

The Four Realities True for Noble Ones

A New Approach to *Ariyasaccas*

Ven. Pandita (Burma)^{*}

University of Kelaniya[†]

Abstract

Peter Harvey recently argued that the term *sacca* of *ariyasacca* should be interpreted as “reality” rather than as “truth”, the common rendition. I basically agree with him in this paper, but reach quite different implications.

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1 Introduction

In a paper published in (2009) as well as in his new edition of *Introduction to Buddhism*, Peter Harvey argues that *sacca* of the term *ariyasacca* should be rendered as “reality”, not as “truth” like commonly rendered. His reasons are as follows:

As regards the meaning of (*ariya-*)‘*sacca*’ in the Buddha’s first sermon, there are three reasons why it cannot here mean ‘truth’. First, it is said that the second *ariya-sacca* is to be abandoned (S.v.422): surely, one would not want to abandon a ‘truth’, but one might well want to abandon a problematic ‘reality’. Secondly, it is said that the Buddha understood, ‘“This is the *dukkha ariya-sacca*”’, not “The *ariya-sacca* “This is *dukkha*”’, which would be the case if *sacca* here meant a truth whose content was expressed in words in quote marks. Thirdly, in some Suttas (e.g. S.v.425), the first *ariya-sacca* is explained by identifying it with a kind of existent (the five bundles of grasping-fuel – see below), not by asserting a form of words that could be seen as a ‘truth’. In normal English usage, the only things that can be ‘truths’ are propositions, that is, something that is expressed in words (spoken, written, thought). Something said about *dukkha*, even just ‘this is *dukkha*’, can be a ‘truth’, but *dukkha* itself can only be a true, genuine reality. (Harvey, *Introduction* 51)

I agree with him; the reasons he has given as above are convincing enough and his theory is also supported by the Abhidhammic tradition:

[†]Email: ashinpan@gmail.com

[†]Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

samudayasaccaṃ akusalaṃ. maggasaccaṃ kusalaṃ. nirodhasaccaṃ abyākataṃ. dukkhasaccaṃ siyā kusalaṃ, siyā akusalaṃ, siyā abyākataṃ. (Vibh 112)

The *sacca* of Origin is unwholesome, that of Path is wholesome, that of Cessation is neither-wholesome-nor-unwholesome, (and) that of Suffering is sometimes wholesome, sometimes unwholesome, and sometimes neither-wholesome-nor-unwholesome.¹

In the text cited above, we can see four *ariyasaccas* being analyzed into the categories of wholesome (*kusala*), unwholesome (*akusala*), and neither-wholesome-nor-unwholesome (*abyākata*), the same categories used in *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, the first book of Abhidhamma (See *Dhs* 179–180). Such categorization is possible only if *sacca* means “reality”; if *sacca* were to mean “truth,” on the contrary, it would not have made sense to say a particular *truth* is wholesome, etc. In short, these four *ariyasaccas* have always been, in the Abhidhammic tradition, one particular method to classify the Ultimate Reality (*paramattha*).

Besides, Buddhaghosa himself has viewed *ariyasacca* as different from the concept of verbal truth:

Idhā ’yaṃ saccasaddo anekesu atthesu dissati, seyyathidaṃ: saccam bhaṇe na kujjheyyā ti ādisu vācāsacce. ... Catunnaṃ ariyasaccānaṃ kati kusalā ti ādisu ariyasacce. (Vism 496–497)

This term *sacca* in this (exposition of *saccas*) is seen in various senses. Which (senses) are these? It is seen in (the sense of) verbal truth in “(One) should speak the truth and not be angry,” etc. ... In (the sense of) *ariyasacca* in “Of four *ariyasaccas*, how many are wholesome?”, etc.

However, Bhikkhu Bodhi has raised an interesting question. In an email (presumably to Harvey), he asks: “... if the Buddha wanted simply to point to four entities, or classes of entities, why didn’t he use ‘*dhammā*’ or ‘*dhātuyo*’ or ‘*ṭhānāni*’ or ‘*padā*’?” (qtd. in Harvey, “*Ariya-saccas*” 207). And Harvey responds:

The fact that *sacca* can mean both ‘truth’ and ‘(true) reality’ does not mean that the Buddha and his audience could not differentiate between these meanings, any more than the existence of English words with a range of meanings — such as ‘bank’, ‘class’, or ‘feeling’ — mean that English speakers cannot differentiate between their meanings in different contexts. Many words have several meanings within their semantic range, but context and usage indicates the difference between these. ... (“*Ariya-saccas*” 207)

Of course, we need not doubt that the Buddha must have known what he was talking about, and his listeners, what they were listening to. However, we still need to understand why the Buddha chose the term *sacca* when other less ambiguous words were available; otherwise, we cannot be really confident that we fully understand the concept of four *ariyasaccas*, a fundamental doctrine of Buddhism. Perhaps this is why Harvey has to write:

¹Cf.: “The truth of the cause is bad. The truth of the path is good. The truth of cessation is neither-good-nor-bad. The truth of suffering sometimes is good; sometimes is bad; sometimes is neither-good-nor-bad.” (Thiṭṭila 147)

One could perhaps say the four *saccas* are ‘true realities’, as they are this in the sense of genuine, not seeming, ones, just as a ‘true musician’ is one who genuinely accords with what a musician is and should be. ‘True realities’ also keeps a clear connection to ‘truth’, the other meaning of *sacca*, and to the positive associations of this word. (“*Ariya-saccas*” 208)

Here I have some reservations, which I try to explain reusing Harvey’s simile. Just as the phrase “a true musician” makes sense only when there exist “false musicians,” the musicians below par, the phrase “true reality” would make sense only if there exist “false realities”—which can mean either unreal things or things real yet somehow carrying a certain falsity. It is not clear what such false realities are.

Therefore, I believe Harvey’s theory is a step in the right direction but not yet complete as a solution. Accordingly, I have attempted in this paper to understand the Buddha’s usage of *sacca* and, as a consequence, arrive at a different interpretation of the four *ariyasaccas*.

2 The Dual Sense of *Sacca*: A Hypothesis

I hypothesize that *sacca* means both “reality” and “verbal truth” at the same time in the context of *ariyasacca*. This is why, I argue, other terms that Bhikkhu Bodhi has proposed—*dhammā*, *dhātuyo*, *ṭhānāni* or *padā*— are not appropriate here as these can carry the sense of “reality” only, not that of “verbal truth.”

To demonstrate my hypothesis, I should mention some instances that I believe use the term *sacca* in its dual sense:

1. Questions each headed by the phrase *saccaṃ kira* and corresponding answers.
2. The common assertion of various ascetics: *idameva saccam, mogham aññaṃ*

One example of *saccaṃ kira* format is: the question and answer between the Buddha and Bhikkhu Sudinna when the former came to know that the latter had had sex with his former wife: *saccaṃ kira tvaṃ Sudinna purāṇadutiyikāya methunaṃ dhammaṃ paṭisevīti. saccam bhante* (*Vin* III 20) (“Sudinna, is it *sacca*, so it seems, that you indulged in sexual intercourse with the former wife? It is *sacca*, Lord.”²).

The general format of such questions and answers can be formalized as (*saccaṃ kira* + A? *saccaṃ/na saccam*), in which A is usually a proposition. The formalization of the example above results in the following table:

²Cf. “Is it true, as is said, that you indulged in sexual intercourse with your former wife? It is true, lord.” (Horner I 36)

	<i>Format</i>	<i>Text</i>
<i>Question</i>	<i>saccaṃ kira</i> = A =	Is it <i>sacca</i> that You indulged in sexual intercourse with the former wife?
<i>Answer</i>	<i>saccaṃ</i> = (A) =	It is <i>sacca</i> that (I indulged in sexual intercourse with the former wife.) ^a

^aNot expressed in the text but to be understood from the context.

Now let us turn our attention to the nature of proposition A in such formats. I argue that A can be interpreted in two ways:

1. If we interpret A as “form”, that is, as a verbal statement, then *sacca* will mean “verbally true.” The format *saccaṃ kira* + A should be interpreted as “Is the statement A true?”. The question in the example above would mean: “Is the statement that you indulged in sexual intercourse with your former wife, true?”.
2. If we interpret A as “content”, that is, as whatever event, process, or fact that A denotes, *sacca* will mean “real.” Then *saccaṃ kira* + A should be interpreted as “Is A real/actual/-factual?”. The question in the example above would mean: “Is it a fact that you indulged in sexual intercourse with your former wife?”.

Moreover, I should point out that these two interpretations are not alternatives either of which we must choose over the other in a given context. On the contrary, we can interpret such sentences in both ways at the same time without any contradiction, so we can safely say that *sacca* can mean both “reality” and “truth” at the same time in such contexts.

Next, an example of *idameva saccaṃ, mogham aññaṃ*:

Santi kho, Cunda, eke Samaṇa-Brāhmaṇā evaṃ-vādino evaṃ-dīṭṭhino—‘sassato attā ca loko ca, idam eva saccaṃ mogham aññaṃ ti.’ (DN III 137)

There are ascetics and Brahmins who say and believe: “The self and the world are eternal. Only this is *sacca* and anything else is false.”³

Again such statements can be formalized as (A + *idameva saccaṃ mogham aññaṃ*) in which A is usually a proposition. The formalization of the example above results in the following table:

	<i>Format</i>	<i>Text</i>
	A =	The self and the world are eternal.
<i>idameva saccaṃ</i> =		(Only) this is <i>sacca</i> ,
<i>mogham aññaṃ</i> =		anything else is false.

Now again I argue that the proposition A in such formats can be interpreted in two ways:

³Cf. “There are ascetics and Brahmins who say and believe: ‘The self and the world are eternal. This is true and any other view is erroneous.’” (Walshe 437)

1. If we interpret A as a verbal statement, then the sentences (*idameva saccaṃ mogham aññaṃ*) should be interpreted as “Only this (i.e., the statement A) is *sacca*, any other statement to the contrary is not.” Then the term *sacca* will mean “verbally true.” The example above would mean: “The self and the world are eternal. Only this (statement) is true, and anything else to the contrary is false.”
2. If we interpret A as whatever event, process, or fact that A denotes, the sentences (*idameva saccaṃ mogham aññaṃ*) should be interpreted as “Only this (i.e., the event/process/ fact A) is *sacca*, anything otherwise is not.” Then the term *sacca* would come to mean “real, actual, factual.” Consequently the example above should be interpreted as: “The self and the world are eternal. Only this fact is real, and anything otherwise is false.”

Again I should note that such sentences can be interpreted in both ways at the same time without any contradiction, with the consequence that we can say *sacca* can mean both “reality” and “truth” at the same time in such contexts.

From the usage examples of *sacca* given above, we can say that *sacca* can mean both “reality” and “truth” at the same time if it is used to describe a proposition. But can it do the same when it is used to describe an entity?

We will look at an instance:

Aneka-dhātu nānā-dhātu kho devānaminda loko. Tasmim̐ anekadhātu-nānādhātusmim̐ loke yaṃ yad eva sattā dhātum̐ abhinivisanti, taṃ tadeva thāmasā parāmāsā⁴ abhinivissa voharanti: “idam eva saccaṃ mogham aññaṃ ti.” Tasmā na sabbe samaṇa-brāhmaṇā ekanta-vādā ekanta-sīlā ekanta-chandā ekanta-ajjhosānā ti.’ (DN II 282)

The world, Ruler of the Gods, is made up of many and various elements. In that world of many and various elements, beings adhere powerfully and reflectively only to whatever (particular) element that they adhere to, and pronounce: “Only this (element) is real, everything else is false.” This is why not all brahmins and ascetics have the same doctrine, the same discipline, the same habits, the same desires, the same resolves.⁵

Whatever the Buddha meant by the term *dhātu*, he supposed these “elements” to be the components of the world, so they must obviously refer to certain entities, not to any proposition. And *sacca* here is used to describe *idam*, the pronoun referring to a certain element. Therefore it would be safe for us to interpret the term *sacca* as “real”, and to translate *idameva saccaṃ* as

⁴PTS edition reads *parāmassa*, which is, in this context, a gerund derived from (*parā* √*mas* + *ya*) meaning “having reflected.” However, Buddhaghosa explains: *thāmasā parāmāsā ti thāmena ca parāmāseṇa ca* (Sv III 737 “The phrase *thāmasā parāmāsā* means: powerfully and reflectively”), indicating that *parāmāsā* is in instrumental case like *thāmasā*, so it must be the CSCD reading *parāmāsā* that Buddhaghosa has seen and used.

⁵Cf. Walshe’s version:

The world, Ruler of the Gods, is made up of many and various elements. Such being the case, beings adhere to one or other of these various things, and whatever they adhere to they become powerfully addicted to, and declare: ‘This alone is the truth, everything else is false!’ Therefore they do not all teach the same doctrine, practice the same discipline, want the same thing, pursue the same goal. (Walshe 330–331)

The problem with Walshe’s version is: how can an element composing the world be a piece of verbal truth?

“Only this (element) is real.” However, does the term *sacca* here still carry the sense of “truth”? If it does, how should we interpret it?

I hypothesize that the sense of “truth” is still retained here, and that a sentence of the format (A + *saccam*), in which A refers to a certain entity, can be interpreted in two ways:

- A is real;
- The proposition/statement to that effect is true.

Every statement, unless it implicitly or explicitly refutes itself, claims its own truth, so the real function of the sense “truth” here should be to emphasize, to indicate a strong assertion on the speaker’s part. In this context, the speaker is making such a strong assertion despite different opinions, or evidences, to the contrary, so both senses of the term *sacca* fits the context.

And I argue that *sacca* in the context of *ariyasacca* is such a term, which I will elaborate in the next section.

3 The Analysis of the Term *Ariyasacca*: Orthodox and New

First of all, it will be helpful to look at the traditional Theravadin interpretations of *ariyasaccas*. I am quoting below the explanations of Buddhaghosa and Dhammapāla.

1. *Saccas* realized by noble ones like Buddhas, etc.:

Yasmā pan’ etāni Buddhādayo ariyā paṭivijjhanti, tasmā ariyasaccāni ti vuccanti. Yath’ āha:—cattār’ imāni, bhikkhave, ariyasaccāni. Katamāni? ... pe ... imāni kho, bhikkhave, cattāri ariyasaccāni. Ariyā imāni paṭivijjhanti, tasmā ariyasaccāni ti vuccanti ti. (Vism 495)

They are called *ariyasacca* because the noble ones, the Buddhas, etc., penetrate them. Accordingly it is stated [on (SN V 433)]: “O monks, there are four *ariyasaccas*. What (four)? ... O monks, these are the four *ariyasaccas*. The noble ones penetrate them; therefore (the latter are) called *ariyasaccas*.”⁶

ariyehi vā buddhādīhi paṭivijjhitaḥāni saccāni ariyasaccāni (It-a I 85)

The *saccas* that should be penetrated by the noble ones, the Buddhas, etc., are termed *ariyasaccas*.

2. *Saccas* of the Noble One, i.e., of the Buddha:

⁶In CSCD, the last two sentences *Ariyā imāni paṭivijjhanti, tasmā ariyasaccāni ti vuccanti* (“The noble ones penetrate them; therefore (they are) called *ariyasaccas*.”) are part of the authoritative text that Buddhaghosa cites here. On the other hand, both the PTS edition and Ñāṇamoli’s translation (Ñāṇamoli) put these sentences out of the quotation obviously because these are not found in the relevant SN text. However:

- The indeclinable *iti* that signals the end of the quotation comes only after these two sentences in the Vism text. It can only mean that they are part of the SN or any other text that Buddhaghosa was citing.
- And without the last two sentences, the whole quotation would have failed to achieve Buddhaghosa’s purpose to validate his statement.

Therefore, I believe that these last two sentences must have been originally in SN; they apparently went missing afterwards from the SN itself, but were saved as part of a cited passage in Vism.

api ca ariyassa saccāni it pi ariyasaccāni. yath' āha: sadevake, bhikkhave, loke ... pe ... [sadeva-]manussāya Tathāgato ariyo, tasmā ariyasaccāni ti vuccanti ti. (Vism 495)
Or (These are) the truths of the Noble One; therefore (they are termed) *ariyasaccas*. Accordingly it is stated [(SN V 435)]: “In this world, with its devas, Marā, and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, the Tathāgata is the noble one. Therefore they are called *ariyasaccas*.” (Bodhi, *Connected* 1856 modified).

athavā ariyassa saccāni ariyasaccāni. sadevakena hi lokena saraṇan ti araṇīyato ariyo Bhagavā, tena sayambhū-ñāṇena diṭṭhattā tassa saccāni ti ariyasaccāni. (It-a I 85)
Or the *saccas* of the Noble One are *ariyasaccas*. To elaborate, the Blessed One is termed *ariya* because he is worthy to be approached, as (their) refuge, by the world including that of gods. (And these are) his *saccas* because they are seen by him through the Self-Arising Wisdom; therefore (they are called) *ariyasaccas*.

3. The ennobling *saccas*:

Atha vā etesaṃ abhisambuddhattā ariyabhāvasiddhito pi ariyasaccāni, yath' āha:—imesaṃ kho, bhikkhave, catunnaṃ ariyasaccānaṃ yathābhūtaṃ abhisambuddhattā Tathāgato arahaṃ sammāsambuddho ariyo ti vuccati ti. (Vism 495)

Or, (they are called) *ariyasaccas* because of the attainment of nobleness owing to the realization of these (*saccas*). Accordingly it is stated [on (SN V 433)]: “It is because he has fully awakened to these four *ariyasaccas* as they really are that the Tathāgata is called the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, the Noble One.”⁷ (Bodhi, *Connected* 1854 modified).

ariyabhāvakarāni vā saccāni ariyasaccāni. (It-a I 85)

The *saccas* which are makers of nobleness are (called) *ariyasaccas*.

4. The true *saccas*:

Api ca kho pana ariyāni saccāni ti pi ariyasaccāni. Ariyāni ti tathāni-avitathāni avisaṃvādakāni ti attho; yath' āha:—imāni kho, bhikkhave, cattāri ariyasaccāni tathāni avitathāni anaññathāni, tasmā ariyasaccāni ti vuccanti ti (Vism 495)

Alternatively, (these are) noble *saccas*, therefore (they are termed) *ariyasaccas*. (The term) “noble” [*ariyāni*] means: actual, unerring, not otherwise. Accordingly it is stated [at (SN V 435)]: “These four *ariyasaccas*, bhikkhus, are actual, unerring, not otherwise. Therefore they are called *ariyasaccas*.” (Bodhi, *Connected* 1856 modified).

5. *Saccas* that should be approached (worthy of approach):

ariyasaccāni ti araṇīyato ariyāni avitathabhāvena saccāni cā-ti ariyasaccāni (It-a I 85ff.)

⁷In both CSCD and PTS editions of *Vism*, the term *ariyo* (“the Noble One”) is there but it is missing in SN of both CSCD and PTS versions. This is why we cannot find it rendered in Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation. However, without it, the cited (SN or any other) text would have lost any relevance to this version of the definition of *ariyasacca*, so it must be in the manuscript Buddhaghosa was using, whether it was of SN or of any other text.

(These) are *ariya* because they should be approached (are worthy of approach),⁸ and also are *sacca* because of (their) non-falsity; therefore (they are called) *ariyasaccas*.

Out of these, I will take the first one and extend it to build my hypothesis. According to the first version, *ariyasacca* literally means “*saccas* for noble ones, i.e., *saccas* penetrated (realized) by noble ones.” And if only noble ones can realize *ariyasaccas*, only they can make truthful assertions about them. Therefore, I argue, *ariyasacca* should be interpreted as “realities true for noble ones, i.e., realities that can be asserted only by noble ones.”

As seen above, both the senses of “reality” and “truth” are necessary for my interpretation. Therefore, other words that mean “reality” only, like *dhammā*, *dhātuyo*, *ṭhānāni* or *padā*, do not work here; the Buddha did need to use the term *sacca*.

4 On *Ariyasaccas*

As seen above, I have outlined my interpretation of the term *sacca* in *ariyasacca*. But this is still a hypothesis, which means its value should be measured in terms of certain mysteries it helps to explain, or certain questions it helps to answer. So I will try in this section to approach the four *ariyasaccas* using my hypothesis.

First of all, I will consider the third *ariyasacca*.

4.1 The Cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodha*)

“... *nirvāṇa* is one of the most widely known Buddhist words outside Asia. ... Yet, it is a word about which Buddhists themselves have never reached agreement.” (Gomez 600). In Theravada Buddhism, “*Nibbāna* stands polarized to the concept of *Samṣāra*. As *Samṣāra* stands for the ceaseless continuance ... from birth to death and death again and again, *Nibbāna* is undoubtedly the joyous termination of this painful process ...” (Dhammavihari 160). On the other hand, “Mahayana practitioners concluded that nirvana was equivalent to and existed concurrently with *samsara*; the two states are at bottom indistinguishable.” (“Nirvana” 370).

Furthermore, “... nirvana ... is perhaps the most misunderstood Buddhist concept among people of other religious traditions.” (“Nirvana” 370). For example, “... Some Westerners ... saw nirvana as a nihilistic goal, a complete annihilation of consciousness, a connotation that many people found troubling.” (370).

But all these controversies are in perfect accord with my hypothesis, which claims that only noble ones have the ability to make truthful assertions about the *ariyasaccas*, of which nirvana is one. If we were noble persons, on the contrary, we need not have argued in this way. Even

⁸The term *araṇīya* is derived from \sqrt{ar} (Skt. \sqrt{r}) meaning “to go, to approach” plus the future participle suffix *anīya*. So *araṇīya* can be literally rendered as “to be approached; to be attained” (Cone *arati* s. v.). And in this context, Norman rendered it as “being approachable” (173).

I do not agree with Norman, however. Why? The term “approachable” in English usually means “1 friendly and easy to talk to; easy to understand ... 2 ... that can be reached by a particular route or from a particular direction” (*OALD approachable* s. v). On the contrary, in the definition of *ariyasaccas* as the *saccas* of the Noble One (the Buddha), the commentator Dhammapāla himself says: *sadevakena hi lokena saraṇan ti araṇīyato ariyo Bhagavā* (*It-a* I 85 “The Blessed One is termed *ariya* because he is *araṇīya* as the refuge by the world including that of gods.”) Therefore, *araṇīya* should be translated as “should be approached” or “worthy of approach.”

if we were unlearned despite our noble status, we would have certainly known what we were talking about and understood one another perfectly.

4.2 The Suffering (*dukkha*)

I argue, in accord with my hypothesis, that the term *dukkha* (“suffering/pain”) in this context is simply a relative term. This characterizes the attitude of noble ones, who have realized nirvana; for them, the whole world, the whole *saṃsāra*, is just a giant pain, when compared with nirvana. Consequently all available descriptions of *dukkha* in the context of *ariyasaccas* should be interpreted as judgmental in nature.

On the other hand, how modern scholars understand the concept of *dukkha* (“suffering”) in the first *ariyasacca* is probably best summed up by Harvey when he writes:

To what extent is ‘this is *dukkha*’ a *description*, and to what extent is it a *judgement*? ... When something is said to be ‘*dukkha*’ as it is a physical or mental pain, the descriptive aspect of its meaning is predominant, though there is an implied ‘this is unfortunate’. When something is said to be ‘*dukkha*’ due to being conditioned, limited and imperfect, the judgemental aspect is to the fore, for that which is *dukkha* is here clearly being unfavourably compared with that which is unconditioned and unlimited, namely *Nirvāna*. ... At this level, *dukkha* is whatever is not *Nirvāna*, and *Nirvāna* is that which is not *dukkha*. (Harvey, *Introduction* 54–55)

So, according to Harvey, the term *dukkha* in different descriptions carries, in different ratios, both descriptive and judgmental aspects.

The flaw with Harvey’s interpretation is that it cannot solve the philosophical problems that arise when the expositions available in *suttas* are taken as descriptive. We will see them one by one.

[i] birth is painful, ageing is painful, illness is painful, death is painful; [ii] sorrow, lamentation, (physical) pain, unhappiness and distress are painful; [iii] union with what is disliked is painful; separation from what is liked is painful; not to get what one wants is painful. (Harvey, *Introduction* 52)

These descriptions of *dukkha* seems philosophically shallow. For, all these negative aspects are balanced by their opposite aspects in real life; aging is balanced by youth, illness is balanced by health, death is balanced by life, etc., etc. This fact has led some students to think that Buddhism smacks of pessimism.

On the other hand, Buddhism seemingly has a response to such a label of pessimism, for the Buddha agreed with Dhammadinnā, who said, “Pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes.” (Ñāṇamoḷi and Bodhi 401) [*Sukhā kho, āvuso Visākha, vedanā t̥hitisukhā vipariṇāmadukkhā* (MN I 303).] Therefore, Harvey writes:

Buddhism emphasizes that all forms of happiness (bar that of *Nirvāṇa*) do not last. Sooner or later, they slip through one’s fingers and can leave an aftertaste of loss and longing. In this way, even happiness is to be seen as *dukkha*. (Harvey, *Introduction* 54)

But this interpretation fails to convince millions of people thinking like Freud, who writes:

I could not see my way to dispute the transience of all things ... But I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth. On the contrary, an increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. It was incomprehensible, I declared, that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it. (Freud)

There seems no logic available to prove Freud wrong.

Moreover, not only pleasure but also painful or neutral feelings are subject to transience, hence a statement rather common in the *suttas*: “Whatever transient is pain” (*yadaniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ*).⁹ However:

1. This statement seemingly contradicts the fact that “Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes.” (Ñāṇamoḷi and Bodhi 401) [*dukkhā vedanā t̥hitidukkhā vipariṇāmasukkhā* (MN I 303)].
2. If whatever transient is *dukkha*, we wonder, why did the Buddha not cut to the chase and not simply state, “the *ariyasacca* of transience” (*anicca-ariyasacca*)?

On the contrary, all these problems go away when we understand all descriptions of *dukkha* in the context of *ariyasaccas* as entirely judgmental. How?

1. When the Buddha defines real pain (*dukkhadukkha*), and the transience of pleasure (*vipariṇāmadukkha*) as *dukkha-ariyasacca*, he is only saying what nirvana is not. This may appear as shallow to philosophers, but such descriptions do appeal to anyone who has the time and intellect to think over the question, “What is the point of all this mess?”. Even now, we can see many Buddhists pushed into a life of meditation by adverse circumstances in their lives. Even if such descriptions may not be philosophically convincing, they still work very well as part of his teaching methodology.
2. With the judgmental approach, if anything but nirvana is pain (*dukkha*) by definition, and also if nirvana is not transient, his statement of whatever transient being pain is justified.

So it should be seen as an attempt to persuade the truth-seekers of his time, who believed in a permanent self as true bliss, and for whom the mere transience of pain is not good enough, to seek out nirvana instead.

3. And my hypothesis can also answer why the Buddha names *dukkha* (“pain”) as an *ariyasacca*, rather than other *lakkaṇas* (“marks”)— *anicca* (“transience”), and *anattā* (non-self). How?
 - a) Transience is actually part of our real-world experience, which common sense cannot deny, so we cannot claim that only noble ones can assert it as true.

⁹(SN II 53, III 22, III 44, etc. AN V 187, etc.)

- b) The notion of self, the opposite of *anattā*, is a very strong illusion on our part, but self (*attā*) is not susceptible to direct experience. This is why, as early as the eighteenth century, the British philosopher David Hume “rejected the notion of a substantive ego on the ground that no such entity was observable.” (Ayer 135). Hume was not even a Buddhist, let alone a noble person, but he seemingly discovered the concept of *anattā* on his own. So we cannot say that only noble ones can realize *anattā*.
- c) On the other hand, the pain of *saṃsāra* is something hard to understand for us, given the availability of real pleasures and joys in the mundane world. Therefore, the Buddha chooses *dukkha* as one *ariyasacca* that only noble ones can assert as true.

Now, one inevitable question arises: why did the Buddha use the judgmental approach to describe the mundane world? Because, if my hypothesis is correct, this situation must have posed a chicken-and-egg problem for him. If no one can understand the suffering of *saṃsāra* without experiencing nirvana, how can a Buddha persuade people to give up the available pleasures of this world for something that they have not experienced nor can even understand? To solve this problem, I argue, the Buddha has adopted a methodology of appealing to different people by showing different aspects of nirvana, in contrast with their counterparts in the mundane world.

Another question is concerned with *lakkhaṇas* (“marks”) that meditators should contemplate upon in *Vipassanā* meditation:

*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ, yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad anattā, yad anattā taṃ netam mama neso
ham asmi na meso attā ti evametam yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ* (SN III
22, 45, 82–83, IV 1, 2, 3, 152–153).

What is impermanent is suffering. What is suffering is nonself. What is nonself should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ (Bodhi, *Connected* 1: 869)

While investigating the [bodily and mental] processes described above, the aim is to experientially recognize their shared features: the ‘three marks’ ... Their constant arising and ceasing demonstrates that they are impermanent (*anicca*, Skt *anitya*). That they are ephemeral, unstable and limited, not the kind of thing that one can rely on, shows that they are unsatisfactory, obviously or subtly painful (*dukkha*, Skt *duḥkha*) ... (Harvey, *Introduction* 335–336)

The question here is: is the pain (*dukkha*) that non-noble meditators should recognize the same as the pain of *dukkha-ariyasacca*? If the same, this contradicts my hypothesis which claims that only noble ones can assert *ariyasaccas* as true. If not the same, what is the difference?

I answer that they are the same and different at the same time, basing my argument on a simile. What follows is the account of a Burmese author retelling his experience of a violent earthquake:

I could not even stay on fours lest I might stumble, so I had to lie prostrate with my stomach close to the ground. In the south, clouds of dust were rolling upwards in the deep darkness,

and the earth was swelling up in big waves, just like a stormy sea. Perhaps it was because I had my face close to the ground, but I did see the earthen surface rolling in waves like a body of water. At the time, what a heart-felt despair! I can assert that the despair was not in the brain but in the guts. Why not? A creature always has to rely on the earth as the most stable support; when one has to experience the violent trembles of the stable earth itself, it is no wonder if one feels, to the highest degree, helpless and desperate in one's heart and guts. (Trans. from Rvhe O Doṅ" 319)

The author and his family, I should add, survived that traumatic experience without so much as a scratch, and they went back to their earthly lives and pleasures as before.

The non-noble meditators who face the pain of fragility in their meditation but who fail to achieve the nirvanic experience are just like the author cited above. Even though they are frustrated by the transience of everything in and around themselves during meditation, they have no actual alternative to choose, so they can adapt to normal lives again some time after meditation retreats. We can say that they do know *dukkha* but that knowledge would yield benefits only when they can have a choice which is not pain, i.e., nirvana.

On the other hand, let us suppose that just after the trauma of the violent earthquake, the author had got a brief vision of a heavenly life, which would come after his days were over here and be incomparably better than his earthly life. Let us also say that even before death, he could also enjoy short stretches of his forthcoming heavenly life occasionally. In this scenario, the author would have come to see his earthly life as a giant pain, and spent his life counting the days before he said the final farewell to the earth.

This scenario perfectly corresponds to those who have become noble persons after meeting both the fragile nature of the *samsāra* and the bliss of nirvana. After becoming noble persons, they can also have an occasional taste of nirvana through a process called *phalasamāpatti* ("attainment of fruitions") (*Vism* 699–702; *Ñāṇamoḷi* 727–730). They would always view the mundane world as a big pain, and would count the days before they finally get the chance to enter nirvana for good.

In short, even though they both sense the pain of the mundane world, noble persons can be judgmental whereas non-noble persons cannot, simply because the former have an alternative to choose but the latter do not. This is why we can say that only the former can understand and assert the *ariyasacca* of suffering but the latter do not.

4.3 The Origin of suffering (*dukkhasamudaya*)

The standard understanding of the second *ariyasacca* is summed up by Harvey thus:

So the key origin or cause of *dukkha* is *taṇhā*. This literally means 'thirst', and clearly refers to demanding, clinging desires which are ever on the lookout for gratification, 'now here, now there'. It contains an element of psychological compulsion, a driven restlessness ever on the lookout for new objects to focus on: I *want*, I *want* more, I *want* different. This propels people into situation after situation which are open to pain, disquiet and upset. (*Introduction* 62–63)

The problem is: *taṇhā* is not the only cause:

Besides craving [i.e., *taṇhā*], another important cause of *dukkha* is ‘views’ (*diṭṭhi*, Skt. *drṣṭi*): beliefs, theories, opinions or world-views, especially when they become fixed or dogmatic, so that one identifies fully with a way of looking at something, a way of explaining it ... (Harvey, *Introduction* 63)

Furthermore, in the related, and all-important, doctrine of Conditional Arising (*paṭicca-samuppāda*), the first conditioning factor (*nidāna*), out of the twelve, is ignorance (*avijjā*), not *taṇhā*, which happens to be the factor numbered (8). And not only these two, but also the constructing activities (*saṅkhāra*), grasping (*upādāna*), and karma-becoming (*kammabhava*) are defined as “actively contributing to the arising of *dukkha*” (Harvey, *Introduction* 72).

So the question is: why did the Buddha choose *taṇhā* (“craving”) as the second *ariyasacca*, i.e., the cause of *dukkha*, and not the other causes? My hypothesis can provide an answer. How?

1. The constructing activities (*saṅkhāra*) and karma-becoming (*kammabhava*) can be affective only for non-arahats, i.e., those still having ignorance with them, because “In a person who has destroyed spiritual ignorance, actions no longer have the power to ‘construct’ any karmic results.” (Harvey, *Introduction* 68). Accordingly, these are not fundamental enough to be chosen as the one cause of suffering.
2. Even in the mundane world, ignorance and/or wrong approach/attitude would prevent a given problem from getting solved. Accordingly, it makes perfect sense to us if *avijjā* and *diṭṭhi* (“ignorance and wrong view”) contribute to the arising of pain; this is certainly not a fact that only noble ones can understand.
3. On the other hand, not everyone can agree that craving (*taṇhā*) should be abandoned even if it causes suffering. What follows is the eloquent protest of a philosopher begging to differ:

... it was better to have fought and lost than never to have fought at all ... And what if, desire, if fulfilled, leads only to another desire? Perhaps it is better that we should never be content ... The healthy man asks not so much for happiness as for an opportunity to exercise his capacities; and if he must pay the penalty of pain for this freedom and this power he makes the forfeit cheerfully; it is not too great a price. (Durant 346)

The only way to convince people like Durant would be to have them experience nirvana, i.e., become noble persons, and let them make a choice between nirvana and *saṃsāra*. Once they become noble persons, they would see for themselves that nirvana is really worth the price of having to abandon desire. This is the reason why, I argue, the Buddha chose craving (*taṇhā*), not other factors, as the origin of suffering that can be asserted only by noble ones.

4.4 The Path leading to the cessation of suffering (*dukkhanirodhagāminīpaṭipadā*)

The Buddha described the fourth *ariyasacca* in the first sermon as follows:

Idaṃ kho pana bhikkhave dukkhanirodhagāminī paṭipadā ariyasaccaṃ. Ayameva ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo. seyyathīdaṃ sammādiṭṭhi ... sammāsamādhī (SN V 421–422)

Now this (i.e., what follows), bhikkhus, is the way leading to the cessation of suffering, (i.e.), (another) reality asserted by noble ones. It is this very eightfold path belonging to noble ones. What is it? Right view, right thought,¹⁰ right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

Here readers should notice how I have rendered the term *ariyo* of the phrase *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*. The former is normally translated as “noble” but I have rendered it, in accord with my hypothesis, as “belonging to noble ones,” resulting in the the whole phrase taking on the sense of “the eightfold path belonging to noble ones.” It means that, whenever we encounter the phrase *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*, we can safely interpret it as the Eight-factored Path that noble persons tread.¹¹

My interpretation agrees with the supposedly “late” Abhidhammic tradition, for:

The Abhidhamma’s focus on momentary realities leads to seeing the full power of the transcendent, Noble Eight-factored Path as lasting for a very short time ... The Theravāda sees each of the ‘Path’ states, immediately after which a person becomes a stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner and Arahāt, as lasting only one moment each. The Sarvāsativāda sees these as lasting fifteen moments each. The Noble Eight-factored Path is, on this kind of view, an achieved state, rather than something a person practises. (Harvey, *Introduction* 92)

But it outright contradicts the modern understanding of the fourth *ariyasacca*, which Gombrich sums up as follows:

Though there is no canonical evidence for this interpretation, modern scholars have plausibly argued that the formulation of the Four Noble Truths follows the medical idiom of the time: first the disease is diagnosed [*dukkha*], then its origin or cause is established [*dukkhasamudaya*], then it is accordingly stated what a cure would consist of

¹⁰The term *sammāsaṅkappa* is often rendered “right intention” (E.g., see Bodhi, *Numerical* 126; *Connected* 180; *Nāṇamoḷi* and Bodhi 100), but elsewhere “right thought” (E.g., see Walshe 146; Horner 4: 15), and rarely “right resolve” (E.g., see Thomas 53). We still need further research to determine the best rendition, but I have chosen “right thought” here so as to avoid having readers confuse it with volition (*cetanā*).

¹¹ There are some scholars who maintain that the phrase *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* might sometimes refer to the mundane path. The evidence they quote is the following passage in *Mahāsīhanādasutta*:

Atthi Kassapa maggo, atthi paṭipadā, yathāpaṭipanno sāmaṃ yeva ṇassati sāmaṃ dākkhīti: Samaṇo va Gotamo kāla-vādī bhūta-vādī attha-vādī dhamma-vādī vinaya-vādī ti. ... Katamo ca Kassapa maggo, katamā paṭipadā ... ? Ayam eva Ariyo Aṭṭhaṅgiko Maggo. (DN I 165)

Kassapa, there is a path, there is a course of training, whereby one who has followed it will know and see for himself: “The ascetic Gotama speaks at the proper time, what is true, to the point—the Dhamma and the discipline. What is this path and this course of training? It is the Noble Eight-fold Path ... (Walshe 152–153)

The passage quoted above allegedly refers to the mundane path, for: “this *Sutta* is preached to the ascetic Kassapa, to convince him of the appropriateness of the mundane practice of the Buddha’s followers ...” (Nandapala). But this is not convincing enough, for the phrase “will know and see for himself” may just as well mean knowing and seeing as a noble person.

[*dukkhanirodha*], and finally the treatment to achieve that cure is prescribed [*dukkhanirodhagāminīpaṭipadā*]. (161)

Why? Because the metaphor breaks down with my interpretation. If the fourth *ariyasacca* is to be “an achieved state,” as both the Abhidhammic tradition and myself claim (rather than something to be practiced), it means, in the medical metaphor, that only the treatment received at the time of recovery counts whereas any therapy before that does not. What kind of medical care is it?

So, I can only conclude that, at least, one of the two interpretations must be wrong. Anyhow, there is evidence favoring my interpretation.

First of all, we can find, in the *Mahācattārīsakasutta* of *Majjhimanikāya* (MN III 71–78), two levels of Path factors, the ordinary (*lokiya*) and the transcendent (*lokuttara*). And Harvey gives these in a nice table (*Introduction* 83–84). However, he has not dealt with how each factor in these different levels are differently described in the original sutta:

Mundane affected by taints (*sāsava*), partaking of merits (*puññabhāgiya*), and ripening in acquisitions (*upadhivepakka*)

Supramundane belonging to noble ones (*ariya*), taintless (*anāsava*), supramundane (*lokuttara*), and a factor of the Path (*maggaṅga*).

As seen above, factors only at the supramundane level, not those at the ordinary level, are described as “factor of the Path (*maggaṅga*).” This shows, I argue, that only path factors at the supermundane level are deemed path factors *per se*.

Furthermore, we know that a person at the lowermost state of nobleness is called *sotāpanna* (“stream-enterer”). But what do the terms “stream” and “stream-enterer” mean? The Buddha asked those questions and Venerable Sāriputta answered that the Eight-Factored Path belonging to noble ones is the stream, and those who possess it are stream-enterers (SN V 347; Bodhi, *Connected* 1792–1793). This also shows that the Eight-Factored Path does not belong to anyone lesser than a stream-enterer.

Moreover, we should consider the Buddha’s instructions on how to approach those four *ariyasaccas*:

Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhaṃ ariyasaccam pariññeyyan ti ... Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhasamudayam ariyasaccam pahātabban ti ... Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhanirodham ariyasaccam sacchikātabban ti ... Taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhanirodhagāminīpaṭipadā ariyasaccam bhāvetabban ti ... (SN V 422)

That this *ariyasacca* of suffering is to be fully understood ... That this *ariyasacca* of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned ... That this *ariyasacca* of the cessation of suffering is to be experienced ... That this *ariyasacca* of the way leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed ... [See also (V 436).]

As seen above, the fourth *ariyasacca* is a particular way or path (*magga*) and it is supposedly to be developed (*bhāvetabba*). If it were something to be practiced, as commonly believed, the Buddha would have said “to be tread upon” (*gantabba*), but he did not. This shows, I argue, that non-noble practitioners are only *developers* of the Way, which they themselves are to *use* when they have achieved the noble state.

But how do noble persons make use of the Way?

4.4.1 How noble ones tread the Path and the rest of us develop it

As ordinary beings, we can be compared to a driver whose car is rushing about in an open field. Being in an open field means that whenever he meets an object, animate or inanimate, it is up to him to choose—to avoid it or to run over it. In the same manner, it is our wholesome or unwholesome moods at a given moment that make an ethical choice in our daily activities. And if circumstances are bad enough and/or our moods are foul enough, there is no limit to how low we would stoop.

On the other hand, noble persons can be compared to a trolley car driver. Given that trolley cars run on rails, the driver can choose to run over an object which happens to be on the rails, or to spare it by hitting on the brakes, but he cannot touch anything off the rails. In the same manner, the Eight-Factored Path (*aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*) is the “rails” which noble ones move on, and which regulates the latter’s bodily, verbal and mental activities. These people can still choose to, or not to, run over objects lying on the rails—i.e., they can choose to, or not to, perform unwholesome deeds when the defilements not yet abandoned are involved—but they would be forever away from the objects off the rails—i.e., from the taints, and from the relevant bad deeds, that they have discarded for good; the Path would see to it that such defilements do not come back.

But how exactly does the Path manage to prevent one or more given defilements coming back when circumstances are right for the latter? By having one or more of its eight factors come into play whenever certain defilements are invited by the circumstances at a given place and time. For example, when the available scientific knowledge at a time leads most scientists, and subsequently the general educated public, to entertain a form of wrong view, the Path would ensure that right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*) arise in a noble person and thus prevent him or her accepting the wrong view as metaphysical truth even though the latter is supported by all scientific evidence available at the time. This is how wrong view or any other type of defilements is eradicated by the Path; it can be experienced and understood only by noble persons, hence the term *ariyasacca*.

On the other hand, the rest of us have to develop these Path factors deliberately. In doing so, sometimes we succeed, sometimes we fail; that is, we cannot guarantee that they would come to us at right time and right place. This is why they are true only for noble persons, not for us.

But how about the noble ones who are not yet arahats and consequently have not abandoned all defilements yet? They are also in the same boat as us when they strive for a higher spiritual status; to achieve their objectives, they have to cultivate Path factors deliberately up to the required degree. The difference, however, is that, even if they have not yet succeeded to climb up, they do not need to worry if they may fall off, i.e., whether defilements they have already abandoned would ever come back again. For the rest of us, on the contrary, there is always a chance, however slim, to fall back to the square one.

I should note here that my hypothesis does not need to use the concept of underlying tendencies (*anusaya*) in explaining how noble persons abandon their defilements. This fact leads to a new solution, which I intend to elaborate in a subsequent paper, to the age-old controversy that has raged over the nature of *anusayas*. If that solution of mine correctly reflects the true perspective of early Buddhism on *anusayas*, it would also corroborate my hypothetical interpretation of the fourth *ariyassa*.

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