

The Noble Truth of Suffering

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Good morning! Welcome to International Buddha Dharma Society for Cosmic Law to listen to today's Dharma talk. Last week, we introduced what are the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are the Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering and the Noble Truth of the Path that Frees us from Suffering. We also recited the part in the Mahasatipatthana Sutra where the Buddha explained the Four Noble Truth in detail.

What is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering, sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and anguish are also suffering. Having to associate with those persons and things that one dislikes is also suffering. Being separated from those one loves, or likes is also suffering; wishing for what one cannot get is also suffering; in short, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering. In our daily life, how do we recognize these sufferings? How should we carefully perceive these sufferings?

Right after being born, little babies would cry out. They cry because of pain. From one world to another, the gentle stroking from the adults, the cool winding, the sound from surrounding... they need to get used to everything in this new world. Ten months in the mother's womb and the birth are a long and painful process. Some even could not live through the ten months and die. Many die not long after birth. From birth to death, who don't go through illness? Some even need to take medicines year after year or even stay in bed all the time. Some children have cruel parents. Some have oppressive siblings. Some have to be bullied by classmates, even teachers, even those who they trust. Some children do not have enough to eat. Some do not have clothes to wear. Some are born with this or that kind of defects. Some even are abandoned by their parents. Some get into bad habits because of parents, friends or the society. Some are abducted by bad persons so that they live on streets, or are sold to other family, or even are killed. Some children leave school in their early age, step into the society and go through difficulty things. Such and such, every kind, has countless varieties.

Even those healthy kids, kids that study well in school, there are still sufferings inside. For example, no love from their parents or parents don't give equal love to their kids, unfair teachers, not being able to get along well with their classmates. All the negative energy they live in make them suffer. In the school, at home, at work, there are always some people who you don't like, or they don't like you. In those situation, annoyances may arise, even anger and fear.

In this modern society, the pressure starts from children. They need to practice piano, violin... They need to study late, and they are busier than adults. While at school, it may be safe at school and they get educated at school, but at the same time, do they lose some freedom? Peer pressure exists too. Such and such, every kind, has countless varieties.

As parents, they need to worry about their children's eating, drinking, growing... Is their eating normal? Do they get enough sleep? Do they grow normal? A little bit deviation from the standard curve may make them worried. When they are several years old, parents will try to create different kinds of environment to prepare them for the society. Maybe they need a sibling. Another few years later, they care about their school life, then their job, then their kids. Such and such, day after day, month after month, year after year, every parent has their own bitterness, happiness, sorrow and lamentation, all different.

Every child has their own experience. Every parent has their own experience. Everyone has their own life experience. Everyone's life has different ups and downs, but suffering will not ignore anyone. Nobody is able to escape. No matter how excellent a person is, he/she has to face birth, ageing, illness and death of their loved ones and themselves. No matter how excellent a person is, he/she has to go through some rainy days. Such and such, all different. Life is like waves, rising and retreating, and at the end is disappearing.

Also, there are disasters of wind, water, fire, earthquakes, hurricanes, drought, tornados, and so on. Especially in recent years, extreme weathers appear often. I still remember the summer in winter two years ago. Just a couple days ago, it's reported that it's 32 °C in the north Europe within the Arctic circle and it's 48 °C in Spain. How many people lost their lives when the disasters happened? How many people lost their lives in the sunk ships and

crashed planes? In some countries, the political environment is not stable, and, in some places, people don't have enough food to eat and clean water to drink. Such and such, most likely you know more than me.

The sufferings in this world is endless and cannot be completely described, let alone sufferings in the ghost realm. Compared to ghost realm, if human beings are less greedy, things would be much better, and life would not be bad. We can't see ghost by our naked eyes, but for their sufferings, we can perceive their sufferings from sutras. In **the Ghosts Asking Maudgalyayana Sutra**, it says:

At that time, the Buddha lived in the Kalandaka Veṇuvana in Rājagṛha. One early evening, Ven. Maudgalyayana got up from meditation and came to the Ganges river. He walked along the river and saw many hungry ghosts, each suffering different karma retributions. The hungry ghosts saw Ven. Maudgalyayana and all showed their respect. They asked Ven. Maudgalyayana the causes of their retributions.

One ghost asked, "I am always headache. Why?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a person in previous life, you liked to hit others' head with a walking stick. So, you are a hungry ghost now and, in the future, you will go to hell to continue the suffering."

One ghost asked, "I am rich, but I like to wear ragged clothes. Why?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a person, you once cultivated merits by giving, but you regretted afterwards. So, you are receiving the retribution of hungry ghost and will continue the suffering in the hell."

One ghost asked, "I often have no fixed abode and sleep on the streets. Why?"

Ven. Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, somebody came and asked to live in your place for some time and you did not let him. When he did not want to live there and was about to leave, you again were angry. So, you are receiving the retribution of hungry ghost and will receive retribution of hell in the future."

One ghost asked, "I can only eat that much, and I am always hungry. What did I do?"

Ven. Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, when you invited people to eat, you never gave them enough to eat. So, you are receiving retribution of hungry ghost and will continue the suffering in the hell in the future.

One ghost asked, "My stomach is as big as an urn, but my throat is thin as a needle. What did I do before to suffer like this?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you were a leader of a tribe. You oppressed people, struck people, and forced people to offer you good food. So, you are receiving retribution of hungry ghosts and in the future, you will continue to suffer in the hell."

One ghost asked, "My male genital rots and the pain cannot not be described. What have I done?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you had sex in clean places like temples. That's why you are receiving this retribution. And in the future, you will sink into hell to continue the suffering."

One ghost asked, "I have many sons and they all have good looking, but they all died young. Whenever I think about this, my heart would break. Why?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, seeing your sons killing, you were happy. And you also ate the living beings that they killed with them. Due to this reason, all your sons died young. While because you were happy to see them killing living beings, so you are receiving this suffering of deep sorrow. Furthermore, you will fall into hell to continue to suffer in the hell."

One ghost asked, "There is a big dog with sharp teeth and shining eyes and it always bites me. Why?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you liked to hunt with a dog. You killed without any compassion. And in the future, you will fall into hell to continue the suffering."

One ghost asked, "There is always a person with a sharp knife and he cut off my flesh until the last bit. And then not long after, my flesh will grow out again and this person will come and cut off my flesh again. This is so painful. What on earth have I done?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you liked to cut the flesh of living beings without any compassion. This is the reason and in the future, you will continue the suffering in the hell."

One ghost asked, "I have pain everywhere. Why?"

Ven. Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you liked to fish. Not only that, you also liked to throw the fish to the sand and watch them dying in great pain. So, you are receiving this kind of retribution and in the future, you will go to hell to continue the suffering."

One ghost asked, "I have always been stupid and know nothing. Why?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you liked to persuade and force people to drink wine and make them drunk and muddleheaded. So, you are receiving this retribution and will continue this suffering in hell."

One ghost asked, "I often felt hot and thirsty. When I saw the Ganges river, I would want to jump into it to eliminate the heat and thirst. But once I entered the water, my body would be burned to pieces and the pieces would drop, and the bones would show up. Even though I am very thirsty, but when I drink the water, my five viscera would be burned to pieces and the pain is unbearable. What on earth have I done before?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you liked to set fire on forest and mountains to kill living beings. So, you are receiving this retribution. And in the future, you will sink into hell to continue the suffering."

One ghost asked, "I often felt hungry and thirsty and wanted to go to the bathroom to get some shit to eat. But the vigorous ghost always hits me with a cane and I have no way to get close. Why?"

Maudgalyayana answered, "When you were a human, you were an abbot in a temple. When other bhiksus came, you were mean and did not invite them to eat. After they left, you and others in the temple would eat. And because of this, you are receiving this retribution. And in the future, you will fall into hell to continue the suffering."

One ghost asked, "There is always some smelly and dirty stuff stuck to my body. When I am extremely hungry and thirsty, I would eat these filthy things. What did I do before?"

Maudgalyayana answered, “When you were a human, you were a Brahmin who cultivated Brahma. One day, there was a cultivator who came to you after lunch time. You had an idea and made sure that he would not come back again. You took his bowl, put shit into it first and then covered it with rice. After the cultivator went back, he washed his hands and face and prepared to eat. The meal in the bowl became so smelly that he could not eat it. So, you are receiving this retribution. And in the future, you will fall into the shit hell to continue to suffer.”

One ghost asked, “On my shoulder, there is always a copper bottle full of copper juice. My hand would automatically scoop out the copper juice and water my head. This is so much pain. What on earth is happening?”

Ven. Maudgalyayana answered, “When you were a human, you were in charge of programs in a temple. You hid a bottle of curd cheese. After the guest bhiksus left, you took out and shared with other bhiksus in the temple. You should know the bottle of curd cheese is public property and belongs to everyone. Because you were mean of public property, you are receiving this retribution and you will fall into hell to continue the suffering. “

One ghost asked, “In the hell, I am either climbing a knife mountain or sword tree, or I am falling into a fire pit or a boiling pot. My suffering won’t stop. Why?”

Maudgalyayana answered, “When you were a human, you were an abbot in a temple of gods of the heaven. At that time, you often killed cows, sheep and pigs to worship the gods of the heaven. When sprinkling the blood and the flesh of the three kinds of animals to the four directions, you proclaimed, ‘If you sacrifice to the gods of the heaven this way, you will have good luck.’ Because you spread this kind of evil and demonly words, cheated common people, so you fell into the hell to receive punishment.”

One ghost asked, “I constantly swallow iron balls. Why?”

Maudgalyayana answered, “When you were a human, you were a novice. One day, you used clean water to make stone honey pulp. When working, you quietly knocked off a small piece off a big chunk of stone honey and ate it. Because you ate before all the others, you received this retribution of constantly swallowing iron balls in the hell.”

After Maudgalyayana spoke the causes and the retributions to the hungry ghosts, he came back to Mount Grdhrakuta.

The Buddha told the disciples the questions and answers between Maudgalyayana and hungry ghosts. After hearing this, they bowed and said good bye to the Buddha. They remembered the teaching and did not dare to make the same mistakes.

After reading this sutra, you now should understand that all suffering has a cause or causes. Cause and Effect Law is everywhere. All we are receiving is due to what we have done.

The suffering of the hungry ghosts cannot be completely described, let alone suffering of living beings in the hell. So, what about suffering of living beings in the hells?

In the **Original Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Sūtra**, it's said, "Within the three karma seas is big hells. There are hundreds and thousands of them, each different from another. It's said to be big because it has 18 categories. Under each category, there are 500 kinds. The suffering there is indescribable. Under each kind, there are again hundreds and thousands of types and there is no way to describe the suffering either.

In the **Original Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Sūtra**, it's also described as this, "Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva then said, "Compassionate One, the suffering in hells are as follows. There is a hell in which the sinners' tongues are pulled out and plowed. Then, there is another hell which the *yaksas* rip out sinners' hearts and eat them. There is a hell in which sinners are cooked in boiling waters. Then, there is another hell which sinners are forced to embrace burning-hot bronze pillars. There is a hell in which sinners' bodies are burned in fires. Then, there is another hell which is always freezing; in another, [the sinners are submerged in] unlimited amounts of feces and urine; in another, flying white-hot 'morning stars' [strike the sinners]; in another, fire spears [pierce the sinners' bodies]; in another, the sinners' chests and backs are pounded; in another, sinners' hands and feet are burned; in another, iron snakes suffocate sinners [by coiling around their necks]; in another, iron dogs [tear the sinners into pieces]; in another, iron mules [trample the sinners]."

Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva concluded by saying, "Compassionate One, these types of suffering number into the hundreds of thousands. Within each hell, the implements of karmic retributions are made of bronze, iron, rock and fire, for these four materials are manifestations of the sinners' karmic sins. If [I were to] describe in detail the karmic retributions in all the hells, [I must] address all the myriad of sufferings in each hell. In addition, there are many more hells [not even mentioned yet]. By the divine power of the

Buddha and [responding to] Mahasattva's question, I have briefly described them. If to describe it in detail, in all the time of the future, it cannot be completed."

Today, we talked about the suffering in the human realm, ghost realm and hell realm. Besides these three realms, there are also animal realm, Asura realm and heaven realm. As we know, the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm and the animal realm are three evil realms. The human realm, Asura realm and the heaven realm are three good realms. In the sutra, it's said that the quantity of living beings in the hell is like the dust on the earth; the quantity of hungry ghosts is like the sand in the Ganges river and the quantity of human beings is like the dust in the nail. This is why we often say that it is so rare to obtain a human body. So, we all should cherish and do meaningful things with it.

Next week, we will talk about the characteristics of each realm and the causes of suffering for each realm. Amitabha! Thank you! Protect well our body, mouth and mind. Don't create new karma. And repent what we have done wrong. Thank the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for their compassionate rescuing. May we lessen our greed, lesson our anger, be more compassionate, have more freedom. All beings are from the same source and belong to the same body. Thank you! See you next week!