

# The Four Noble Truths

## The **Four Noble Truths**

(Sanskrit: *catvāri āryasatyāni*; Pali: *cattāri ariyasaccāni*) are "the truths of the Noble Ones," the truths or realities which are understood by the "worthy ones" who have attained Nirvana. The truths are *dukkha*, the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.

The four truths express the basic orientation of **Buddhism**: we crave and cling to **impermanent states and things**, which is *dukkha*, "incapable of satisfying" and painful. This keeps us caught in **samsara**, the endless cycle of repeated **rebirth**, *dukkha* and dying again. But there is a way to reach real happiness and to **end this cycle**, namely following the **eightfold path**. The meaning of the truths is as follows:

1. *Dukkha*, "incapable of satisfying," painful. Life in this "mundane world," with its craving and clinging to **impermanent states and things**, is *dukkha*, unsatisfactory and painful;
2. *Samudaya*, the origination or **arising** of *dukkha*. *Dukkha*, and repeated life in this world, arises with Tanah, "thirst," craving for and clinging to these impermanent states and things. This craving and clinging produces **karma** which leads to **renewed becoming**, keeping us trapped in **rebirth** and renewed dissatisfaction;
3. *Niroda*, the cessation of *dukkha*. By stopping this craving and clinging **nirvana** is attained, no more karma is produced, and rebirth and dissatisfaction will no longer arise again;
4. *Magga*, the path to the cessation of, or liberation from *dukkha*. By following the **Noble Eightfold Path**, restraining oneself, cultivating discipline, and practicing **mindfulness** and meditation, craving and clinging will be stopped, and rebirth and dissatisfaction are ended.

The four truths provide a conceptual framework for introducing and explaining Buddhist thought, which has to be personally understood or "experienced." The formulation of the four truths, and their importance, developed over time, when **prajna**, or "liberating insight," came to be regarded as liberating in itself, instead of the practice of *dhyana*.

In the *sutras*, the four truths have both a symbolic and a propositional function. They represent the awakening and liberation of the Buddha, but also the possibility of liberation for all sentient beings, describing how release from craving is to be reached.

The four truths are of central importance in the Theravada tradition, which holds to the idea that insight into the four truths is liberating in itself. They are less prominent in the Mahayana traditions, which emphasize insight into sunyata and the Bodhisattva-path as a central element in their teachings.

## The four truths

The four truths are best known from their presentation in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, which contains two sets of the four truths, while various other sets can be found in the Pali Canon.

### Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta

According to the Buddhist tradition, the **Buddha** first taught the four noble truths in the very first teaching he gave after attaining **enlightenment**, as recorded in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* ("The Discourse That Sets Turning the Wheel of Truth"). Within this discourse, there are four key verses which present the four noble truths:

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.

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to re-becoming, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for becoming, craving for dis-becoming.

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: it is the remainder-less fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non-reliance on it.

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 intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.<sup>1</sup>

## Basic set

According to Norman, the Pali canon contains various shortened forms of the four truths, the "mnemonic set," which were "intended to remind the hearer of the full form of the NTs." The earliest form of the mnemonic set was "dukkham samudayo nirodho magga," without the reference to *sacca* or *ariya*, which were later added to the formula. This full set contains grammatical errors, but were considered correct by the Pali tradition, which didn't correct them. According to K.R. Norman, the basic set is as follows:

1. idam dukkham, "this is pain"
2. ayam dukkha-samudayo, "this is the origin of pain"
3. ayam dukkha-nirodha, "this is the cessation of pain"
4. ayam dukkha-nirodha-gamini patipada, "this is the path leading to the cessation of pain"

## Etymology of the basic set

The four basic terms can be translated as follows:

*Dukkha* - "incapable of satisfying," "the unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all [conditioned phenomena](#)"; "painful." *Dukkha* is most commonly translated as "suffering," which is an incorrect translation, since it refers to the ultimately unsatisfactory nature of temporary states and things, including pleasant but temporary experiences. As opposite to *sukha*, "pleasure," it is better translated as "pain."

1. *Samudaya* - "origin", "source", "arising", "coming to existence"; "aggregate of the constituent elements or factors of any being or existence", "cluster", "coming together", "combination", "producing cause", "combination", "rising"
2. *Nirodha* - cessation; release; to confine; "prevention, suppression, enclosing, restraint.
3. *Magga* - "path." The key terms in the longer version of this expression, *dukkha-nirodha-gamini Patipada*, can be translated as follows:
4. *Gamini*: leading to, making for
5. *Patipada*: road, path, way; the means of reaching a goal or destination

## Alternative formulations

L.S. Cousins notes that the four truths are not restricted to the well-known form where *dukkha* is the subject. Other forms take "the world, the arising of the world" or "the [āsavas](#), the arising of the āsavas" as their subject. According to Cousins, "the well-known form is simply shorthand for all of the forms." "The world" refers to the [saṅkhāras](#), that is, all compounded things, or to the six sense spheres.

## Truths for the noble ones

The Pali terms *ariya sacca* (Sanskrit: *arya satya*) are commonly translated as "noble truths". This translation is a convention started by the earliest translators of Buddhist texts into English. According to [K.R. Norman](#), this is just one of several possible translations.<sup>[1]</sup> According to [Paul Williams](#),

[T]here is no particular reason why the Pali expression ariyasaccani should be translated as 'noble truths'. It could equally be translated as 'the nobles' truths', or 'the truths for nobles', or 'the nobilising truths', or 'the truths of, possessed by, the noble ones' [...] In fact the Pali expression (and its Sanskrit equivalent) can mean all of these, although the Pali commentators place 'the noble truths' as the least important in their understanding

The term "arya" was later added to the four truths. The term [ariya](#) (Sanskrit: *arya*) can be translated as "noble", "not ordinary", "valuable", "precious". "pure", Paul Williams states:

The Aryas are the noble ones, the saints, those who have attained 'the fruits of the path', 'that middle path the Tathagata has comprehended which promotes sight and knowledge, and which tends to peace, higher wisdom, enlightenment, and Nibbana' (Narada 1980: 50 ).

The term [sacca](#) (Sanskrit: [satya](#)) is a central term in Indian thought and religion. It is typically translated as "truth"; but it also means "that which is in accord with reality", or "reality". The four noble truths are not asserted as propositional truths or creeds; rather, they are understood as "true things" or "realities" that function as a convenient conceptual framework for making sense of Buddhist thought:.

The word *satya* (Pali *sacca*) can certainly mean truth, but it might equally be rendered as 'real' or 'actual thing'. That is, we are not dealing here with propositional truths with which we must either agree or disagree, but with four 'true things' or 'realities' whose nature, we are told, the Buddha finally understood on the night of his awakening.

According to K.R. Norman, probably the best translation is "the truth[s] of the noble one (the Buddha)." It is a statement of how things are seen by a Buddha, how things really are when seen correctly. It is the truthful way of seeing, Through not seeing things this way, and behaving accordingly, we suffer.

## Dukkha and its ending

The [Dharmacakra](#), often used to represent the Noble Eightfold Path

The four truths express the basic orientation of [Buddhism](#): clinging and craving to temporary states and things is ultimately unsatisfactory and painful, *dukkha*, and leads to repeated rebirth and "redeath." By following the Buddhist path, craving and clinging can be confined, peace of mind can be attained, and the resulting [cycle of repeated rebirth and "redeath."](#) will be stopped.

The truth of [dukkha](#), "incapable of satisfying," "painful," is the basic insight that life in this "mundane world," with its clinging and craving to [impermanent states and things](#) is *dukkha*, and unsatisfactory. We expect happiness from states and things which are impermanent, and therefore cannot attain real happiness.

*Dukkha* [arises](#) when we crave (Pali: [tanha](#)) and cling to these changing phenomena. The clinging and craving produces [karma](#), which ties us to samsara, the round of death and rebirth. Craving includes *kama-tanha*, craving for sense-pleasures; *bhava-tanha*, craving to continue the cycle of life and death, including rebirth; and *vibhava-tanha*, craving to not experience the world and painful feelings.

*Dukkha* ceases, or can be confined, when craving and clinging cease or are confined. This also means that no more karma is being produced, and rebirth ends. Cessation is [nirvana](#), "blowing out," and peace of mind. [Joseph Goldstein](#) explains:

[Ajahn Buddhadasa](#), a well-known Thai master of the last century, said that when village people in India were cooking rice and waiting for it to cool, they might remark, "Wait a little for the rice to become nibbana". So here, [nibbana](#) means the cool state of mind, free from the fires of the [defilements](#). As Ajahn Buddhadasa remarked, "The cooler the mind, the more Nibbana in that moment". We can notice for ourselves relative states of coolness in our own minds as we go through the day.

By following the Buddhist path to [moksha](#), liberation,<sup>1</sup> one starts to disengage from craving and clinging to impermanent states and things. The term "path" is usually taken to mean the [Noble Eightfold Path](#), but [other versions](#) of "the path" can also be found in the Nikayas. The Theravada tradition regards insight into the four truths as liberating in itself.

The well-known eightfold path consists of the understanding that this world is floating and unsatisfying, and how craving keeps us tied to this floating world; a friendly and compassionate attitude to others; a correct way of behaving; mind-control, which means not feeding on negative thoughts, and nurturing positive

thoughts; constant awareness of the feelings and responses which arise; and the practice of *dhyana*, meditation. The tenfold path adds the right (liberating) insight, and liberation from rebirth.

The four truths are to be internalized, and understood or "experienced" personally, to turn them into a lived reality.

## Ending rebirth

### Tibetan Bhavacakra or "Wheel of Life."

The four truths describe *dukkha* and its ending as a means to reach peace of mind in this life, but also as a means to end rebirth. Some contemporary teachers tend to explain the four truths psychologically, by taking *dukkha* to mean mental anguish in addition to the physical pain of life, and interpreting the four truths as a means to attain happiness in this life.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Spiro notes that "the Buddhist message is not simply a psychological message," but an eschatological message.

As Geoffrey Samuel notes, "the Four Noble Truths [...] describe the knowledge needed to set out on the path to liberation from rebirth."<sup>1</sup> By understanding the four truths, one can stop this clinging and craving, attain a pacified mind, and be freed from this cycle of rebirth and re-death. Patrick Olivelle explains that [moksha](#) is a central concept in Indian religions, and "literally means freedom from samsara. Melvin E. Spiro further explains that "desire is the cause of suffering because desire is the cause of rebirth." When desire ceases, rebirth and its accompanying suffering ceases. Peter Harvey explains:

Once birth has arisen, 'ageing and death', and various other *dukkha* states follow. While saying that birth is the cause of death may sound rather simplistic, in Buddhism it is a very significant statement; for there is an alternative to being born. This is to attain Nirvāna, so bringing an end to the process of rebirth and re-death. Nirvāna is not subject to time and change, and so is known as the [unborn](#); as it is not born it cannot die, and so it is also known as the 'deathless'. To attain this state, all phenomena subject to birth – the [khandhas](#) and [nidānas](#) – must be transcended by means of [non-attachment](#).

The last sermon, the [Maha-parinibbana Sutta](#) (Last Days of the Buddha, Digha Nikaya 16)", states it as follows:

[...] it is through not realizing, through not penetrating the Four Noble Truths that this long course of birth and death has been passed through and undergone by me as well as by you [...] But now, bhikkhus, that these have been realized and penetrated, cut off is the craving for existence, destroyed is that which leads to renewed becoming, and there is no fresh becoming.

### Medical analogy

The model of the four truths may be an analogy with classical Indian medicine, in which the four truths function as a medical diagnosis, and the Buddha is presented as a physician.

1. *The truth of dukkha*: identifying the illness and the nature of the illness (the [diagnosis](#))
2. *The truth of origin*: identifying the causes of the illness (the [etiology](#))
3. *The truth of cessation*: identifying a cure for the illness (the [prognosis](#))
4. *The truth of the path*: recommending a treatment for the illness that can bring about a cure (the [prescription](#))

This analogy is said to emphasize the compassion of the Buddha—that he was motivated by the desire to relieve the suffering of beings.

# Historical development

## Development

### Growing importance

Anderson notes that "the four truths are recognized as perhaps the most important teaching of the Buddha."<sup>1</sup> Yet, she also notes that as early as 1935 Carolyn Augusta Foley noted that for a teaching so central to Theravada Buddhism, it was missing from critical passages in the Pali canon. According to Bronkhorst, the four truths may already have been formulated in earliest Buddhism, but did not have the central place they acquired in later buddhism. According to Anderson, only by the time of the commentaries, in the fifth century CE, did the four truths come to be identified in the Theravada tradition as the central teaching of the Buddha. According to Anderson,

... the four noble truths were probably not part of the earliest strata of what came to be recognized as Buddhism, but that they emerged as a central teaching in a slightly later period that still preceded the final redactions of the various Buddhist canons.

Stephen Batchelor notes that the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* contains incongruities, and states that

The First Discourse cannot be treated as a verbatim transcript of what the Buddha taught in the Deer Park, but as a document that has evolved over an unspecified period of time until it reached the form in which it is found today in the canons of the different Buddhist schools.

According to Feer and Anderson, the four truths probably entered the Sutta Pitaka from the Vinaya, the rules for monastic order. They were first added to enlightenment-stories which contain the Four Jhanas, replacing terms for "liberating insight". From there they were added to the biographical stories of the Buddha:

### Substituting "liberating insight"

Information of the oldest teachings of Buddhism, such as on the Four Noble Truths, has been obtained by analysis of the oldest texts, but is a matter of dispute. According to Schmithausen, three positions held by scholars of Buddhism can be distinguished:

"Stress on the fundamental homogeneity and substantial authenticity of at least a considerable part of the Nikayic materials;"

"Scepticism with regard to the possibility of retrieving the doctrine of earliest Buddhism;"

### "Cautious optimism in this respect."

Inconsistencies in the oldest texts may reveal developments in the oldest teachings. Scholars have noted such inconsistencies in the presentations of the Buddha's enlightenment, and the Buddhist path to liberation, in the oldest sutras. These inconsistencies show that the Buddhist teachings evolved, either during the lifetime of the Buddha, or there-after. According to the Japanese scholar Ui, the four truths are not the earliest representation of the Buddha's enlightenment. Instead, they are a rather late theory on the content of the Buddha's enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> According to Vetter and Bronkhorst, the earliest Buddhist path consisted of a set of practices which culminate in the practice of *dhyana*, leading to a calm of mind which according to Vetter *is* the liberation which is being sought.

Later on, "liberating insight," as exemplified by *prajna*, or the insight in the "four truths," came to be regarded as equally liberating. According to Vetter and Bronkhorst, this happened in response to other religious groups in India who held that a liberating insight was indispensable for liberation from rebirth (*moksha*). According to Bronkhorst,

...the accounts which include the Four Noble Truths had a completely different conception of the process of liberation than the one which includes the Four Dhyanas and the destruction of the intoxicants.

The ideas on what exactly constituted this "liberating insight" was not fixed but developed over time. In the Nikayas the four truths are given as the "liberating insight" which constituted the [awakening](#), or "enlightenment" of the Buddha. When he understood these truths he was "enlightened" and liberated, as reflected in Majjhima Nikaya: "his taints are destroyed by his seeing with wisdom."<sup>1</sup> Typically the four truths refer here to the eightfold path as the means to gain liberation while the attainment of insight into the four truths is portrayed as liberating in itself.

According to Bronkhorst, in [earliest Buddhism](#) the four truths did not serve as a description of "liberating insight". Initially the term *prajna* served to denote this "liberating insight." Later on, *prajna* was replaced in the suttas by the "four truths. This happened in those texts where "liberating insight" was preceded by the four jhanas, and where this practice of the four jhanas then culminates in "liberating insight." Bronkhorst also notices that the conception of what exactly this "liberating insight" was developed throughout time. Whereas originally it may not have been specified, later on the four truths served as such, to be superseded by *pratityasamutpada*, and still later, in the Hinayana schools, by the doctrine of the non-existence of a substantial self or person.<sup>1</sup> And Schmithausen states that still other descriptions of this "liberating insight" exist in the Buddhist canon:

"that the five Skandhas are impermanent, disagreeable, and neither the Self nor belonging to oneself"; "the contemplation of the arising and disappearance (*udayabbaya*) of the five Skandhas"; "the realisation of the Skandhas as empty (*rittaka*), vain (*tucchaka*) and without any pith or substance (*asaraka*).

An example of this substitution, and its consequences, is Majjhima Nikaya, which gives an account of the awakening of the Buddha.

## Symbolic and propositional function

According to Anderson, the four truths have both a symbolic and a propositional function. As a symbol, they refer to the possibility of awakening, as represented by the Buddha:

[W]hen the four noble truths are regarded in the canon as the first teaching of the Buddha, they function as a view or doctrine that assumes a symbolic function. Where the four noble truths appear in the guise of a religious symbol in the *Sutta-pitaka* and the *Vinaya-pitaka* of the Pali canon, they represent the enlightenment experience of the Buddha and the possibility of enlightenment for all Buddhists within the cosmos.

As a proposition, they describe how release from craving is to be reached:

... the four noble truths are truly set apart within the body of the Buddha's teachings, not because they are by definition sacred, but because they are both a symbol and a doctrine and transformative within the sphere of right view. As one doctrine among others, the four noble truths make explicit the structure within which one should seek enlightenment; as a symbol, the four noble truths evoke the possibility of enlightenment. As both, they occupy not only a central but a singular position within the Theravada canon and tradition.

## Appearance within the discourses

The developing Buddhist tradition inserted the four truths, using various formulations, at various sutras. They are being used both as a symbol of all dhammas and the Buddha's awakening, and as a set of propositions which function within a matrix of teachings. According to Anderson, there is no single way to understand the teachings; one teaching may be used to explain another teaching, and vice versa. The teachings form a network, which should be apprehended as such to understand how the various teachings intersect with each other.

# Emphasis within different traditions

## Early Indian Buddhism

The [Ekavyāvahārika](#) sect emphasized the transcendence of the [Buddha](#), asserting that he was eternally enlightened and essentially non-physical. According to the Ekavyāvahārika, the words of the Buddha were spoken with one transcendent meaning, and the Four Noble Truths are to be understood simultaneously in one moment of insight. According to the [Mahīśāsaka](#) sect, the Four Noble Truths should be meditated upon simultaneously.

## Theravada

According to Carol Anderson, the four truths have "a singular position within the Theravada canon and tradition." The Theravada tradition regards insight in the four truths as liberating in itself. This liberation can be attained in one single moment, when the four truths are understood together. Within the [Theravada](#) tradition, great emphasis is placed upon reading and contemplating [The Discourse That Sets Turning the Wheel of Truth](#), and other suttas, as a means to study the four noble truths and put them into practice.

The [Kathāvatthu](#) records debate by the Theravādins with the Andhakas (who may have been [Mahāsāṅghikas](#)) regarding whether or not old age and death are the result ([vipāka](#)) of [karma](#). The Theravāda maintained that they are not—not, apparently because there is no causal relation between the two, but because they wished to reserve the term *vipāka* strictly for mental results—"subjective phenomena arise through the effects of kamma."

## Mahayana

The four truths are less prominent in the Mahayana traditions, which emphasize insight into sunyata and the Bodhisattva-path as a central element in their teachings. They are traditionally studied through various Mahayana commentaries, in conjunction with teachings on [bodhisattva](#) path.

## Tibetan Buddhism

Within [Tibetan Buddhism](#), the four noble truths are traditionally studied from Mahayana commentaries such as the [Abhisamayalamkara](#), rather than from reading the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. The truth of the path (the fourth truth) is traditionally presented according to a progressive formula of [five paths](#), rather than as the eightfold path presented in other traditions. The Tibetan tradition also emphasizes the study of the [sixteen characteristics](#) of the four noble truths, as described in the [Abhisamayalamkara](#) ("Ornament of Clear Realization"). Some contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers have provided commentary on the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* and the noble eightfold path when presenting the dharma to Western students.

## Nichiren Buddhism

[Nichiren Buddhism](#) is based on the teaching of the Japanese priest and teacher [Nichiren](#), who believed that the [Lotus Sūtra](#) contained the essence of all of Gautama Buddha's teachings. The third chapter of the Lotus Sutra states that the Four Noble Truths was the early teaching of the Buddha, while the Dharma of the Lotus is the "most wonderful, unsurpassed great Dharma. The teachings on the four noble truths are a provisional teaching, which Shakyamuni Buddha taught according to the people's capacity, while the Lotus Sutra is a direct statement of Shakyamuni's own enlightenment.