

## Sixteen Characteristics of the Four Noble Truths

The Mahayana text *Ornament of Clear Realization (Abhisamayalamkara)* identifies four characteristics of each Noble Truth, for a total of sixteen characteristics, which are presented as a guide to contemplating and practicing the Four Noble Truths. The *Ornament of Clear Realization* is a key text in the curriculum of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and study colleges, and this method of study and practice is emphasized in the Tibetan tradition.

These sixteen characteristics are identified as follows:

- **Truth of suffering** - these characteristics refer to the five aggregates
  1. impermanence - the five aggregates\* are impermanent and change from moment to moment
  2. suffering - the five aggregates have come into being because of *avidya*\* (ignorance) and *kleshas*\* (disturbing emotions), and they are under the influence of the *avidya* and *kleshas*
  3. emptiness - there is no "self" outside of the five aggregates that controls or makes use of the five aggregates
  4. selflessness - there is no "self" to be found within the five aggregates that controls or makes use of the five aggregates
- **Truth of origin** - these characteristics refer to karma\* , *kleshas*, and *avidya*
  1. causes - karma, *kleshas*, and *avidya* are constantly arising within our mental continuum, and because of their nature they have the quality of being the causes of suffering.
  2. origin - *kleshas* and karma are the actual origin of suffering, not just intermediate links.
  3. strong production - *avidya*, *kleshas*, and karma act forcefully as the main causes of suffering (they are not just passive ingredients)
  4. condition - *avidya*, *kleshas*, and karma are more than just the main causes of suffering, they are also the contributory causes

- **Truth of cessation** - these characteristics refer to cessation
  1. cessation - cessation is the ceasing of all *kleshas* and *avidya* forever
  2. pacification - cessation pacifies the torment of suffering, and brings true peace
  3. being superb - cessation is supreme in bringing about the source of all health and happiness
  4. definite emergence - cessation will definitely bring us out of *samsara*\*
  
- **Truth of the path** - these characteristics refer to the path
  1. path - the path leads to cessation
  2. awareness - the path leads us to a full and complete understanding of the root of cyclic existence (*samsara*) and the means to escape it
  3. achievement - through the path, we can definitely achieve the result of liberation and enlightenment
  4. deliverance - the path delivers us from the bondage of our conditioned existence

Definitions (marked \* above):

*avidya* (Skt.): ignorance, which is generally divided into two types: ignorance of causality and ignorance of ultimate nature.

*five aggregates*: the traditional way to break down a person into psychophysical components. The aggregates are form (body), feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness (mind).

*karma* (Skt.): action; the natural law of cause and effect whereby positive actions produce happiness and negative actions produce suffering.

*klesha* (Skt.): delusions – the combination of ignorance and the afflictive emotions of attachment and aversion.

*samsara* (Skt.): cyclic existence, the state of constantly taking rebirth due to delusion and karma.

Sources:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Noble\\_Truths#Sixteen\\_characteristics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Noble_Truths#Sixteen_characteristics)  
 Tsering, Geshe Tashi. *The Four Noble Truths: The Foundation of Buddhist Thought* (Volume 1). Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005.