

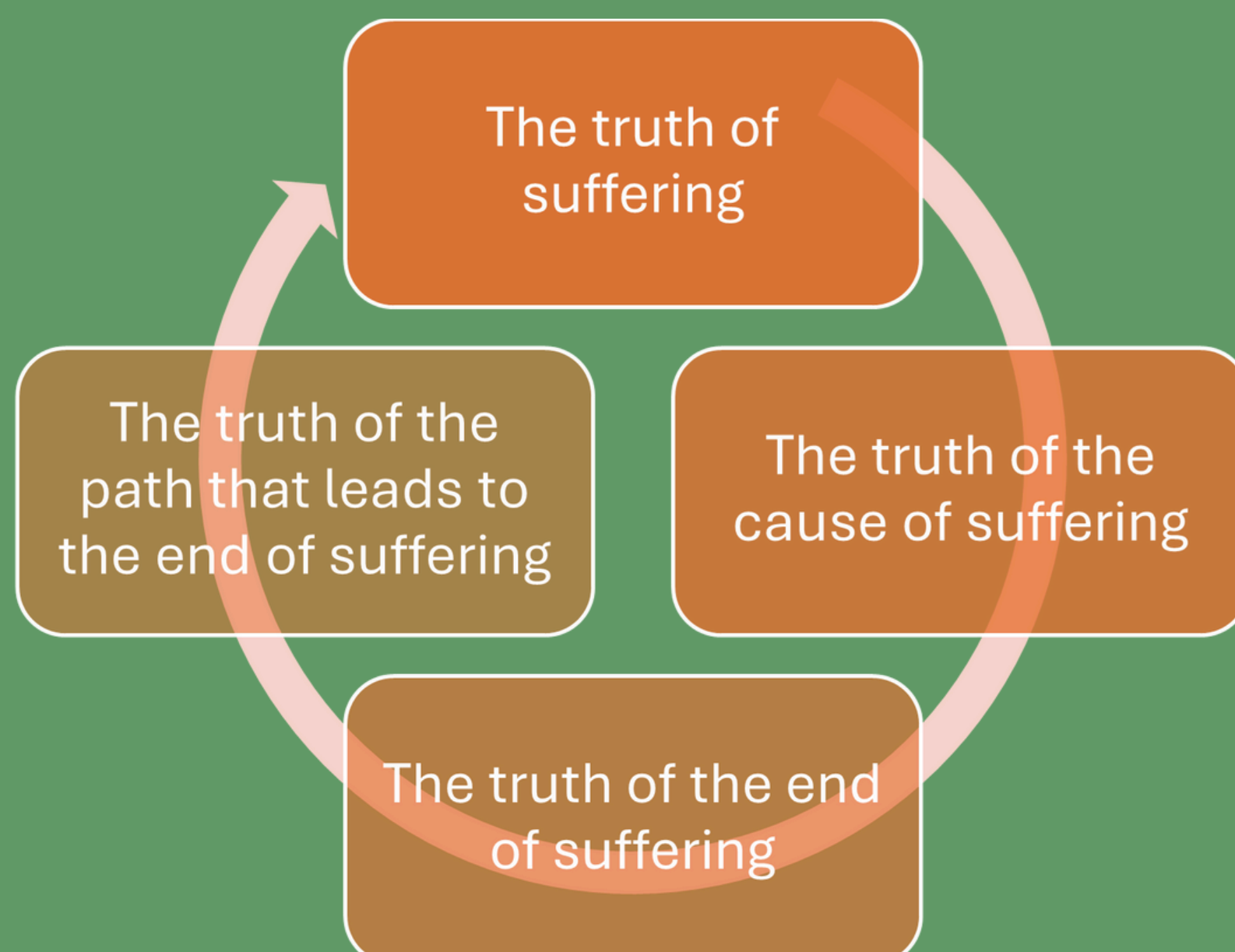
The cycle of suffering and growth: why discomfort is critical in a Buddhist context

The necessity of an earthquake: the balance between shock and growth in early Buddhism.
By Kate Johnson, supervised by Chris Goto-Jones

Buddhism 101

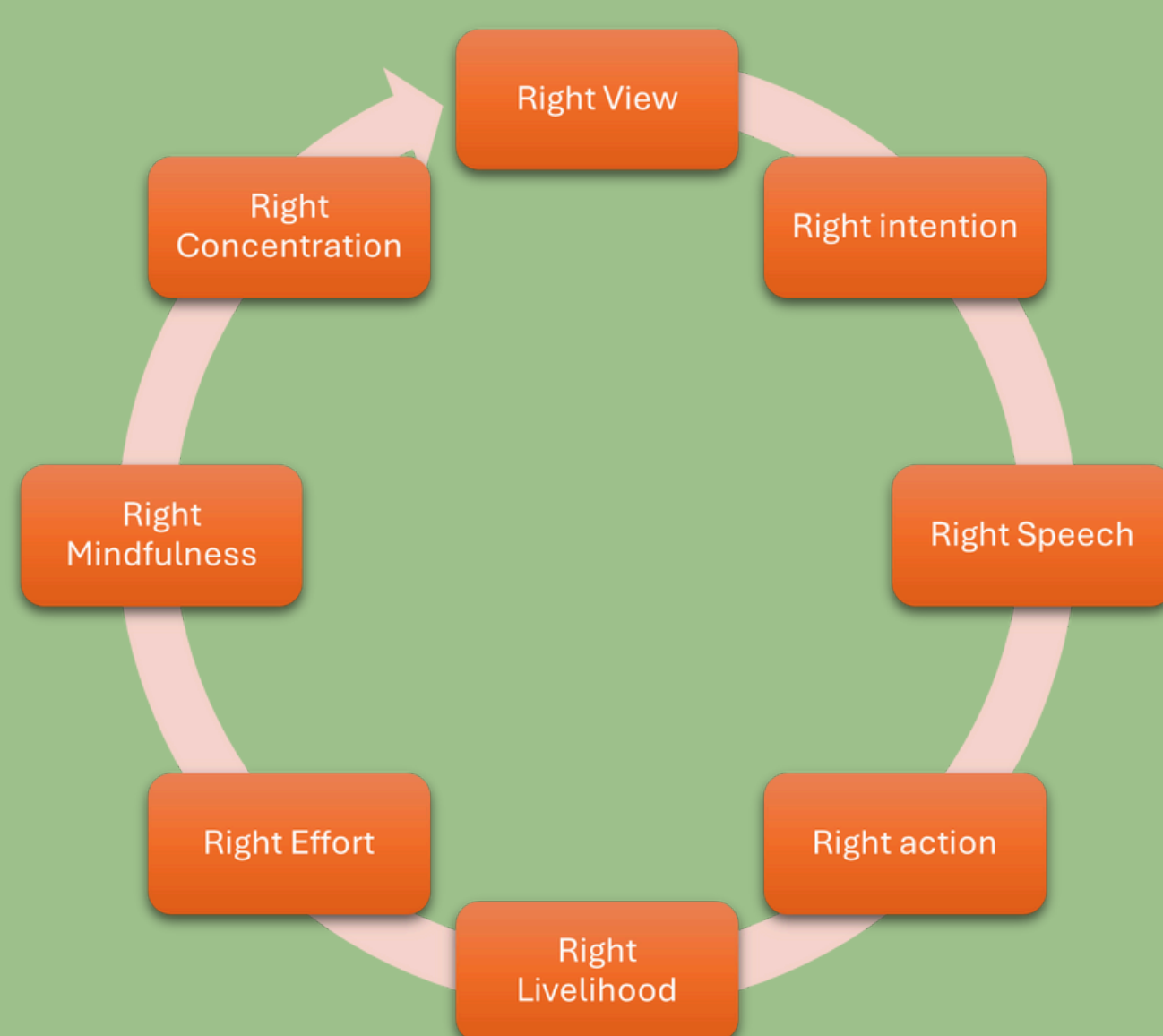
The First Noble Truth explains that in this world, suffering exists. Now, 'Suffering' is an oversimplified, but commonly used translation of the Pali word dukkhā. Dukkhā is a feeling that is both physical and psychological, encompassing mildly irksome feelings of dis-ease, to profound suffering

What does the Second Noble Truth refer to? The origins of suffering in the Buddhist canon, is people tend to create clinging attachments to phenomena that will inevitably change. When we cling to something, we hope it won't change, and will persist in the same state. This clinging desire will lead to dukkhā. For example, people tend to cling onto their youth, and resist aging. Despite our best efforts, aging continues, and when confronted with the inevitability of aging and even death, we suffer (Davids & Stede, 1921)



The Third Noble Truth provides a message of hope; if the craving for clinging onto ephemeral things eases, one will no longer suffer (Davids & Stede, 1921).

The Fourth Noble Truth proclaims that there is a path that if followed, will lead to the end of suffering; it will lead practitioners into non - craving, and thus, individuals will not cling onto ephemeral things. This path is called the Noble Eightfold Path.



Samvega

What do awe, horror, shock, fear, and wonder all have in common? They are emotions that can push you into a moment of Samvega. Samvega is a Pali word that describes a numinous experience which is best described by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu in his brilliant essay a Noble Strategy.

[Samvega is] at least three clusters of feelings at once: the oppressive sense of dismay, terror, and alienation that comes with realizing the futility and meaninglessness of life as it is normally lived; a chastening sense of our own complicity, complacency, and foolishness in having let ourselves live so blindly; and an anxious sense of urgency in trying to find a way out of the meaningless cycle. (Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 1999, p.6)

Thus, Samvega creates a stirring within, shocking us out of complacency. This shock provides one with insight into an embodied insight into one's participation in one's own suffering, and an urgent, soteriological drive. (Coomaraswamy, 1943; Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, 1999). Liang & Morseth (2021) explain that the insight Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu mentions is an powerful understanding of the first and second noble truths of Buddhism: the truth of suffering and the truth of the origin of suffering.

Pasada

To start, the Pali Text Society's dictionary defines pasāda as: "clearness, brightness and purity, joy, satisfaction, a happy or good mind, virtue and faith, repose, composure, allayment, and serenity" (Davids & Stede, 1921, p. 496).

Therefore, pasāda encompasses a range of positive emotional states and behaviors. Thanissaro Bhikkhu explains that these positive mental states enable an individual to confront the harsh realities of samvega without succumbing to despair. This is because, with faith in the Buddha's path, one understands that even the most extreme suffering can be transformed into a beneficial quality (p. 8).



Turning Samvega to Pasada

The development of samvega should follow the establishment of a strong foundation of pasāda. I refer to this approach as the "spiritual sandwich" technique, which provides the meditator with mental stability while still reaping the benefits of exposure to samvega.

Samvega generates a deep sense of urgency within an individual. However, Coomaraswamy (1943) reminds us that "...when we are struck by it [samvega], as a horse might be struck by a whip. It is, however, assumed that like the good horse, we are more or less trained and hence that more than a merely physical shock is involved; the blow has a meaning for us." (p.6).

In other words, it is assumed that we have a fundamental understanding of what acting skillfully entails, and when we are prompted by samvega, we can direct that energy with intentionality and purpose. Therefore, it is important to have a foundation of pasāda in order to provide an appropriate outlet for an experience of samvega, which can ultimately be transformed into pasāda.

Pasāda and samvega need continuous cultivation to deepen one's spiritual practice. One's initial experience of pasāda generally revolves around a teacher. Typically, it is characterized by faith, enthusiasm, and confidence in the teacher's insight into a path that leads to a beneficial way of living in the world. These positive emotions can assist in motivating an individual to continue their journey as one becomes more spiritually mature and recognizes the futility of clinging to emotions – both positive and negatively charged – faith may express itself as more as mental clarity, serenity and equanimity (Trainor, 1989, p.3).



However, one's teacher can point to one path, but how can one know if the teacher is correct? This is where it is helpful to induce an experience of samvega. Samvega's stirring quality shakes one out of complacency and makes one question the efficacy of their behaviour and the teachings they follow. Pasāda is an excellent state to cultivate; however, as Liang & Morseth (2021) explain, one can have serene confidence and faith in the wrong teacher (p.227).

According to Liang & Morseth, (2021) "...When the stirring quality of samvega is harnessed through energetic application (viriya), the serene confidence of pasāda blooms in its wake." (p.233) in other words, samvega encourages a student to earnestly study and question their teacher and the teachings provided.