

# Four Noble Truths

The **Four Noble Truths** (Sanskrit: चत्वारि आर्यसत्यानि *catvāri āryasatyāni*, Sinhala language: චතුරාර්ය සත්‍යාන) are an important principle in Buddhism, classically taught by the Buddha in the *Dharmacakra Pravartana Sūtra*.

## Definitions of the Four Noble Truths

According to various sources,<sup>[1] [1]</sup> a simple rendition of the Four Noble Truths is as follows:

1. Suffering does exist
2. Suffering arises from attachment to desires
3. Suffering ceases when attachment to desire ceases
4. Freedom from suffering is possible by practicing the Eightfold Path

However, the Sanskrit and Pali words *satya* and *sacca*, respectively, mean both "truth" and "real" or "actual thing." With that in mind, one scholar argues<sup>[2]</sup> that the four noble truths are not asserted in the way they just have been above, as propositional truths or creeds. Instead, they can be seen as "true things" or "realities" that the Buddha experienced. The original Tibetan Lotsawas (Sanskrit: *locchāwa*; Tibetan: *lo ts'a ba*), who studied Sanskrit grammar thoroughly, used the Tibetan term *bden pa*, which reflects this understanding. In that light, and according to the *Samyukta Āgama* of the Sarvāstivāda school, the basic teachings of the Four Noble Truths are as follows.<sup>[3]</sup>

1. Thus is the Noble Truth of Suffering
2. Thus is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering
3. Thus is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering
4. Thus is the Noble Truth of the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering

Going further, some versions of the *Dharmacakra Pravartana Sutra* contain definitions of the Four Noble Truths while others do not. For example, the Sarvastivadin versions portrays the truths as principles to be contemplated in various methods, and no definitions are given.<sup>[3]</sup> In the Theravada version and the version translated by An Shigao, the Four Noble Truths are given definitions:

1. The Nature of Suffering (or *Dukkha*):

"This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are 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."<sup>[4] [5]</sup>

2. Suffering's Origin (*Dukkha Samudaya*):

"This 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."<sup>[4] [5]</sup>

3. Suffering's Cessation (*Dukkha Nirodha*):

"This 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."<sup>[4] [5]</sup>

4. The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering: (*Dukkha Nirodha Gamini Patipada Magga*)

"This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: it is the Noble Eightfold Path; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration."<sup>[6] [7]</sup>



The Buddha teaching the Four Noble Truths.

## Relation to the Noble Eightfold Path

In the version of the *Dharmacakra Pravartana Sūtra* contained in the extant Saṃyukta Āgama, there is no mention of the Noble Eightfold Path. Instead, contemplation of the Four Noble Truths is taken to be the path itself.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Interpretations

Among the early Buddhist schools, the Ekavyāvahārikas held the doctrine that the Buddha speaks with a single and unified transcendent meaning,<sup>[8]</sup> and that the Four Noble Truths are perfectly realized with one wisdom.<sup>[9]</sup> Another Indian sect, the Mahīśāsakas, held that the Four Noble Truths should be meditated on simultaneously.<sup>[10]</sup>

According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the Four Noble Truths are best understood, not as beliefs, but as categories of experience.

## The Four Noble Truths and the Lotus Sutra

The text of the *Lotus Sūtra* views the Four Noble Truths as the first teaching of the Buddha, but not the final teaching. In the third chapter, *Similes and Parables*, the sūtra introduces what it calls "the most wonderful and unsurpassed great Dharma".<sup>[11] [12]</sup>

In the past at Vārāṇasī, you turned the wheel of the Dharma of the Four Noble Truths, making distinctions and preaching that all things are born and become extinct, being made up of the five components (*skandhas*). Now you turn the wheel of the most wonderful, the unsurpassed great Dharma. This Dharma is very profound and abstruse; there are few who can believe it. Since times past often we have heard the World-Honored One's preaching, but we have never heard this kind of profound, wonderful and superior Dharma. Since the World-Honored One preaches this Dharma, we all welcome it with joy.

Nichiren, whose teachings were based on the *Lotus Sūtra*, stated in his letter "Comparison of the Lotus and Other Sūtras" that the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths was only a specific teaching expounded especially for the śrāvakas disciples, while the *Lotus Sūtra* was taught equally for all.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Notes

[1] "<http://dharma.ncf.ca>" (<http://dharma.ncf.ca/introduction/4-Noble-Truths.html>). .

[2] Gethin (1998), p. 60.

[3] "Saṃyukta Āgama 379: *The Dharmacakra Pravartana Sūtra*" ([http://lapislazulitexts.com/dharmacakra\\_pravartana\\_sutra.html](http://lapislazulitexts.com/dharmacakra_pravartana_sutra.html)). Lapis Lazuli Texts. . Retrieved 2010-06-23.

[4] Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), trans. Bodhi (2000), pp. 1843-47.

[5] "轉法輪經" ([http://w3.cbeta.org/result/normal/T02/0109\\_001.htm](http://w3.cbeta.org/result/normal/T02/0109_001.htm)). Cbeta. . Retrieved 2008-10-28.

[6] SN 56.11, trans. Bodhi (2000), p. 1844. In this translation, Bodhi elides the six middle factors of the Noble Eightfold Path (between right view and right concentration). Thus Bodhi's translation for the six middle factors was taken from his translation of SN 45.1 (Bodhi, 2000, p. 1523-24). See also Feer (1976), p. 421f.

[7] In AN 3.61, the Buddha provides an alternate elaboration on the second and third noble truths identifying the arising and cessation of suffering in accordance with Dependent Origination's Twelve Causes, from ignorance to old age and death (Thanissaro, 1997). (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.061.than.html>)

[8] Sree Padma. Barber, Anthony W. *Buddhism in the Krishna River Valley of Andhra*. 2008. p. 67.

[9] Rockhill, William. *The Life of Buddha And the Early History of His Order Derived from Tibetan*. pp. 187-188

[10] Potter, Karl. *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Vol. IX: Buddhist philosophy from 350 to 600 AD*. 2004. p. 106

[11] The Lotus Sutra, Columbia University Press 1993, Burton Watson, page 55

[12] [http://news.fjnet.com/english/sutra/200606/t20060617\\_29962.htm](http://news.fjnet.com/english/sutra/200606/t20060617_29962.htm)

[13] "The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin" (<http://www.sgilibrary.org/view.php?page=1039>). Soka Gakkai International. . Retrieved 2010-11-02.

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## External links

- The Four Noble Truth in Nichiren Buddhism ([http://www.sokahumanism.com/nichiren-buddhism/Four\\_Noble\\_Truths\\_and\\_the\\_Lotus\\_Sutra.html](http://www.sokahumanism.com/nichiren-buddhism/Four_Noble_Truths_and_the_Lotus_Sutra.html))
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- Buddhism: The Four Noble Truths ([http://meditationincolorado.org/buddhism\\_four\\_noble\\_truths.htm](http://meditationincolorado.org/buddhism_four_noble_truths.htm)) by Geshe Kelsang Gyatso.
- At *Access to Insight* (<http://www.accesstoinight.org>):
  - *The Four Noble Truths: A Study Guide* (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/study/truths.html>) (by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)
  - *Wings to Awakening Section 3.H.i: The Four Noble Truths* (<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/modern/wings/3h1.html>) (translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu)
- Talks given by Ajahn Sumedho:
  - At Amaravati Monastery (<http://www.amaravati.org/>)'s web: *The Four Noble Truths* (<http://www.amaravati.org/abm/english/documents/4noble2/index.html>)
  - PDF version at *Buddhanet.net* (<http://www.buddhanet.net/>): *The Four Noble Truths eBook* (<http://www.buddhanet.net/filelib/pdf/4nobltru.zip>)
- From the Ten Lecture Series (<http://www.bodhimonastery.net/courses/TenLectures/TenLectures.html>), Lecture on the Four Noble Truths by Bhikkhu Bodhi: *The Four Noble Truths* ([http://www.bodhimonastery.net/courses/TenLectures/MP3/BB-002\\_Four\\_Noble\\_Truths.mp3](http://www.bodhimonastery.net/courses/TenLectures/MP3/BB-002_Four_Noble_Truths.mp3))
- A View on the Four Noble Truths ([http://viewonbuddhism.org/4\\_noble\\_truths.html](http://viewonbuddhism.org/4_noble_truths.html))
- *The Light of Asia (Book Eight)* (<http://myweb.cableone.net/subru/Buddhism.html>), a poem in iambic pentameter by Sir Edwin Arnold.
- Buddhism - the Four Noble Truths (<http://www.meditateinlondon.org.uk/buddhism-the-four-noble-truths.php>)
- *The Feeling Buddha* (<http://www.heartlandsangha.org/feeling.html>): An alternate interpretation of the Four Noble Truths.
- Sixteen Aspects of the Four Noble Truths ([http://www.berzinarchives.com/sutra/sutra\\_level\\_4/list\\_16\\_4\\_noble\\_truths.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/sutra/sutra_level_4/list_16_4_noble_truths.html))

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