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The Four Noble Truths



Statue of Buddha, 1st–2nd century CE, Afghanistan ©

"I teach suffering, its origin, cessation and path. That's all I teach", declared the Buddha 2500 years ago.

The Four Noble Truths contain the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It was these four principles that the Buddha came to understand during his meditation under the bodhi tree.

1. The truth of suffering (Dukkha)
2. The truth of the origin of suffering (Samudāya)
3. The truth of the cessation of suffering (Nirodha)
4. The truth of the path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The Buddha is often compared to a physician. In the first two Noble Truths he diagnosed the problem (suffering) and identified its cause. The third Noble Truth is the realisation that there is a cure.

The fourth Noble Truth, in which the Buddha set out the Eightfold Path, is the prescription, the way to achieve a release from suffering.

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The First Noble Truth

Suffering (Dukkha)

Suffering comes in many forms. Three obvious kinds of suffering correspond to the first three sights the Buddha saw on his first journey outside his palace: old age, sickness and death.

But according to the Buddha, the problem of suffering goes much deeper. Life is not ideal: it frequently fails to live up to our expectations.

Human beings are subject to desires and cravings, but even when we are able to satisfy these desires, the satisfaction is only temporary. Pleasure does not last; or if it does, it becomes monotonous.

Even when we are not suffering from outward causes like illness or bereavement, we are unfulfilled, unsatisfied. This is the truth of suffering.

Some people who encounter this teaching may find it pessimistic. Buddhists find it neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but realistic. Fortunately the Buddha's teachings do not end with suffering; rather, they go on to tell us what we can do about it and how to end it.

The Second Noble Truth

Origin of suffering (Samudāya)

Our day-to-day troubles may seem to have easily identifiable causes: thirst, pain from an injury, sadness from the loss of a loved one. In the second of his Noble Truths, though, the Buddha claimed to have found the cause of all suffering – and it is much more deeply rooted than our immediate worries.

The Buddha taught that the root of all suffering is desire, *tanhā*. This comes in three forms, which he described as the Three Roots of Evil, or the Three Fires, or the Three Poisons.



The Three Fires of hate, greed and ignorance, shown in a circle, each reinforcing the others.

Photo: Falk Kienas [©](#)

The three roots of evil

These are the three ultimate causes of suffering:

- Greed and desire, represented in art by a rooster
- Ignorance or delusion, represented by a pig
- Hatred and destructive urges, represented by a snake

Language note: *Tanhā* is a term in Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, that specifically means craving or misplaced desire. Buddhists recognise that there can be positive desires, such as desire for enlightenment and good wishes for others. A neutral term for such desires is *chanda*.

The Fire Sermon

The Buddha taught more about suffering in the Fire Sermon, delivered to a thousand bhikkus (Buddhist monks).

Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what is the all that is burning?

The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, also whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hate, with the fire of delusion. I say it is burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrows, with lamentations, with pains, with griefs, with despairs.

The Fire Sermon (SN 35:28), translation by Nanamoli Thera. © 1981 Buddhist Publication Society, used with permission

The Buddha went on to say the same of the other four senses, and the mind, showing that attachment to positive, negative and neutral sensations and thoughts is the cause of suffering.

The Third Noble Truth

Cessation of suffering (Nirodha)

The Buddha taught that the way to extinguish desire, which causes suffering, is to liberate oneself from attachment.

This is the third Noble Truth – the possibility of liberation.

The Buddha was a living example that this is possible in a human lifetime.

Bhikkhus, when a noble follower who has heard (the truth) sees thus, he finds estrangement in the eye, finds estrangement in forms, finds estrangement in eye-consciousness, finds estrangement in eye-contact, and whatever is felt as pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant that arises with eye-contact for its indispensable condition, in that too he finds estrangement.

The Fire Sermon (SN 35:28), translation by Nānamoli Thera. © 1981 Buddhist Publication Society, used with permission

"Estrangement" here means disenchantment: a Buddhist aims to know sense conditions clearly as they are without becoming enchanted or misled by them.



Buddha. Photo: Paul Boulding [©](#)

Nirvana

Nirvana means extinguishing. Attaining nirvana – reaching enlightenment – means extinguishing the three fires of greed, delusion and hatred.

Someone who reaches nirvana does not immediately disappear to a heavenly realm. Nirvana is better understood as a state of mind that humans can reach. It is a state of profound spiritual joy, without negative emotions and fears.

Someone who has attained enlightenment is filled with compassion for all living things.

When he finds estrangement, passion fades out. With the fading of passion, he is liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands: 'Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what can be done is done, of this there is no more beyond.'

The Fire Sermon (SN 35:28), translation by Nānamoli Thera. © 1981 Buddhist Publication Society, used with permission

After death an enlightened person is liberated from the cycle of rebirth, but Buddhism gives no definite answers as to what happens next.

The Buddha discouraged his followers from asking too many questions about nirvana. He wanted them to concentrate on the task at hand, which was freeing themselves from the cycle of suffering. Asking questions is like quibbling with the doctor who is trying to save your life.

The Fourth Noble Truth

Path to the cessation of suffering (Magga)

The final Noble Truth is the Buddha's prescription for the end of suffering. This is a set of principles called the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is also called the Middle Way: it avoids both indulgence and severe asceticism, neither of which the Buddha had found helpful in his search for enlightenment.



The wheel of the Dharma, the symbol of the Eightfold Path [©](#)

The eight divisions

The eight stages are not to be taken in order, but rather support and reinforce each other:

1. Right Understanding - *Sammā ditthi*
 - Accepting Buddhist teachings. (The Buddha never intended his followers to believe his teachings blindly, but to practise them and judge for themselves whether they were true.)
2. Right Intention - *Sammā saṅkappa*
 - A commitment to cultivate the right attitudes.
3. Right Speech - *Sammā vācā*
 - Speaking truthfully, avoiding slander, gossip and abusive speech.
4. Right Action - *Sammā kammanta*
 - Behaving peacefully and harmoniously; refraining from stealing, killing and overindulgence in sensual pleasure.
5. Right Livelihood - *Sammā ājīva*
 - Avoiding making a living in ways that cause harm, such as exploiting people or killing animals, or trading in intoxicants or weapons.
6. Right Effort - *Sammā vāyāma*
 - Cultivating positive states of mind; freeing oneself from evil and unwholesome states and preventing them arising in future.
7. Right Mindfulness - *Sammā sati*
 - Developing awareness of the body, sensations, feelings and states of mind.
8. Right Concentration - *Sammā samādhi*
 - Developing the mental focus necessary for this awareness.

The eight stages can be grouped into Wisdom (right understanding and intention), Ethical Conduct (right speech, action and livelihood) and Meditation (right effort, mindfulness and concentration).

The Buddha described the Eightfold Path as a means to enlightenment, like a raft for crossing a river. Once one has reached the opposite shore, one no longer needs the raft and can leave it behind.

<https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-180>

Four Noble Truths

Carol S. Anderson

Subject:

Buddhism, Practices, Applications, and Concepts

Online Publication Date:

Aug 2016

DOI:

10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.180

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Summary and Keywords

The Buddhist teaching known in English as the four noble truths is most often understood as the single most important teaching of the historical buddha,

Siddhartha Gautama, who taught in northern India during the 5th century bce. — Sanskrit *duḥkha* and Pali *dukkha* (pain), *samudayo* (arising), *nirodho* (ending), and *maggo* (path) or *dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā* (way leading to the ending of pain)—are recorded in the languages of Pali and Sanskrit in the different Buddhist canons, and the literary traditions have been very consistent in how they remember the teaching. These teachings are explained in the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* (*Dhamma-cakka-ppavattana Sutta* in Pali) and in a handful of different formulations in different suttas, abhidhamma analysis, and in the *vinaya* sections of the canonical texts. Despite the widespread awareness of the four truths, the complexities associated with this teaching are not usually recognized. While the bulk of the scholarship on the four noble truths analyzes them as they appear in the Pali canon, recent scholarship traces them through Buddhist canons that are extant in the Chinese Tripitaka.

Keywords: [four noble truths](#), [enlightenment](#), [buddha](#), [Gautama Buddha](#), [Pali Buddhist canon](#), [buddhaghosa](#), [Pali language](#)

The Four Noble Truths as a Fundamental Teaching

The four noble truths are one of the key teachings of the buddha’ s first talk after his enlightenment, according to the *vinaya* and sutta/sutra literature of the early Hinayana schools, preserved in the Pali Buddhist canon. This narrative that identifies the four noble truths as the first talk of the Buddha belongs to the early Hinayana tradition, and recent scholarship suggests that the primacy of this teaching was not shared by all Buddhist schools as Buddhism spread throughout India and the rest of Asia.¹ The story of Gautama Buddha’ s enlightenment and first talk on dhamma/dharma is found in the Pali, Mahīśāsaka, and Dharmaguptaka canons, the latter two of which we have in Chinese.² When the four noble truths are said to be a fundamental teaching of the buddha and thus of all of Buddhism, this is one answer that early Buddhists gave to the question “What did the Buddha teach?” As European scholarship has traced the spread of Buddhism with greater accuracy since the late 20th century, scholars have begun to trace the historical emergence of Buddhist teachings with greater precision. The buddha’ s talk on “The Turning of the Dhamma Wheel” is one such teaching. Contrary to assumptions that locate the buddha’ s teaching on the four noble truths at the heart of all schools of Buddhism, Dessein has demonstrated that there is a range of interpretations in the early schools of Buddhism. The narrative found in the *vinaya* and sutta portions of the Pali canon, however, is the one widely recognized to be the first talk of the buddha (*Vin* I.1 and *S* V.420).

The story of Gautama Buddha’ s first talk on dhamma/dharma (Pali/Sanskrit) after his enlightenment is well known throughout Buddhist literature, primarily from the “Talk on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel” (*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*) in

the Pali Buddhist canon: five companions of the buddha were gathered in Deer Park in Sarnath, outside of ancient Bārāṇasi (now Varanasi), and the buddha approached them to tell them of his awakening.³ The buddha began his talk on dhamma (*dharmakathā*) by explaining that there are two extremes to be avoided: devotion to sensual pleasures and devotion to ascetic practices. Between these two poles, the buddha continues, lies the middle way, which consists of the noble eightfold path: right view, right intent, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The buddha explains that this path leads to “insight, knowledge, calm, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and *nibbāna*” —in short, the eightfold path leads to enlightenment. With the next sentence the Buddha begins explain to the first noble truth: “this is pain” (*idaṃ dukkhaṃ*), and continues with the second, third, and fourth truths. Each truth is laid out in three ways: the buddha states that he, first, came to know that he had to realize the truth that was the truth of pain (future). Secondly, he states that he realizes the truth that was the truth of pain (present), and, third, he declares that he had realized the truth that was the truth of pain (past). These three tenses are the three ways in which the Buddha understood the four noble truths, and when they are multiplied by the four truths, we see the twelvefold way in which the buddha realized the four noble truths.

The Buddha explains to his companions that once he realized and knew the fourth noble truths in the twelve ways, he realized that this life was his last rebirth and that he had no more births in the future. At that moment, inspired by this Dhamma Talk, one of his companions by the name of Aññā Koṇḍañña (i.e., “One among the Koṇḍañña clan who knows”) cultivated a knowledge of the four noble truths and thereby became an enterer into the stream, or the first of four stages on the path to full awakening. At the end of this Dhamma Talk, the gods in the heavens and all beings throughout the cosmos proclaim that the Wheel of Dhamma has turned and that no one may turn it back. With this setting for the four noble truths in the “Talk on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel,” we see how the Buddhist traditions remembered the integral relationship between the buddha’s own autobiographical experience of enlightenment and the act of teaching the four noble truths. As soon as one of the buddha’s companions realized the truth of what the buddha had learned in his own enlightenment and taught in the “Talk on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel,” the Wheel of Dhamma was turned in the world, and could not be turned back. Put differently, the Wheel of Dhamma was not turned when the buddha himself was enlightened: the Wheel of Dhamma was turned in the world only when Koṇḍañña, the first awakened follower of the buddha, experienced enlightenment. At the moment when Koṇḍañña became a stream-enterer, the “Talk on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel” declares that a cosmological “noise or sound” (*saddaṃ*) was let loose throughout the heavens, and echoed from one heaven to the next. This is how all Buddhist traditions remember that the Wheel of Dhamma was turned. Dessein points out that the version of this talk that appears in the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* (T.1428) does not refer to a wheel but does say “that when the World-honoured

One [the Buddha] cannot make someone else awaken for the four noble truths, he does not set the wheel of the doctrine in motion.”⁴ The four noble truths are the most fundamental teaching of Buddhism because that teaching was the means by which Koṇḍañña realized the path and thus the way that the buddha set the Wheel of dhamma in motion for all humanity.

The symbol of the dhamma/dharma wheel is found throughout all of Buddhism and refers to the teachings of the buddha(s). The dhamma wheel is the wheel with four (rare), eight (common), and ten (unusual) spokes found on top of monasteries and temples throughout Buddhist cultures and as images on countless websites for a symbol of Buddhism; the eight spokes refer to the eightfold path and the wheel represents the Buddha’s teachings, recalling the moment at which the wheel was turned. The symbol of the wheel turning was used by Buddhists to symbolize subsequent momentous points in Buddhist teachings. For example, as the biography of the buddha expanded to include the lives of past buddhas, each buddha turned the wheel of dhamma to spread the teachings for that buddha.⁵ So, too, the teachings of the second turning of the wheel are recognized as articulated in the early Prajñāpāramitā sutras and in the commentarial tradition of the Madhyamaka.⁶ The third turning of the wheel refers to the celestial setting of the Samdhinirmocana Sutra, an Indian text that dates to the second century c.e.⁷ From the point of view of the second and third turnings of the wheel, each provide a different teaching on śūnatā or emptiness. There are occasional references to four and five turnings of the wheel, the latter usually in relation to the Avataṃsaka-Sutra. In short, the first, second, and third turnings of the wheel of dhamma/dharma are powerful images and textual metaphors found throughout Mahayana literature. The actual physical symbol, as well as the textual metaphor of the turning of the dhamma/dharma wheel, is a powerful image that runs throughout Buddhist teachings and beyond.⁸ Dessein suggests that a comparison of the different versions of the *Dharmacakrapravartana Sutra/Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta* reveals a far more complex history of the turning of the dharma wheel.⁹ The earliest strata, relatively speaking, within the Buddhist canons included the teachings on the middle path (Dessein translates this as the “middle mode of progress”) that were connected to the four noble truths as the content of the first dharma talk of the Buddha. He suggests that the element of the “five companion monks” was introduced into the narrative as a link between this first sermon and the portion of the buddha’s life as an ascetic, prior to his enlightenment. “Further philosophical development,” Dessein continues, “led to the interpretation of these four noble truths in terms of ‘three cycles’ and ‘twelve constituent parts.’”¹⁰ From this point on, however, different schools differ in what they record as the setting for the first talk on dharma, and the content. The major difference between the schools, according to Dessein, lies in the point at which the schools consider the wheel of dharma to be turned. Briefly, Dessein demonstrates that the Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika 經量部 schools of the Sarvāstivāda 說一切有部 have different opinions about when the wheel first turned that set them apart from the Mahāsāṃghikas; while the Mahāsāṃghikas

disagreed, the Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika claimed that the Mahāsāṃghika taught that the wheel was turned when the buddha gave his first talk under the bodhi tree immediately after his enlightenment.¹¹ Throughout this excursion into the disagreements about when the dharma wheel was turned, however, the four noble truths remain a stable element in all of these variations.

What the Four Noble Truths Mean

When we read statements by such eminent Buddhist teachers as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nat Hahn describing the four noble truths as the most fundamental teaching of Buddhism, those declarations read like unequivocal and unproblematic assertions. And they are correct: seen from the point of view of the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, the four noble truths are, indeed, the most important teaching of the historical buddha because they were the substance of his first talk on dharma to his five companions. In a much broader sense, too, the four noble truths are among the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment, another crucial category of Buddhist teachings. In terms of Buddhist pedagogy, to say that the four noble truths are a fundamental teaching is, again, an accurate statement: they are the substance of the Buddha's first "*dhamma kathā*," or talk on Buddhism. *Kathā*, in this sense, often gets translated as "sermon," so we often see references to the four noble truths as the Buddha's first sermon on the four noble truths. We also need to recognize that many would claim that the four noble truths must be the most important doctrine of Buddhism. And here we run into some difficulties: the category of doctrine, usually in Christianity, is not the same thing as a "talk on dhamma" (*dhamma kathā*) in the Buddhist literature.¹² So when we begin to answer the question of what the four noble truths are, we need to use categories found in Buddhist sources, not categories such as doctrine (which come primarily from Christianity). According to the Pali canon, then, the four noble truths should be understood as right views (*sammā diṭṭhi*).

There are, according to scholar Steven Collins, three types of right views.¹³ The first is a generalized sense of a positive attitude toward the basic ideas of karma and samsara within Buddhism. A practitioner at this stage has not experienced the truth of karma and samsara but is willing to consider that these are true teachings. The second type of right view means recognizing right view as the first "limb" of the eightfold path, along with such fundamental teachings as the four noble truths and the teachings on dependent origination (*paṭiccasamupāda*). The third type of right view, according to Collins, is that of full, liberating insight, which is the highest realization of right view: the wisdom and insight that lead to an experience of *nibbāna*. To know what the four noble truths are, then, we need to know that the four noble truths are, according to Buddhist frameworks of knowledge, true statements in the sense that they are taught by the buddha but whose truth is recognized gradually by individuals striving to understand the truth of the four noble truths, along with other key teachings of the buddha (including the eightfold path and

dependent origination). At the first stage, we should regard the four noble truths with a generally positive attitude. At the second stage, we recognize the truth of the teaching on the four noble truths as a key component of all of the buddha's teachings. At the third stage, followers recognize the liberating insight of the four noble truths for themselves, as Koṇḍañña was enlightened upon hearing the buddha's first "Talk on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel."

The Four Noble Truths in the Pali Canon

There is little to no debate in the Pali tradition about how we should understand the four noble truths. There is a strong agreement throughout the canonical texts and commentaries that carries through to contemporary teachings. One noteworthy observation is that the Pali explanations of each of the truths are rather brief. In many contemporary works on the four noble truths, however, the four noble truths become the framework by which other teachings of the buddha are taught. The buddha taught for forty-five years, and within that period, there is no single teaching that emerges as unquestionably more central than others—including the four noble truths. At the same time, learning the entirety of the buddha's teachings is a difficult task; even memorizing the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment is a challenge. It is natural, then, to use the four noble truths as a scaffold, if you will, to understand the central teachings of the buddha. The canonical explanations of each truth, however, are relatively brief, as we will see. Elsewhere in the canon and commentaries the individual truths are occasionally the subject of single *dhamma* talks, and in those talks, they are often explained with other teachings of the buddha not discussed in the explanations of the four noble truths as a set.

The four noble truths are often discussed as a medical diagnosis. Professor Gethin's introduction of the teaching follows this model: the subheading for his chapter on the four noble truths is "The Disease, the Cause, the Cure, the Medicine."¹⁴ This is a very common metaphor that we find throughout contemporary writings on the four noble truths. At the same time, it is not a metaphor or an image that we find in the actual canonical teachings. The buddha uses the simile of a physician in such suttas as the *Cula-Malunkya Sutta* (M I 426), in which the buddha says that someone who asks questions about how the cosmos came to be (the ten unanswerable questions) is like a man shot with a poisoned arrow who refuses the attention of a surgeon or a doctor until he knows all details of how he was shot—both will die before they find the answers to their questions. Bhikkhu Thanissaro has assembled a study guide for the buddha's teachings on birth, illness, old age, and death under the title "Beyond Coping: The Buddha's Teachings on Aging, Illness, Death, and Separation," in which he includes the references to the buddha as a physician.¹⁵ As persuasive as this image of the Buddha as a physician is, we need to be cautious about drawing any conclusions from this metaphor about the relationship between Indian medical traditions and the actual practices of Buddhist medicine. The *vinaya* has extensive discussions about which medicines should be used for how long and by whom within the

monasteries and nunneries. Kenneth Zysk's study of Buddhist medicine is the classic study on this topic; Wezler suggests that the teaching on the four noble truths may actually have influenced Hindu medical teachings.¹⁶ Thus, the logical model of the buddha as a physician who diagnoses the problem of pain (*dukkha*), determines its cause (*taṇhā* or craving), and offers a cure (*nirodho* or stopping) and medicine (*magga* or *paṭipadā*, path or way) is a very compelling metaphor. It is not one, however, that we see closely tied to the four noble truths in the Pali canon or commentaries themselves, although we do see references to diagnosis in other canonical passages.

The First Truth: Dukkham

In the *Sutta on the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma*, the buddha explained the first truth at greater length than at other points in the Pali canon:

This, monks, is the noble truth that is pain. Birth is pain, old age is pain, illness is pain, death is pain, sorrow and grief, physical and mental suffering, and disturbance are pain. Association with things not liked is pain, separation from desired things is pain, not getting what one wants is pain; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are pain.

(*Vin* I.5 - 12; *M* I 55; *D* II 290; *S* V 420; commentary on *Vin* I.5 - 12 = *Sp* V.962 - 965.)

This is the most expansive description of the first truth of the noble ones: the truth that is pain is birth, old age, illness, death, and so on. An important distinction should be made here: the first truth is not pain in and of itself, but rather the pain that is associated with all of the following conditions: birth is pain, death is pain, not getting what we want is pain, and so on. All of these conditions are characteristic of human life, and thus the first truth is often understood to mean that Buddhism claims that human life is associated with pain, or to use a term from the Abrahamic religions, human life is suffering. The Pāli term *dukkha* is most often translated as “suffering.” However, it is more accurately construed as pain: *dukkha* refers to those things that hurt, that are painful. The four truths should be understood descriptively: the buddha was simply describing the truths—the ultimate and real truths—that he realized while sitting under the bodhi tree during his experience of enlightenment. The first truth, then, is not an argument or a debate about the fact that human life is painful. The first truth is an observation that human life is full of pain. What is painful? All of these things: birth, death, old age, illness, not getting what we want, having to deal with things that we don't want to deal with, and so on—all of these things are painful. And the truth of that pain, the fact of that pain, is the first truth. The passage in the Pali canon continues: “in short, the five aggregates of grasping are pain.” The five aggregates are the aggregates of grasping or holding onto one's body, one's feelings, one's perceptions, one's formations, and one's

consciousness. Taken together, these five aggregates of grasping represent the various ways that people come to the conclusion that there is an independent and permanent self or an “I.” And all of these ways (grasping the body, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness) are *dukkha*: pain or suffering.¹⁷

The teaching on pain is occasionally the subject of an independent talk on *dhamma* in the Pali canon, as in the short talk in the *Samyutta-nikāya* called the *Dukkha Sutta*. In that talk,, Bhikkhu Thanissaro translates *dukkha* as “stress” and as “pain,” which gives us a slightly different connotation: “there are three kinds of stress (*dukkhatā*): the stressfulness of fabrication (*dukkhadukkhatā*), the stressfulness of formations (*saṅkhāradukkhatā*), and the stressfulness of change (*vipariṇāmadukkhatā*).”¹⁸ The *Acela Sutta* (“The Naked Ascetic”) contains an exchange in which Kassapa approaches the buddha, asking him how *dukkha* is created: “Is stress self-made? . . . Is stress other-made? . . . Then is it both self-made and other made? . . . Then is it the case that stress, being neither self-made nor other made, arises spontaneously?” The buddha’s answer to each of these questions is “Don’ t say that, Kassapa.” Frustrated, Kassapa asks the buddha if *dukkha* exists; yes, the buddha replies. “Well, in that case, does Master Gotama not know or see stress?” “I know stress, I see stress,” the buddha answers. The buddha finally gives a longer explanation, which is the twelvefold chain of dependent arising or origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

“The one who acts is the one who experiences [the result of the act]” amounts to the eternalist statement, “Existing from the very beginning, stress is self-made.” “The one who acts is someone other than the one who experiences” amounts to the annihilationist statement, “For one existing harassed by feeling, stress is other-made.” Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the dhamma via the middle:

From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.

From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.

From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.

From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.

From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.

From birth as a requisite condition, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering (S II.18).¹⁹

This sutta is an example of how the buddha's teachings intersect with each other. In this *dhmma* talk to Kassapa, the clothesless (or naked) ascetic, *dukkha* is explained in terms of the teaching on dependent arising. This is a teaching that is widely represented with paintings and images, each stage of the twelve steps represented as an equal segment of a circle. Moving forward, each step is one movement to another that traces the origins or causes that result in rebirth. Moving in reverse order, we learn how to deconstruct the chain of arising in order to be freed from the cycle of rebirth, or to attain enlightenment. This pairing of the analysis of arising and the analysis of ending is the same as that of the second and third truths, and is often found as an independent explanation for the difference between the direct and reverse order of this teaching on dependent arising: all that arises, passes away.

The Second Truth: Samudayo (Arising)

The second truth of the four noble truths is *samudayo*, or arising. In the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, it reads: "This, monks, is the noble truth that is the arising of pain. This is craving that leads to rebirth, is connected with pleasure and passion and finds pleasure in this or that; that is, craving for desire, craving for existence, and craving for existence to fade away." This second truth is most often understood as laying out the causation of pain, the first truth. In short, what is the arising of pain? Craving is the short answer—human attachment to things that we want, to things that feel good in a mundane or daily sense as well as the fundamental human craving for desire, existence, or the fading away of existence. The second truth lays out these three kinds of craving: "craving for desire, existence, and the craving for existence to fade away." The first, craving for desire or "sense pleasures" (*kāma*) is familiar to all of us: one way of putting it is that we all want to love, we want to be in love, we want to desire life itself in a profound sense. We want things that make us feel good. The second kind of craving is equally straightforward: we want to live, we want to exist in the world, and we often want to exist permanently—we want to renew and continue our existence in the world or even in the heavens. But permanent existence is simply not part of the cosmos, according to Buddhist traditions. Nothing exists permanently, and to become attached to the idea of any kind of permanence is to sow the seeds of craving for existence and thus opens the door to the arising of pain.

The third kind of craving is perhaps more challenging to understand: we want our existence to ultimately fade away. Bhikkhu Thanissaro translates the term as "craving for our annihilation after death."²⁰ The compound itself

“annihilation-craving” (*vibhava-taṇhā*) can be interpreted in a variety of ways, as one can readily determine by typing the word into any search engine. Classical interpretations of the craving for annihilation refer to the desire, the thirst, or the craving for nonexistence or annihilation, usually referring to the self. In this framework, the second and third types of craving are two poles that represent wrong thinking: the craving for permanent and renewable existence and the craving for nonexistence. The Buddhist response to these two kinds of craving is to say that we need to recognize our attachment or our thirst for both permanent existence and nonexistence, and to be attached to neither. Contemporary interpretations of craving for annihilation take the term as applicable to certain states, such as wanting certain emotional states to be annihilated. We can readily understand this type of craving in this contemporary sense, when we want our embarrassing or debilitating emotions to permanently disappear. Regardless of how the third type of craving is interpreted, the point in all Buddhist interpretations is to recognize the force of such craving in life, to watch, and to observe the force and the role of craving or thirst to better understand how pain arises on a daily basis.

The Third Truth: Nirodho (Ending)

The third truth is *nirodho*, or ending. It is explained in the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*: “This, monks is the noble truth that is the ending of pain. This is the complete fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, renouncing it, releasing it, and letting go.” This is a natural movement in the sequence of the truths thus far: the first is to recognize the truth “this is pain” or “this is suffering.” The second step is to know why “this is pain.” The three types of thirst or craving lead to things that cause us pain in this life. We stop that pain, we stop that hurting or suffering by stopping craving or thirst: “the complete fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, renouncing it, releasing it, and letting it go.” This truth is just a simple fact: to end things that cause us pain, we need to end their arising. The pair of the second and third truths is often extracted into a separate formula in the Buddhist texts, as in the saying that Koṇḍañña uttered when he became a stream winner: “Whatever has the nature of arising, all that has the nature of ending.”

Buddhaghosa was a late-4th- and early-5th-century commentator on the Pali canon who synthesized the buddha’s teaching into a compendium of teachings known today by its popular translation as the *Path of Purification*. In that work, Buddhaghosa offers the following commentary on the third truth: “[*Nirodha* (cessation):] the word *ni* denotes absence, and the word *rodha*, a prison. Now, the third truth is void of all destinies [by rebirth] and so there is no constraint (*rodha*) of suffering here reckoned as the prison of the round of rebirths; or when that cessation has been arrived at, there is no more constraint of suffering reckoned as the prison of the round of rebirths. And being the opposite of that prison, it is called *dukkha-nirodha* (cessation of

suffering). Or alternatively, it is called ‘cessation of suffering’ because it is a condition for the cessation of suffering consisting in non-arising.”²¹ Briefly, Buddhaghosa is explaining just how the third truth (*nirodho*) means “stopping” or “cessation.” The key for Buddhaghosa is the term *rodho*, or prison. The prison of future births is simply stopped according to this third truth. When pain is stopped, or when suffering is ended, there is no more rebirth and there will be no more arising of pain or suffering.

The Fourth Truth: Paṭipadā (Way)

The fourth truth, the way, according to the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, reads:

This, monks, is the noble truth that is the way leading to the ending of pain. This is the eightfold path of the noble ones: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The fourth truth, again, follows logically after the first three: pain, arising, ending, and the way—or the how. The eightfold path is always found as the explanation of the fourth truth, and is often taken as the buddha’s teaching of “the” path to enlightenment. It is more accurate to say that the eightfold path is one path among many that the buddha taught, although it is foundational within the Pali Buddhist tradition, often serving as a synonym for the word *path* (*maggo* or more commonly, *magga*). Each of the eight steps is explained at different points in the Pali canon and commentaries.²² Buddhaghosa followed one particular explanatory framework found in the Middle Length Sayings collection in the Suttapiṭaka that classified the eightfold path into three stages: virtue or ethics (*sīlaṃ*), concentration (*samādhī*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Right speech, right action, and right livelihood are grouped under the heading of virtue or ethics. Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration are gathered under concentration, and right view and right intention are classified under wisdom. It is vital to understand that this is not a linear “path.” Each of these steps is interdependent. For example, right concentration is sometimes explained in terms of the other seven stages of the eightfold path. The fourth truth is not always explained in Buddhist literature, but when it is, it is always laid out in terms of the eightfold path. So, too, the eightfold path often appears independent of the other three truths, as in the *Maggavibhaṅga Sutta* (Analysis of the Path) in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (S V.2).

There is a broader point to make here in relationship to the fourth truth. While the set of the four noble truths consistently teaches the eightfold path as the path to achieve the cessation of pain—that is, an experience of the state of nirvana—the concept of the “path” is far more expansive than the fourth truth. There are many paths in Buddhism, and while the fourth truth and the eightfold path are among the most common, the concept of *magga/mārga* is one of

the most generative concepts in all of Buddhist thought. Perhaps it would be accurate to say that there are overlapping definitions of the “path leading to the ending of pain.” Where the fourth truth is explained within the set of the four noble truths, it is consistently explained as the eightfold path. But the teachings on *magga/mārga* in the whole of Buddhism are far greater. The best volume on this point is now a classic, *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*. Buswell Jr. and Gimello, the editors, provide a list to illustrate precisely the point under scrutiny here. They sketch out a list of the various kinds of “*mārga* schemes” found in Buddhist teachings: the noble eightfold path, the four approaches or paths (stream-winners, etc.), the thirty-seven factors of awakening, the five paths, the six or ten stages of the bodhisattva’s career, the six or ten perfections, the bodhisattva path in fifty-three stages (Huayan traditions), and the “five ranks” of different Chan or Zen schools.²³ When the “way leading to the ending of pain” is explained *as the fourth truth* it should be understood as the eightfold path. But when “the way leading to the ending of pain” is simply identified as “path” (*magga*), we need to specify which path, in which Buddhist tradition, and according to whom.

Variations on the Four Noble Truths

The teaching on the four noble truths is almost ubiquitous within Buddhist literature. References to the four noble truths are found everywhere that the buddha’s biography appears, because the teachings are remembered as the substance of the buddha’s first talk on dhamma, according to the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*. This scene appears in the Buddhist Sanskrit versions of the *vinaya* in the *Mahāvastu*, the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtra*, and the *vinaya* collections of the *Mahīśāsaka*, and the Dharmaguptaka schools found in the Chinese Tripitaka.²⁴ The four noble truths sometimes appear in some accounts of the buddha’s departure from earth, when he enters the state of *parinibbāna*. The four noble truths also appear in the Buddhist Sanskrit *Avadāna* literature. In short, there is no question about the significance of the four noble truths within the Buddhist tradition. For example, Nāgārjuna deconstructs the four noble truths in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikāḥ*—he demonstrates neatly how they exist conventionally but how they are ultimately empty. Similarly, the four noble truths are recognized as ultimately empty in the *Heart Sutra*. The four noble truths are found woven throughout the schools and teachings of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism.

In looking more closely at these canonical collections, however, the four noble truths are missing from certain narratives of the buddha’s life story where they should be present if they were as universally central as presumed to be. Using the Pali Canon, K. R. Norman identified different “grammatical sets” of how the four noble truths are introduced within this body of Pali literature. Each of these grammatical sets for the four noble truths is found in different points in the canon, and thus the presence and absence of the four noble truths

can be traced within the narrative structures of the buddha' s biography. The result of this analysis demonstrates that the four noble truths were gradually integrated into the buddha' s life story as the textual tradition unfolded within the history of Pali Buddhism, as can be seen by looking at Norman' s argument in more detail.

Grammatical Inconsistencies

In the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, the buddha explains the four noble truths as the content of what he realized during his own enlightenment. His audience is the five former companions who left him when he decided to break his fast. The buddha introduces the concept of the middle path and then immediately leaps into the first truth, that is, the truth of pain. However, there is a grammatical error in this sutta. Norman first identified this slip, and in doing so, discovered that the “four noble truths” are not written with the same terms and grammar throughout the Pali canon. Norman translates the first lines that declare each truth: “Monks, the noble truth that ‘this is pain’ ; [and,] monks, the noble truth that ‘this is the origin of pain’ ; [and,] monks, the noble truth that ‘this is the ending of pain’ ; [and,] monks, the noble truth that ‘this is the way leading to the ending of pain.’ ”²⁵ The inconsistency in grammatical gender for the four truths within the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* is as follows. The first truth, “pain,” is *dukkha* in Pali. The grammatical ending of *dukkha* is singular in number, neuter in gender, and in the nominative case. That ending matches up with the pronoun “this” (*idam*), which is also in the nominative or accusative case, singular in number, and neuter in gender. The second and third truths, “arising” (*samudayo*) and “ending” (*nirodho*) are masculine in gender, singular in number, and are declined in the accusative case (or mistakenly declined in the nominative neuter). The fourth truth, “way or practice” (*paṭipadā*) is singular in number, nominative, and singular. The same pronoun, “this” (*idam*) is used to refer to *each* of these terms. But Norman asks a critical question: How can a neuter pronoun refer to masculine and feminine nouns, as occurs with the second, third, and fourth truths? The expected form would be the pronoun “this” declined in the masculine or feminine singular, which is not the form that is actually found in the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*.

Grammatical Inconsistencies Resolved

Norman has found the four noble truths introduced elsewhere in the canon that do *not* have these grammatical errors. In particular, there are no errors in the genders of the pronouns and nouns in a sutta called the “Talk on Fear and Terror” (*Bhayabherava Sutta*).²⁶ The audience for this talk is a Brahmin by the name of Jāṇussoṇi, who has asked the buddha whether it is a distraction to meditate in the midst of a jungle, with all of its wild animals and noises. The buddha replies that those who are not properly purified are, in fact, scared

when they are meditating in the jungle. The buddha explains that he did not walk alone in the thick of the jungle until he was calm in mind and body. The sutta ends with the buddha explaining how he came to be enlightened, but it is a different version of the enlightenment story than is found in the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*. The four noble truths appear toward the end of the “Talk on Fear and Terror,” but they are not called “four” or “noble,” or even “truths.” They simply appear with the properly gendered pronouns “this”: “ ‘I understood as it really is’ ‘this is pain (*idaṃ dukkhaṃ*),’ ‘this is the arising of pain (*ayaṃ dukkha-samudayo*),’ ‘this is the ending of pain (*ayaṃ dukkha-nirodho*),’ and ‘this is the way leading to the ending of pain (*ayaṃ dukkha-nirodho-gāminī-paṭipadā*).’ ” Using the appearance of the four noble truths in the *Sutta on Fear and Terror*, then, Norman suggests that this form, with the properly declined pronouns and nouns, is the accurate and thus the relatively earlier form for the four noble truths. It is worth noting that the truths are not identified as “four,” “noble,” or “truths”—they simply appear in the sentence above as the content of what the buddha realized during his enlightenment.

Absence of the Four Noble Truths

There is another version of the buddha’s enlightenment where the four noble truths do not appear at all, in the “Talk on the Noble Quest” (*Ariyapariyesana Sutta*).²⁷ The buddha gave a talk to a group of monks on the difference between the noble quest, and the quest that is not noble. Put a bit differently, the buddha gave a talk on the difference between the quest of those who are noble and the quest of those who are not. The search of those who are noble is the quest of “one who is subject to birth, who knows the danger in that which is equally subject to birth, who searches for *nibbāna* where there is no birth [and is] the greatest respite from effort.” This person knows the dangers of aging, illness, death, grief, and stain, and looks for *nibbāna* where there is no old age, no illness, no death, no grief, and no stain. The description of the goal of the quest of the noble ones is the same as the first truth found in the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, but no mention is made of “the truth that ‘this is pain,’ ” or the second, third, or fourth truths. “Noble ones” should look for the *nibbāna* that is characterized by an absence of all of those things that are defined in the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* as “pain,” but the words *pain*, *arising*, *ending*, or *the way* are not found in the canonical version of the story—but the commentator Buddhaghosa, in his discussion of this sutta, inserts the four noble truths and says that this is what the story means.²⁸ The absence of the four noble truths in this sutta is significant because the framework for this sutta is the story of how the buddha came to be enlightened. After the buddha distinguishes between the quest (or search) that is noble and that which is not, he explains how he came to this realization during his own search for enlightenment. Based on the appearance of the four noble truths in the *Sutta of the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, this

Sutta on the Noble Quest would be expected to contain the four noble truths as the content of what the buddha realized—but they are not found there. What the *Sutta on the Noble Quest* offers instead is the quest described previously: he sought, and realized, the “*nibbāna* where there is no birth [and is] the greatest respite from effort.” The passage continues, and the buddha declares that he is now enlightened: “Knowledge and vision arose in me: release is unshakeable for me, this is the last birth, there is no more becoming.” Thus, there is a different story of the buddha’s enlightenment from which the four noble truths are missing.²⁹

These variations on the pattern of the four noble truths require a reassessment of the assumption that the four noble truths are the most important teaching of the buddha in Buddhism because they are the content of the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*. The grammatical inconsistencies identified by Norman illustrate that the four noble truths were not always written and recited with the same grammatical forms. Norman suggests that the grammatical inconsistencies for the four noble truths in the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* lead to the conclusion that they were a later addition to the canon, although Cousins disagrees. However, by identifying a relative sequence for “earlier” and “later” versions of the truths, scholars are trying to identify a relative chronology for the different grammatical versions of the truths. Other scholars have recognized that the pattern of presence and absence of the four noble truths in the buddha’s biography indicates a more complex narrative structure for the development of the life story of the buddha and the question of precisely how the buddha became enlightened. At the least, this evidence demonstrates that the early Buddhist tradition had multiple answers to the question of how the buddha was enlightened, and the fact that the four noble truths were written into the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* illustrates that the four noble truths emerged at an early period in the history of Buddhism as a compelling and thus fundamental teaching of the buddha.

Translating the “Four Noble Truths”

The translation of the Pali phrase *catur-ariya-saccāni* as the “four noble truths” is probably not the most accurate translation of this phrase, according to recent scholarship. There are several reasons for this, the first of which reflects the ways in which the phrase was remembered in Buddhist canons, the Pali Buddhist canon in particular. In 1982, Professor K. R. Norman published an article in which he observed that the Pali canon records the teachings on the four noble truths with different linguistic formulas. Briefly, Norman finds that the grammatical form of the truths in the *Sutta on the Turning of Dhamma Wheel* is different from the truths found elsewhere in the Pali canon, and suggests that the appearance of the truths in that sutta is later than the simpler form found at other locations in the Pali canon. Norman also points out that the term *ariya-sacca* (noble truths) was probably not used to describe the four truths themselves (*dukkha* [pain], *samudaya* [arising], *nirodha* [ending], and *mārga/magga*

[path] or *dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā* [way leading to the ending of pain]) in the earliest versions of the truths. In other words, in the earliest strata of the teachings, there was likely only this fourfold formulaic analysis: pain, arising, ending, and the path. But that fourfold analysis came to be identified as the “*catur-ariya-sacca*” (“four-noble-truths”) at some unspecified later point in the development of the tradition. Bhikkhu Anālayo offers a parallel reading of one of the suttas in which the four truths appear in the Chinese and Pali versions of the canon, suggesting that the adjective “noble” (*ariya*) was not always found in association with the four truths. In conclusion, then, it is probable that the teachings that we know now as the “four noble truths” were, in their earliest formulation in the Pali and Chinese canons, not recognized as either “noble” or even as “noble truths.”

In a book review essay, Lance Cousins reassessed Norman’s claims about twenty years after Norman’s first article on the four noble truths. Cousins pointed out that Norman’s arguments do not necessarily require the positing of an earlier version of the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* without the “(noble) truths.”³⁰ Cousins also suggested that while it is reasonable to argue that the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* was a later addition to the Pali canon or that the four noble truths were a later addition to the sutta, definitive proof is unlikely to be found at present. At the same time, scholars are in agreement that the translation of the Pali compound “*catur-ariya-sacca*” as “four noble truths” is rather unsatisfactory. Norman laid out the possible translations of the compound *ariya-saccāni* in Pali, and concluded that the translation of “four noble truths” is the least accurate of all possible translations because it is the only translation that calls the truths themselves noble. Other possible translations, discussed following, refer to the noble ones.³¹ Other possible translations include “the truths of the four noble ones,” referring to the four paths of the stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner, and arhat. Peter Harvey has synthesized much of the scholarship on the four *ariya-saccas*, and argues that *sacca* in Pali (Sanskrit *satya*) should be understood as referring to four crucial true or genuine realities, with “*ariya*” as not an adjective qualifying these, but as referring to the noble or spiritually ennobled people with the insight to directly see them.

These questions of grammar and syntax are central to the ways in which the teachings of the four noble truths are understood. They are also entirely in keeping with the explanations found in the commentaries on the Pali canon. There is a rich commentarial tradition for the Pali canon, and while there has been no comprehensive examination of the commentaries on the four noble truths, Norman discusses the key commentaries on the four noble truths.³² In the commentary on the *Dīgha-nikāya*, Buddhaghosa offers only one definition for “noble truth,” which is “the truths which cause nobleness.” Buddhaghosa gives two definitions in his commentary on the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*: “the truths which cause nobleness or are penetrated by the noble one[s].” Finally, Norman lays out Buddhaghosa’s

longer discussion of the compound in the *Visuddhimagga*, which includes these possible meanings:

- • “because the noble ones, the Buddhas, etc. penetrate, therefore they are called ‘the noble ones’ truths’ ”
- • “they are the truths of the Noble One, ‘the Noble One’ s [the Buddha’ s] truths’ ”
- • “because of the attainment of nobleness arising from their discovery, the ennobling truths”

These possible translations of the Pali compound *ariya-saccāni* in Buddhaghosa’ s commentaries from the late 4th and early 5th century in Sri Lanka demonstrate that these questions about why the truths were called noble rest at the heart of the tradition. These questions about what “four,” “noble,” and “truths” mean should be understood as the most recent scholarly consensus on this central teaching. My own choice to retain the traditional “four noble truths” in this article reflects contemporary use, while alerting readers to the fundamental questions of translation. These questions about whether the teachings of pain, arising, ending, and the way were *always* identified as “the four noble truths,” the “truths of the four noble ones,” or the “four genuine realities of the spiritually ennobled ones” should not divert from the fact that the four noble truths are a central teaching of the Buddhist canon and commentaries. Norman points out that those scholars who first translated the compound *ariya-saccāni* as “the four noble truths” could have translated the compound as “the noble’ s truths,” “the nobles’ truths,” “the truths for nobles,” or “the nobilising truths.” He ends that sentence with the observation that “they could only have one of them.” ³³

Review of the Literature

Examinations of the four noble truths first appeared in European scholarship in the mid-19th century, and several of these early studies remain useful for their attention to the different texts in which the four truths appeared. These early studies also provide us with a glimpse of the changing ways in which the four truths have been interpreted throughout the last two centuries of colonial encounters with Buddhism. Two relatively recent books address the four noble truths in colonial scholarship on Buddhism: Elizabeth Harris provides consistent attention to the four noble truths in her history of British scholarship and Theravada Buddhism, and Anderson offers a chapter on the topic. ³⁴

Throughout these early studies, there is increasing attention given to the teaching of the four noble truths throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries as *the* most important teaching of the buddha, as Anderson and Harris both illustrate. Spence Hardy and Rhys Davids were the two most outstanding examples of many scholars to eventually focus on the four noble truths as the most significant teaching of the buddha. ³⁵ T. W. Rhys Davids served in the Civil

Service in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) between 1866 and 1874, and returned to England to found the Pāli Text Society. The talk in which he argues for the centrality of the four noble truths was written for a popular audience in 1879. Other classical European studies that located the four noble truths at the center of Buddhist thought include those of Professor Feer, who traced different versions of the *Sutta/Sutra on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, identifying the four truths in different Buddhist schools and offering parallel translations of the sutra (in French).³⁶ Feer's work remains the best for parallel translations of the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*, in that he traced Sanskrit, Pali and Chinese versions. La Vallée Poussin offered a different interpretation of the four truths, drawing attention to the relationship between the four noble truths and what he saw as the path itself, instead of the person of the buddha.³⁷ E. J. Thomas continued to emphasize that the four noble truths are most significant because they were discovered by the person of the buddha.³⁸ The classical scholars of Indian religions Louis Renou and Étienne Lamotte both identified the four noble truths as the most comprehensive way to organize Buddhist teachings.³⁹

The most pressing issue surrounding the teaching of the four noble truths today remains the linguistic and grammatical analyses of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, as introduced in the work of Professors Norman, Cousins, and Harvey. Without additional textual sources, however, the question of whether or not the buddha himself conceptualized the four noble truths as “*the* four noble truths” in the way that the *Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel* remembers must remain unanswered. Most scholars today are satisfied to recognize the linguistic puzzles that characterize the teaching on the four noble truths in the various Buddhist canons. Work that may lie ahead would involve a more extensive analysis of the parallel versions of the teaching, not so distant from the work of Feer in the 1870s. At present, the teaching on the four noble truths remains one of the most widely studied by Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism throughout the world.

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(1.) Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher, eds., *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 5.

(2.) Bart Dessein, “The First Turning of the Wheel of the Doctrine: Sārvastivāda and Mahāsāṃghika Controversy,” in *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. A. Heirman and S. P. Bumbacher, 15 – 48 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 16. The versions of the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*/*Dharmacakrapravartana-sūtra* are found in the *vinaya* collections of these canons as follows: the Pali in *Vinaya-piṭaka* I.1 (translated in), the *Mahīśāsakavinaya* “Mishasai bu hexi wufen lü” (T.1421) and the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* “Sifen lü” (T.1428).

(3.) In Pali, see “*Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (*Sutta on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*),” *Samyutta-nikāya* volume V, 420 – 423 (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1991). See the translation in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000); and *The Book of the Kindred Sayings* (by C. A. F. Rhys Davids and F. L. Woodward, 1917 – 1930). For online access, the [Access to Insight](#) website by John Bullit offers different translations by leading scholars of the *Talk on the Turning of the Dhamma Wheel*.

(4.) Bart Dessein, “The First Turning of the Wheel of the Doctrine: Sārvastivāda and Mahāsāṃghika Controversy,” in *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. A.

Heirman and S. P. Bumbacher, 15 – 48 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 17, n. 8.

(5.) Jonathan S. Walters, “Stupa, Story and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Asokan India,” in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. J. Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai’ i Press, 1997), 160 – 192.

(6.) Abraham Vélez de Cea, “Emptiness in the Pāli Suttas and the Question of Nāgārjun a’ s Orthodoxy,” *Philosophy East and West* 55.4 (October 2005): 507 – 528.

(7.) Reginald Ray, “Response to John Cobb,” *Buddhist Christian Studies* 8 (1988): 86, 83 – 109. While the title of this article is obscure, this is a succinct and useful introduction to the three turnings of the dharma wheel. See also Tsepag Ngawang, “Traditional Cataloguing and Classification of Tibetan Literature,” *Tibet Journal* 30.2 (Summer 2005): 55, 49 – 60.

(8.) John Ross Carter, *Dhamma: Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist Interpretations—A Study of a Religious Concept* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1978), 74, n. 44.

(9.) Dessein, “First Turning,” 41 – 42.

(10.) [Ibid.](#)

(11.) [Ibid.](#)

(12.) Carol S. Anderson, *Pain and Its Ending: The Four Noble Truths in the Theravāda Buddhist Canon*, Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism Series, ed. C. S. Prebish and D. Keown (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999) (Reprinted Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), 32 – 33.

(13.) Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 90.

(14.) Rupert M. L. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59.

(15.) [Access to Insight.](#)

(16.) Kenneth G. Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 48 – 49; and Albrecht Wezler, “On the Quadruple Division of the Yogaśāstra, the Caturvyū hatva of the Cikitasāśāstra and the ‘Four Noble Truths’ of the Buddha,” *Indologica Taurinensia* 12 (1984): 291 – 337.

(17.) For a very good introduction to this, see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50 – 87. This chapter forms the bulk of his essay in the *Blackwell Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*: Peter Harvey, “Dukkha, Non-Self, and the Teaching on the Four ‘Noble Truths,’ ” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (London: Blackwell, 2013).

(18.) The *Dukkha Sutta*, found at S IV.259 and Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., “*Dukkha Sutta*: Stress,” [Access to Insight](#).

(19.) Translation found at [Access to Insight](#) and other standard translations of the *Samyutta-nikāya*.

(20.) M I. 55 – 63; Bhikkhu Thanissaro, “The Foundations of Mindfulness: *Satipatthana Sutta*,” [Access to Insight](#).

(21.) Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Path of Purification by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa*, 4th ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975 and 2010), 507. This passage is found in Chapter XVI, “The Faculties and Truths.”

(22.) Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 83 – 84.

(23.) Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Robert M. Gimello, eds. *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’ i Press, 1992), 7 – 8.

(24.) Anderson, *Pain and Its Ending*, 16.

(25.) K. R. Norman, “The Four Noble Truths: A Problem of Pāli Syntax,” *Collected Papers*, Vol. II (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1991), 212.

(26.) M I. 16 – 24; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans. and Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., “Bhayabherava Sutta: Fear and Dread,” in *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 102 – 107; and Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., “Bhayabherava Sutta or Sutta on Fear and Terror,” [Access to Insight](#).

(27.) M I. 160 – 175; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans. and Bhikkhu Bodhi, ed., “Ariyapariyesanā Sutta: The Noble Search,” in *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 253 – 265; and Bhikkhu Thanissaro, trans., “Ariyapariyesana Sutta or Sutta on the Noble Search,” [Access to Insight](#).

(28.) *Samantapāsādikā*, Buddhaghosa’ s Commentary on the Vinaya Piṭaka, ed. J. Takakusu and M. Nagai (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1969), 2:174.

(29.) Bhikkhu Thanissaro, introduction, “Ariyapariyesana or Sutta on the Noble Search, ” [*Access to Insight*](#).

(30.) L. S. Cousins, “Review of Anderson, *Pain and Its Ending*, ” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 8 (2001): 36 – 41.

(31.) Norman, K. R., “Why Are the Four Noble Truths Called ‘Noble’ ?,” in *Ānanda: Essays in Honour of Ananda W. P. Guruge*, ed. Y. Karunadasa (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Vision House, 1990), 11 – 13.

(32.) Norman, *Ānanda: Essays in Honour of Ananda W. P. Guruge*, 171 – 172. The commentary on the *Dīgha-nikāya* is found at Sv 542, line 33; the commentary on the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* is Mp II.281, lines 1 – 2.

(33.) Norman, “Why Are the Four Noble Truths Called ‘Noble?’ ” 174.

(34.) Elizabeth J. Harris, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: Religious, Missionary and Colonial Experience in Nineteenth-century Sri Lanka* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); and Anderson, *Pain and Its Ending*

(35.) Robert Spence Hardy, *The Legends and Theories of the Buddhists Compared with History and Science* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1866); and T. W. Rhys Davids, “Buddha’ s First Sermon, ” *Fortnightly Review* 39 (1879): 899 – 912.

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(39.) Louis Renou and Jean Filliozat, *L’ Inde classique: Manuel des Études indiennes*, 2 vols. (Paris: École Française d’ Extrême Orient, 1953), reprinted 1982; and Étienne Lamotte, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien, des origins à l’ ère Śaka*, Bibliothèque du Muséon, vol. 43 (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1958). English translation by Sara Webb Boin, *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śaka Era*, Publications de l’ Instiut Orientaliste de Louvain 36 (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1988).