

# Some Reflections on the Four Noble Truths

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## Introduction

The very first discourse that the Buddha delivered after his enlightenment enunciates the concept of Four Noble Truths or *cattāri ariyasaccāni* without knowing which liberation from suffering, from the cycle of birth and death, is not possible. It thus has rightly been termed as the most fundamental of his teachings; some commentators even suggest that all his subsequent discourses are essentially further elucidation of the seminal ideas contained in this teaching. The Buddha himself, greatly extolls these in these words which are repeated after for each of these Truths: *pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi, ñāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi. ....* in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, true knowledge and light.[1] Surely, there must be something very significant in each of these statements, some unique contributions to spiritual investigations, that merit such high praise from the Master himself. In this paper an attempt has been made to identify such unique contributions made in this seminal teaching.

To do so, it is necessary to recall the background of this discourse. It was given to the five bhikkhus who had been following him for almost six years, doing whatever practices he did in his search for the path to liberation. When the future Buddha changed his course from severe austerities, they mistook it as a regression and left him. So they must have been quite familiar not only with all the practices of that time, but also with various spiritual-philosophical terminologies extant at that time. Therefore when the Buddha expounded to them the four noble truths, he didn't need to explain many 'technical' terms like *pañcupādānakkhandhā* in full detail. However, for us today, to understand the full import of his words we need to refer to other discourses where the Buddha has explained these in greater detail. This approach has been followed here in unravelling the full import of these four noble truths.

## Noble Truths?

The very first concept that we need to understand is that of 'Noble' Truths, *cattāri ariyasaccāni*. The

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Buddha uses the word 'ariya' to refer to a noble person, an enlightened individual, who has entered the stream of liberation and is thus assured of release from the cycle of birth and death in a maximum of seven future lives. This is in contrast to an ordinary worldling who is still trapped in the quagmire of repeated becoming. These truths are termed as noble in that by comprehending and putting these into practice properly, an ordinary worldling can become an *ariya*- the noble one. Since this is precisely the purpose of the Buddha's teachings, these 'ennobling Truths' can be expected to contain the quintessence of his teachings.

### **The First Noble Truth : (dukkha ariyasaccaṃ)**

The statement of the first noble truth is:

*jātipi dukkhā, jarāpidukkhā, byādhipi dukkho, maraṇampi dukkhaṃ,  
appiyehi sampayogo dukkho, piyehi vippayogo dukkho, yampicchaṃna labhati tampi dukkhaṃ  
saṃkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhādukkhā*

The statement has been broken above into three parts. The first part says: 'Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering', which is quite obvious. Physical pain indeed is suffering.

The second part says: 'union with displeasing (that which is not dear) is suffering, separation from that which is dear is suffering, not getting what one wants is suffering'. This surely is a more generic classification of what constitutes 'psychological' suffering, but again, rather obvious; not a great discovery as claimed by the master himself.

The third part translates as : 'In brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging, are suffering.' This statement is clearly not obvious. One first needs to understand what the five aggregates subject to clinging are. This terminology must have been quite prevalent at that time, but we need to understand it properly. The five aggregates are: *rūpa viññāna vedanā saññā saṅkhāra* , usually translated as form (or body), consciousness, feeling, perception and mental formation. In modern idiom we could term it as the body-mind complex; *rūpa* being the body , and other four aggregates constituting the 'mind' as commonly known. The Buddha points out that attachment to these five-aggregates, the body-mind complex is the root cause of suffering. For all but the *ariyas* these five aggregates constitute the "I", there being a congenital attachment to these; and the Buddha says that this is suffering! An elaborate explanation of this statement is found in other discourses, e.g. in [3] where it is pointed out that these five aggregates are continually in a state of flux, changing from moment to moment; thus any attachment to them is bound to lead to suffering. On account of this evanescent nature, these definitely do not qualify to be called as "I" or 'mine' or my 'self'. What the Buddha is thus pointing out is that the notion of "I" or my "self", which seems to be so tenaciously ingrained that we never even question it, is an illusion. This point is very succinctly brought out by Bhikkhuni Vajirā:

*“Yathā hi aṅgasambhārā, hoti saddo ratho iti;  
Evaṃ khandhesu santesu, hoti sattoti sammuti*

Just as with the assemblage of parts, the word 'chariot' is used;  
So, when the aggregates exist, there is the convention 'a being'. [2]  
Put in other words, this "self consciousness" is suffering. This is also termed as the insight of *anattā*, egolessness. Clearly a great insight, which is so counter-intuitive!

### **The Second Noble Truth : (*dukkha samudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ*)**

The statement is: *yāyaṃ taṇhā ponobbhavikā nandirāgasahagatā tatrataṭṭhābhiniṇṇā, seyyathidaṃ - kāmataṇhā, bhavataṇhā, vibhavataṇhā*

which is usually translated as [1] : "It is this craving (*taṇhā*) 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".

The word *taṇhā* is translated above as 'craving', not an apt translation for *taṇha* includes both craving for pleasant and aversion to unpleasant. That *taṇhā* is the source of all suffering is not a particularly original insight of the Buddha; it was known in Indian spiritual tradition even earlier. The unique contribution of the Buddha lies in identifying genesis of *taṇhā* as a dependently conditioned phenomenon, through the celebrated forward chain of dependent origination driven by *avijjā*, ignorance. [4] The two links of which *taṇhā* is a member are : *vedanā- paccayā taṇhā, taṇhā-paccyā upādānaṃ*. Thus *taṇhā* arises due to unwise response to feelings (sensations) , which are a consequence of sensory impingement on the body-mind complex. Due to ignorance of their evanescent nature we try to hold on to the pleasant feelings, and rebel against unpleasant ones, thus creating *taṇhā*. Repeated reaction of this kind strengthens *taṇhā* which then leads to *upādāna* , clinging to the five aggregates, which eventually leads to suffering. Identifying the origin of *taṇhā* as dependent on *vedanā* is one of seminal contributions of the Buddha; for in this link lies the practical strategy to eliminate *taṇhā* and thereby all suffering.

A bit of reflection would reveal that *vedanā* leads to *taṇhā* only when there is ignorance, the primeval ignorance being attachment to the five aggregates and the resulting notion of "I" due to which one considers the sensations/feelings as belonging to 'me', in the words of the Buddha: *etaṃ mama, eso'hamasmi eso me attā"ti* -- this is mine, this I am, this is my 'self': 'I have headache.'; 'I am trembling with fever.'; 'I am very happy.'; 'I lost my temper', 'I am very generous.' etc.

This, therefore, is the real root cause of suffering, as mentioned explicitly by Ven. Sāriputta [5]: *Yo imesu pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu chando ālayo anunayo ajjhosānaṃ so dukkhasamudayo* i.e. desire, indulgence, inclination, and holding based on these five aggregates affected by clinging is the origin of suffering. Clearly old age, illness and even death will no longer cause 'suffering' if attachment to the body-mind complex has been given up. The whole tree of suffering has its roots

in this basic delusion of 'egoic identity' , and from this tree emerge two prominent branches of carving (rāga) and aversion (dosa) which further have numerous sub-branches like acquisitiveness, lust, arrogance, pride, illwill, hatred, anger, animosity etc. -- the immediate causes of suffering.

### **The Third Noble Truth :** (*dukkha nirodha ariyasaccaṃ*)

Once the cause of suffering is pin-pointed, the cessation of suffering becomes possible by eradicating that cause. Accordingly, the usual narration of the third noble truth is [1] :yo tassāyeva taṇhāya asesavirāganirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti anālayo i.e. it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, non reliance on it.

Taṇhā being the cause of suffering, its cessation would naturally lead to the cessation of suffering. Similarly, if we proceed from the root cause of 'egoic identity', the cessation of suffering would be the result of abdication of this identity, as expounded at [5]: Yo imesu pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu chandarāgavinayo chandarāgappahānaṃ, so dukkhanirodho'ti. , i.e. the removal of desire & lust, the abandonment of desire and lust for these five aggregates affected by clinging is the cessation of suffering. The choice of the word 'nirodha' is very important; being the antonym of samudaya it means cessation not suppression. Cessation implies natural process of ceasing. Anything that arises, is born, will naturally cease, will pass away! Thus this noble truth indicates that all that one needs to do is not to get swayed by the taṇhā, and allow it to naturally cease. The Buddha mentions this as yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ, i.e. observing the phenomenon as it happens with wisdom. This again, is another seminal contribution of the Buddha; all attempts at suppression of taṇhā are counterproductive since the intention behind such attempts is a strong aversion to taṇhā, which itself is another taṇhā!

### **The Fourth Noble Truth :** (*dukkha nirodha gāminī paṭipadāriyasaccaṃ*)

Here the Buddha has spelled out a well structured path by practising which one can experience the cessation of suffering [1]: ayameva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo, seyyathidaṃ - sammādiṭṭhi sammā saṅkappo sammā vācā sammā kammanto sammā ājīvo sammā vāyāmo sammā sati sammā samādhi. , i.e. It is this Noble Eightfold Path, that is right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

The Buddha was probably the first among the spiritual teachers of the world to have laid down such a structured path to enlightenment, bringing it from the rarefied domain of mystery to the domain of rational thought and systematic practice. Thus the very enunciation of such a path is

another seminal contribution.

If we go into the details of the eight limbs of this path, we find that at least two of the limbs, viz. right view and right mindfulness are uniquely Buddhist in nature. The key feature of the right view is knowing the Four Noble Truths properly, for in the absence of right understanding of the root cause of suffering, its 'remainderless cessation' is not possible. As discussed above, most crucial to the achievement of this fundamental goal is the insight of 'anattā', i.e. egolessness - a distinctly unique insight which is now gaining increasing acceptance in the light of modern scientific researches also. The second unique feature of this eightfold path is right mindfulness, which implies being mindful of whatever is happening in the body-mind complex.- being mindful of the body, bodily sensations, the breath, mental states, mental reactions, etc. The Buddha gave great stress to cultivation of mindfulness for this is the basic faculty of mind needed for *yathābhūtaṃ nānadassanaṃ* mentioned above while discussing the cessation of suffering. In recent years the realisation of great benefits accruing from this practice of right mindfulness have made it extremely popular in the west and workshops on mindful eating, mindful walking, mindful listening, mindful observation of the breath, mindfulness based stress relaxation etc. have become immensely popular.

### **The Practice of Four Noble Truths**

The main purpose of the Buddha while sharing his discovery of these Four Noble Truths was very practical, viz. cessation of suffering. Clearly mere theoretical understanding of these would not suffice and Buddha mentioned clearly how he himself used these Truths to attain enlightenment. Associated with each Truth there are three aspects, viz.

Knowledge of Truth :	<i>saccañāṇa</i>
Knowledge of task to be accomplished regarding each Truth :	<i>kiccañāṇa</i>
Knowledge of accomplishment of that task:	<i>katañāṇa</i>

Accordingly he laid down all the three dimensions for each of these Truths, as enunciated below:

<i>Dukkha saccaṃ</i> :	<i>pariññeyya'nti me</i>	<i>pariññāta'</i>
The Truth of suffering	should be understood	has been understood
<i>Dukkha samudaya saccaṃ</i>	<i>pahātabba'nti me</i>	<i>pahīna'nti me</i>
The Truth .. origin.. suffering	taṇhā should be abandoned	taṇhā has been abandoned

*Dukkha nirodha saccam*

*sacchikātabba'nti me*

*sacchikata'nti me*

The Truth of cessation of suffering

should be realized

has been realized

*Dukkha ... paṭipadā saccam*

*bhāvetabba'nti me*

*bhāvita'nti me*

The Truth..the way... cessation of suffering

should be developed

has been developed

Keeping in view the fact that for all these Truths he advises the approach of *yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ* , observation of phenomena as these happen, with wisdom, the importance of right mindfulness, *sammā sati*, becomes obvious. The abandonment of *taṇhā*, as well as the experience of the cessation of suffering, all become possible under the penetrating gaze of bare attention,i.e. right mindfulness.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The teaching of Four Noble Truths hints at many seminal insights not found in other spiritual traditions, notable among these being : a) the root cause of suffering is 'self-consciousness' arising due to the attachment to the body-mind complex; b) *yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ*, observation of phenomena as these happen, with wisdom is the key to liberation; c) *sammā sati* or right mindfulness is the principle faculty which facilitates such observation. The detailed exposition of these insights is found in other discourses in the *tipiṭakā*. The most radical of these insights , of course , is that 'self-consciousness' is based on the illusion of 'self'. If reflected on deeply, and put to practice systematically, this insight is sufficient to transform a worldling into a noble one.

This insight, if put to use in day to day life, can also greatly help in reducing tensions and increase efficacy of all actions; for most of the time the egoic demands of recognition, and resentment if 'someone else' gets more recognition than 'me' , fritter away our energy. As one's pre-occupation with self reduces, actions are motivated not by any personal axe to grind, but by loving kindness and compassion, the natural propensity of mind free from the stranglehold of ego. Imbibing the understanding of 'no self' does not kill the motivation to work, as may seem to a logical worldly mind, but only changes the motivation, and releases enormous energy which usually gets dissipated in attempts to preserve/ enhance 'self image'.

The practice of mindfulness of 'whatever is happening inside' is also enormously beneficial. It ensures that any deflections or falling back from our goal, due to casual whims, laziness, or any distracting temptations are brought to the fore at the earliest , not through any external policing – which might arouse indignation and other forms of 'self defense' -- but through inner self-awareness. This

self-awareness of one's weaknesses naturally creates that inner motivation to arrest the frittering of energy in wasteful activities.

### **References**

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3. ibid, p 901-903.( Discourse: The Characteristic of Non-self)
4. ibid, p533-534.(Discourse: Dependent Origination)
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