lies dormant is rooted out, suffering springs up again and again. (*Dhammapada*, 24, 338; Buddhārakkhita 1986, p. 133)

## 2.5 The Cessation of Suffering

There is debate amongst Buddhist schools as to exactly what constitutes liberation (i.e. the cessation of suffering) and whether it represents the conclusion of the spiritual journey. For example, some Buddhist systems contend that liberation and enlightenment are two distinct conditions, whereby liberation signifies the removal of obscurations caused by emotional defilements (Sanskrit: *klesavarana*), but not of all obscurations to knowledge (Sanskrit: *jneyavarana*). However, despite the slight variations in how different Buddhist approaches interpret the meaning of the term “liberation”, all Buddhist schools agree that spiritual liberation implies breaking free of samsaric wandering.

Within Buddhism, beings are said to be samsaric if they are bound to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Buddhism contends that the particular category (i.e. hell being, preta, animal, human, demigod, god) and quality (i.e. attractive/ugly, rich/poor, healthy/unhealthy) of an individual’s rebirth are directly influenced by their karmic baggage (Tsong-Kha-pa 2004). In this context, karmic baggage refers to the imprint that each individual’s thoughts, words, and deeds leaves upon their mind and this, in turn, determines how they react to and perceive the conditions and occurrences around them.

Although we would argue that a being—including those that have attained Buddhahood—never actually concludes its spiritual journey, the Buddha’s statement that there is cessation of suffering implies that liberation from suffering is not a half-way stage on the path to enlightenment. The reason for this is because it is logically implausible to assert that there exists a state in which suffering has completely ceased, but that in this state, a being is still subject to a subtle class of ignorance (i.e. suffering) due to still not having awoken to complete omniscience and enlightenment. Therefore, we would argue that to experience the cessation of suffering means to have fully actualised: (i) omniscience, (ii) deathlessness, (iii) emptiness, (iv) unconditional blissful abiding, (v) freedom to take rebirth in any realm according to the needs of beings, (vi) great compassion (Sanskrit: *maha karuna*), and (vi) command over animate and inanimate phenomena.

Implicit as part of advancing on the path towards liberation is the accumulation of spiritual wisdom. There are numerous delineations of the term “wisdom” in Buddhism, but we would define it as “the extent to which an individual accurately apprehends both themselves and reality”. In other words, the Buddhist notion of wisdom refers to the gradual (or in some cases instantaneous) development of

insight that permits an individual to undergo recovery from ontological addiction by reconstructing their erroneous view of self and reality (Shonin et al. 2014a). Therefore, the Buddhist interpretation of wisdom contrasts with the Western psychological depiction where wisdom is generally measured against indices of knowledge, adaptive psychological functioning, and socio-environmental mastery (Baltes and Staudinger 2000).

Consistent with Buddhist thought, the degree of respect awarded to a particular Buddhist practitioner or teacher is (or should be) based on the amount of spiritual wisdom they have accumulated (Shonin and Van Gordon 2015). Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Buddhism assigns a similar meaning to the word wisdom (Sanskrit: *prajna*) as it does to the word enlightenment (i.e. the wiser a person is, the closer they are to enlightenment and vice versa). Shonin and Van Gordon (2014a, p. 1) described the Buddhist construction of wisdom as follows:

A wise person knows every inch of their mind. They know why it exists, where it exists, and how it exists. Not only do they know their mind, but they also know that part of them that knows that it knows the mind. They appreciate fully that they are both the observed mind as well as the mind that observes. Because they know their own minds, they also know every inch of everybody else's minds and they are fully aware that all minds are interconnected. They are aware that their mind is without limitations and they know that all other sentient beings also have the potential to have a mind without limitations. In short, their outlook is vast and unconditionally compassionate—everything is encompassed in it.

Although the wise person has realised the full potential of their mind, they are in no way conceited or boastful about this. In fact, the wiser a person is, the more humble they are. Wise people don't have goals or agendas *per se*, and they place no importance on being recognised for their efforts or successes. Their main objective is to simply be, and from this state of simply being, profound tranquillity and lucidity arises that allows them to act in a way that is inconceivably skilful yet completely uncontrived.

A noteworthy observation concerning the Buddhist construction of wisdom is that intelligence is not a prerequisite for being wise. Obviously, there are numerous categories (e.g. emotional, social, logical, linguistic, and so on) and interpretations of intelligence, but here, we are using the term according to its popular definition of the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills. Thus, based on a Buddhist view, it is probable that a wise person will be intelligent in the conventional sense, but it is also conceivably possible that they will not be. Buddhism regards intelligence as a tool that wise people can cultivate and make use of as required, but it also asserts that wise people appreciate the need to handle intelligence carefully. This is because in the absence of wisdom, intelligence can become an obstacle to enlightenment and therefore an obstacle to the development of a dynamic and fluid wisdom (Shonin and Van Gordon 2014a).

## 2.6 The Path

The fourth noble truth that there is a path that leads to the cessation of suffering principally refers to the Noble Eightfold Path that comprises the elements of (i) right view, (ii) right intention, (iii) right speech, (iv) right action, (v) right livelihood,

(vi) right effort, (vii) right mindfulness, and (viii) right concentration. A more detailed discussion of the eightfold path and its relationship to mindfulness is provided in Chap. 2, so here we briefly outline three considerations concerning the eightfold path that we deem to be pertinent in the context of the current discussion:

1. *The Noble Eightfold Path Is One Path*: As inferred by the Buddha's teachings on the noble eightfold path in the *Mahācattārisaka Sutta* (*The Great Forty Sutta*; MN 117), although the eightfold path comprises eight individual elements, these elements should be considered as the individual strands that comprise a single rope. A rope is at its strongest when all of the strands are wound together, and it is only when practised and embodied as a single path that the noble eightfold path provides all of the factors necessary to attain liberation. In fact, the same principle applies to the entire collection of Buddhist teachings. Irrespective of the complexity, aspect (i.e. esoteric or exoteric), and intended audience of a particular strand of teachings, all authentic Dharma teachings take their place as part of a cohesive whole, and they originate from a single source. In effect, there is only one path to liberation, but it manifests in various guises in order to appeal to the differing needs, dispositions, and capacities of suffering beings.
2. *Treading the Path Requires Right Effort*: In order to realise their corresponding outcomes, Dharma teachings require continuous effort on behalf of the practitioner. This may seem like an obvious statement, but what is perhaps less obvious is the type of effort that is required. An individual can only be said to be making the "right effort" when they adhere to each of the following sets of advice provided by the Buddha:
  - a. Understand and accept that nobody but themselves can eliminate their suffering:  

You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only point the way. Those meditative ones who tread the path are released from the bonds of Māra. (*Dhammapada*, 20, 276; Buddhārakkhita 1986, p. 109)
  - b. Make nothing less than complete liberation the object of their practice:  

He whose cankers are destroyed...whose object is the void, the unconditioned freedom—his path cannot be traced, like that of birds in the air. (*Dhammapada*, 7, 93; Buddhārakkhita 1986, p. 37)
  - c. Adopt the middle way between extremes (e.g. of trying too hard and not trying hard enough, of being attached to possessions/material comforts and of being averse to having possessions/material comforts):  

He who holds aloof from house holders and ascetics alike...him do I call a holy man. (*Dhammapada*, 26, 404; Buddhārakkhita 1986, p. 159)
  - d. At all times, hold the teacher and teachings as dear to their heart:  

Of all the paths the eightfold path is the best; of all the truths the four noble truths are the best; of all things passionlessness is the best; of men the Seeing One (the Buddha) is the best. (*Dhammapada*, 20, 273; Buddhārakkhita 1986, p. 109)



- e. View their life as a practice ground and persevere at all times:

Ever grows the glory of him who is energetic, mindful and pure in conduct, discerning and self-controlled, righteous and heedful. By effort and heedfulness, discipline and self-mastery, let the wise one make for himself an island which no flood can overwhelm. (*Dhammapada*, 2, 24–25; Buddhārakkhita 1986, p. 11)

- f. Offer loving-kindness and compassion unconditionally to all suffering beings:

Come bhikkhus, abide pervading one quarter [of directional space] with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above, below, around and everywhere, and to all as to yourselves, abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and ill will. Abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with compassion, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above, below, around and everywhere and to all as to yourselves, abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with compassion, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and ill will. (Nanamoli and Bodhi 2009, p. 434; MN 50)

3. *Any Attachment to A Path Must Be Relinquished*: In essence, walking the path is the practice of simply being and allowing the mind to relax into its natural state. Striving to do something other than this is an example of attachment and serves only to obscure pure perception:

Whoever meditates on me will not encounter me precisely on account of that meditation. As I am the manifestation of the fundamental nature, [in my state] suffering does not arise, and consequently, there is no need to try to eliminate it [by walking a path]. (Norbu and Clemente 1999, p. 187)

## 2.7 Deductive Logical Analysis of the Four Noble Truths

Robust empirical investigation permits the credible testing of hypotheses that involve observable variables. However, the utility of empiricism comes into question when attempting to investigate subtle spiritual phenomena or metaphysical propositions (Puhakka 2015). For example, to date, no scientifically credible empirical study has been conducted that allows reliable conclusions to be drawn regarding the claim made in the third noble truth that sentient beings can transcend to a state of spiritual liberation in which suffering has completely ceased. However, as far as Buddhism is concerned, the absence of scientific evidence in support of a given theory or assertion does not necessarily present a cause for concern. This is not to say that Buddhism does not recognise or value empirical findings, because it most certainly does. Indeed, what in our opinion constitutes a particular strength of Buddhist doctrine is that if robust scientific evidence comes to light that invalidates a particular aspect of Buddhist thought, then Buddhism is dynamic and humble enough to re-evaluate its spiritual and philosophical outlook accordingly.

However, although Buddhism recognises the importance of empirical evidence, the value it assigns to different forms of scientific evidence arguably proceeds in the reverse direction compared with contemporary research paradigms. For example,

the research and scientific community generally places experimental evidence (particularly from randomised controlled trials) much higher up the hierarchical-evidence pyramid than it does expert opinion. Buddhism, on the other hand, places much greater value on the opinion of spiritual adepts who are deemed to have directly tasted and penetrated the truth of existence. However, rather than some religious systems where followers are required or encouraged to accept claims made by the spiritually inspired as “the gospel truth”, the emphasis in Buddhism is for practitioners to adopt such claims as hypotheses to be accepted or rejected based on their own meditative and spiritual experience.

In conjunction with the investigating of spiritual hypotheses on the personal and experiential level, a key technique utilised in Buddhist practice is the examining of a given proposition via the use of DLA. DLA lends itself to the testing of hypotheses or theoretical assumptions that involve non-observable variables. In essence, the technique makes use of top-down (i.e. deductive) logical principles (e.g. detachment, syllogism, contraposition) such that reliable conclusions can be drawn from a given starting premise. Of course, any conclusions reached by using DLA are only as reliable as the soundness of the original premise. However, where the assumptions of logical validity and scientific soundness are not violated throughout a given deductive logical sequence, then the final outcome can be regarded as being necessarily true. In this section, we use DLA in order to test the logical validity of the Four Noble Truths and, in particular, to assess whether those aspects of the Four Noble Truths that relate to non-observable phenomena represent logically plausible assertions.

Taken at face value, the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths do not follow a coherent logical sequence. In the first noble truth, the Buddha states that “there is suffering”, but in the third noble truth, he states that “there is non-suffering” (i.e. cessation). Thus, the third noble truth negates the first noble truth, and the second noble truth does not provide a plausible or logical explanation of why this is so. However, Buddhism (and contemporary science) accepts the principle of causality (i.e. effects rely on causes) and so by factoring this premise into a deductive logical sequence, the link between the first and third noble truths becomes apparent:

*Sequence 1 (taking the first noble truth as a starting premise; P premise, C conclusion):*

- P1: There is suffering
- P2: Phenomena exist in reliance upon causes
- C: Therefore, there is a cause to suffering

*Sequence 2 (taking the conclusion of sequence 1 as the starting premise):*

- P1: There is a cause to suffering
- P2: Phenomena exist in reliance upon causes
- C2: Therefore, removal of the causes of suffering leads to the removal of suffering

Sequence 1 above validates from a logical perspective both the first and second of the Buddha’s noble truths (i.e. that suffering exists, and it has a cause). Taking the outcome of sequence 1 as the starting premise, sequence 2 then provides the logical

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