

1.1.3 Summary table

Here is a table showing 4 kinds of noble saints and the fetters they have broken:

	Fetters broken:	<u>the lower fetters</u>	fetters that obtain	
			<u>rebirth</u>	<u>existence</u>
(1) The once-returned	[§2]	0	0	0
(2) The one bound upstream for Akaniṭṭha	[§3]	✓	0	0
(3) The one who attains nirvana in the interval	[§4]	✓	✓	0
(4) The arhat	[§5]	✓	✓	✓

Table 1.1.3. The 4 saints and the 3 fetters

1.2 BACKGROUND TEACHINGS

1.2.1 TYPES OF SAINTS

1.2.1.1 The 4 kinds of noble saints. These saints are simply called “recluses” (*samaṇa*) in the **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16). Further, declares the Buddha: “Empty of recluses are the other outside doctrines”: these saints are not found outside of the Buddha Dharma.⁴ Traditionally, these are the 4 kinds of noble saints⁵ mentioned in the suttas in terms of the 10 fetters:⁶

(1) **The streamwinner** (*sotāpanna*), the first of the 4 noble saints,⁷ is one who has broken the first 3 fetters of (1) self-identity view, (2) doubt and (3) attachment to rituals and vows.⁸ He has full faith in the 3 jewels and moral virtue dear to the noble saints.⁹ He is also endowed with charity.¹⁰ His spiritual attainment is such that he will attain arhathood in the next life, or within a few lives, but never more than 7 lives.¹¹

(2) **The once-returned** (*sakadāgāmi*), the second of the 4 noble saints, is a noble saint who has broken the first 3 fetters and also significantly weakened *greed, hate and delusion*. In other words, he has destroyed the gross forms of the fourth fetter, sensual desire, and the fifth fetter, ill-will. As a rule, a once-returned is only reborn once in the sense-desire world (*kāma,loka*), as a human or sense-world god.¹² However, if he is able to attain dhyana, he will be reborn in one of the form realms or, if he has mastered the formless attainments, even in one of the formless realms.

The once-returned (and implicitly, the streamwinner, too) have “not abandoned the lower fetters” — despite the fact that they have abandoned *the first 3 fetters* [1.6.6.2]. The Tīkā (Subcommentary) to the Sutta explains that this is because they still have to abandon the fetters of sensual lust and of ill will

⁴ D 16,5.27 (SD 9).

⁵ On the 4 kinds of saints, see **(Catukka) Samaṇa S** (A 4.239), SD 49.14.

⁶ For a diagram of the 10 fetters, see SD 50.11 (Table 2.2.2).

⁷ For a detailed study of the 4 noble saints or individuals (*ariya,puggala*), see SD 10.16 (11-14).

⁸ For details on overcoming the 3 fetters, see **Emotional independence**, see SD 40a.8.

⁹ These are the 4 limbs of streamwinning (*sotāpanna-y-aṅga*): see **Pañca Bhera Bhaya S** (S 12.41), SD 3.3(4.2); **Pañca Vera S 1** (S 55.28/5:387-389); **(Anātha,piṇḍika) Vera S** (A 9.27), SD 87.6. Further, on the 6 benefits of being a streamwinner, see **(Sotāpanna) Ānisaṃsā S** (A 6.97), SD 3.3.

¹⁰ **Thapatayo S** (S 55.6,3.1), SD 42.7.

¹¹ On these 3 kinds of streamwinners, see **(Sekha) Uddesa S 3** (A 3.87/1:233), SD 80.14.

¹² **(Chakka) Miga,sālā S** (A 6.44) records the non-celibate lay once-returned as being reborn in Tusita (A 6.44,2.3), SD 3.2(6); also at **(Dasaka) Miga,sālā S** (A 10.75/1:138), SD 99.8.

¹³(*kāma.rāga,vyāpāda,samyojanāni*, AAT:Be 2:333). In other words, they have not abandoned the lower fetters as a set. Apparently, this is to highlight the priority given by the Buddha to the attainment of non-returning and arhathood.¹⁴

(3) **The non-returner** (*anāgāmi*), the third of the 4 kinds of saints, is one who has destroyed all the 5 lower fetters [Table 1.1.2], those that keep us bound to the sense-world, so that, after death, we are reborn in one of the pure abodes¹⁵ and do not return to this world (the sense-world). There, the non-returner exhausts his karmic potential and attains arhathood in due course.¹⁶

(4) **The arhat** (*arahata*) is a noble individual who is worthy of respect and so on because he is truly free from ignorance and liberated from suffering. He has fully realized the Buddha's teaching and so stands as an exemplar for others. As a fully liberated saint, his awakening is the same as that of the Buddha's—like him, too, he would not have any more rebirth.¹⁷

1.2.2.2 The 5 kinds of non-returners. The non-returners are those saints, who upon dying, will not be reborn in the sense-world again. They would either pass away into nirvana, or be reborn in one of the pure abodes to finish off the remains of their natural karmic life. There are 5 kinds of non-returners, or 5 kinds of destinies that a non-returner has, that is, as follows:¹⁸

(1) **The attainer of nirvana in the interval** [the intermediate state] (*antarā,parinibbāyī*) is one who, on account of the abandoning of the 5 lower fetters, dies from here and arises in an intermediate state where he abandons the higher fetters and attains arhathood, that, is nirvana.¹⁹ Although this is the shortest-lived of the non-returners, he is also the one who attains arhathood and passes finally away the fastest.

(2) **The attainer of nirvana upon landing** (*upahacca,parinibbāyī*) refers to a non-returner who attains nirvana “upon landing” in a pure abode, that is, immediately on being reborn therein. This means that “upon being reborn” in a pure abode, he abandons the higher fetters and awakens as an arhat (attains nirvana with remains), living out the rest of his natural life there.²⁰

(3) **The attainer of nirvana without exertion** (*asaṅkhāra,parinibbāyī*) is one who, having overcome the higher fetters, is reborn in a pure abode, and almost at once attains final nirvana. **The Purisa,gati Sutta** (A 7.52) compares the nirvana of this individual to a flying spark that lands on a bit of grass or sticks, igniting them or causing them to smoulder, then cools down after they are consumed.

(4) **The attainer of nirvana with exertion** (*sa,saṅkhāra,parinibbāyī*) is one who, having overcome the higher fetters with *some* exertion (some time in meditation), attains final nirvana.

(5) **The one bound upstream, heading for Akaniṭṭha** (*uddham,sota akaniṭṭhā,gāmi*), the fifth and last kind of non-returner, is the slowest of them in terms of attaining nirvana. He progresses through each one of the pure abodes until he attains nirvana upon reaching Akaniṭṭha, the highest of the pure abodes.

¹³ The usual term for “ill will” (*vyāpāda*) is “repulsion” (*paṭigha*) [1.2.1.2].

¹⁴ See SD 10.16 (12).

¹⁵ See SD 10.16 (13.1.6).

¹⁶ For details on the non-returner, see SD 10.16 (13).

¹⁷ See **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

¹⁸ For details on these 5 kinds of non-returners, see SD 10.16 (13.1.3).

¹⁹ See **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17 (6-9).

²⁰ On the 2 kinds of nirvana, see SD 45.18 (2.5).

1.3 Sutta commentary

1.3.1 THE ONCE-RETURNER (*sakadāgāmi*) [§2]

1.3.1.1 The (Catukka) Saṃyojana Sutta says that the once-returner is one “**has abandoned *neither* the lower fetters *nor* the fetters that obtain rebirth, *nor* the fetters that obtain existence**” [§2; Table 1.1.2]. This sentence simply means that the once-returner (like the streamwinner) “has not broken *any* of the 10 fetters.” The meaning of this statement is explained by the Commentary [1.2.1.2].

According to the Commentary, the “**the fetters that obtain rebirth**” (*upapatti, paṭilābhiya saṃyojana*) are those by which one obtains the next rebirth (*yehi anantarā upapattim paṭilābhati*). “**The fetters that obtain existence**” (*bhava, paṭilābhiya saṃyojana*) are the conditions for obtaining rebirth-existence (*upapatti, bhavassa paṭilābhaya paccayāni*) (AA 3:130).

Apparently, according to the Commentary, “the fetters that obtain rebirth” bind one only to the immediately following rebirth, while “the fetters that obtain existence” bind one to successive rebirths. This explanation, however, does not seem to be helpful. But see below [1.3.2.3] for an alternative interpretation.

1.3.1.2 Both the streamwinner and the once-returner have abandoned only the lower 3 of the 10 fetters, but the once-returner has also weakened the 3 unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion. Hence, the Commentary explains: “The once-returner is mentioned to show the highest among the noble ones who have not abandoned any of the fetters” (*Sakadāgāmissāti idarṃ appahīna, saṃyojanesu ariyesu uttama, koṭiyā gahitaṃ*, AA 3:130).

1.3.1.3 The Ṭikā adds: “That is, who have not abandoned the lower fetters. For above the once-returner, there is no noble one who has not abandoned the lower fetters.’ But is it not the case that once-returners have abandoned (some) lower fetters: have they not abandoned the fetters of views, doubt, and attachment to rituals and vows?

In that case, why is it said that they have not abandoned the lower fetters? Because once-returners have not abandoned the fetters of sensual lust and ill will. Therefore, the statement that they have not abandoned the lower fetters is said with reference to those fetters that they have not abandoned. It does not mean that they have not abandoned *any* fetters.” (AAṬ:Be 2:333).

In simple terms, it means that neither the streamwinner nor the once-returner has abandoned the “10 fetters” as a whole—only the arhat has.

1.3.2 THE ONE BOUND UPSTREAM FOR AKANIṬṬHA (*uddham, sota akaniṭṭha, gāmi*) [§3]

1.3.2.1 The Sutta describes this noble saint as one who “**has abandoned the lower fetters, but *neither* the fetters that obtain rebirth *nor* the fetters that obtain existence**” [Table 1.1.2]. This means that he will still be *reborn* in the higher pure abodes until he reaches the highest of them, that is, Akaniṭṭha—this is due to “the fetters that obtain rebirth.” What about the “fetters that obtain existence”—it does not seem to fit in here.

1.3.2.2 This is the 5th and slowest of the 5 types of non-returners. He is one who progresses upward through successive pure abodes to the highest one, called Akaniṭṭha [1.2.2.2(5)]. Technically, all the 5 kinds of non-returners still have to eradicate the remaining higher fetters [Table 1.1.2]. Apparently, this non-returner still has to finish off the rest of his karmic life, that is, to eradicate the higher fetters. Perhaps this is where we have a vital clue to the meaning of the two unique phrases—“the fetters that obtain rebirth” and “the fetters that obtain existence.”

1.3.2.3 Clearly here “fettters” (*saṃyojana*) logically refer to the 10 mental fettters. The question now is: Which ones? Here are a few possibilities:

(1) Fettters 6-9 [Table 1.1.2] are “the fettters that obtain existence,” as they are likely to refer to the continued existence before the attaining of awakening; and fetter 10—ignorance—is “the fetter that obtains rebirth,” which is well known, because ignorance (*avijjā*) is the root of samsara itself.

(2) Fettters 6-7 (the lust for form existence and for formless existence) constitute “the fettters that obtain existence” since these two fettters are clearly what holds us back to some kind of existence (*bhava*).

(3) Fettters 8-10 (conceit, restlessness and ignorance), which are mental defilements, generate the karma or look for past karma as the basis for rebirth or new lives—“the fettters that obtain rebirth (*upapatti*)” [as shown in Table 1.1.2]. For a narrower meaning of terms, see (1.3.3).

1.3.3 THE ONE WHO ATTAINS NIRVANA IN THE INTERVAL (*antarā,parinibbāyī*) [§4]

1.3.3.1 The Sutta describes the non-returned “who attains nirvana in the interval” as one who “**has abandoned the lower fettters and the fettters that obtain rebirth, but not the fettters that obtain existence**” [Table 1.1.3]. It does not make sense to take this explanation literally: that the non-returned has overcome rebirth (not born any more) but still exists. If he has attained nirvana, he cannot be said to “exist,” “not exist,” both or neither.

More likely, “the fettters that obtain existence” refer to fettters 6-7, while “the fettters that obtain rebirth” to fettters 8-10 [1.3.2.3(2)]. This means that the non-returned “who attains nirvana in the interval” is one who has overcome the fettters of lust for rebirth (characterized by conceit, restlessness and ignorance, especially the last), but his lust for existence (*rūpa,taṇhā*) and for formless existence (*arūpa,taṇhā*) are “the fettters that obtain existence,” that is, the intermediate state.

According to **the Kutūhala,sāla Sutta** (S 44.9), the intermediate being is said to be propelled on by craving (*taṇhā*): “Craving is the fuel (*upādāna*).”²¹ Understandably, here, the craving cannot be lust for sense-existence or sense-pleasure, as the non-returned has eradicated it. This craving is the subtle desire for form existence or formless existence. But with arhathood, even this subtle desire for existence is overcome, too.

1.3.3.2 This phrase, *antarā,parinibbāyī*, creates a predicament for the traditional Theravāda interpretation of the 5 types of non-returned and Buddhist teachings as a whole. Most traditional Theravādins follow **the Puggala Paññatti** (Abhidhamma) definition of *antarā,parinibbāyī* (and its Commentary at PugA 198-201), as follows:

Katamo ca puggalo antarā,parinibbāyī?

*Idh’ekacco puggalo pañcannaṃ oram,-
bhagiyānaṃ saññōjanānaṃ parikkhayā
opapātikā hoti, tattha parinibbāyī²² anāvatti-
dhammo tasmā lokā. So upapannaṃ vā
samanantara apattaṃ vā vemajjhaṃ
āyu,pamāṇaṃ ariya,maggaṃ sañjaneti*

And what is the person who is attains nirvana in between?

Here, a certain person, having destroyed the 5 lower fettters, is one of spontaneous birth, where he attains nirvana, not of a nature to return from that world. Having arisen (there) and having abandoned the higher fettters, he brings forth the noble path immediately or before reaching the

²¹ S 44.9,15/4:400 (SD 23.15).

²² Meaning that having attained nirvana (becoming an arhat), he continues living in the pure abode without returning to the sense world. On the translation of *parinibbāyī* as simply “who attains nirvana,” not “who passes finally away” (at least in this context), see SD 50.13 (1.3.1.2-1.3.1.3).

*upariṭṭhimānaṃ saññōjanānaṃ pahānāya.
Ayaṃ vuccati puggalo antarā, parinibbāyī.*

middle of his life. This is called the person who attains nirvana in between.

(Pug 1.49/16 f)

1.3.3.3 The gist of this interpretation is the rejection of an intermediate state (*antarā, bhava*), a being in between two lives. Instead, the traditionalists (as here in Pug 1.49) interpret the *antarā, parinibbāyī* as a non-returner who attains arhathood during the first half of the life span in his next existence.

However, the phrase *antarā, parinibbāyī* literally means “one who attains nirvana *in between*.” There is no good reason, based on any sutta, to deny the possibility that certain non-returners, after dying as humans, arise in an intermediate state and attain nirvana in that state itself, without having to take any other rebirth.

1.3.3.4 The (Catukka) Saṃyojana Sutta gives us another vital clue to the existence of the intermediate state. This Sutta says that here the *antarā, parinibbāyī* has abandoned the fetters of rebirth but not the fetters of existence. Upon becoming a non-returner, one’s “fetters for rebirth” are destroyed. Upon attaining arhathood, one then destroys “the fetters of existence.”²³ We have elsewhere discussed what “the fetters” in either cases are [1.3.3.1].

1.3.4 THE ARHAT (arahata)

1.3.4.1 Finally, the **(Catukka) Saṃyojana Sutta** describes the arhat as one who “*has* abandoned the lower fetters, the fetters that obtain rebirth and the fetters that obtain existence” [S5]. This is quite straightforward. The arhat has overcome both the lower fetters and the higher fetters. On awakening as an arhat, the fetters of rebirth are destroyed: the arhat will not be reborn any more.

1.3.4.2 The arhat continues to live for the natural duration of the existence of his 5 aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—but without any clinging. In this case, it is possible that “the fetters of existence” refer to or include the 5 aggregates (which sustain his life), since all his mental fetters have been destroyed.

1.3.4.3 At the end of the arhat’s life, his “fetters that obtain existence,” too, are destroyed: he ceases to exist (as we understand existence). Technically, the arhat, after death, cannot be said to exist, or not exist, or both, or neither.²⁴

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²³ Bodhi discusses the 5 types of non-returners in some detail in S:B 1902 f n65 and A:B 1782 nn 1535-1538. For a further helpful textual analysis, see Harvey, *The Selfless Mind*, 1995:98-108.

²⁴ On these tetralemmata of truth, see **Anurādha S** (S 22.86,4) SD 21.13; **Cūḷa Māluṅkya,putta S** (M 63,2.2) + SD 5.8 (2+3); **The unanswered questions** SD 40a.10.

The (Fours) Discourse on the Fetters

A 4.131

The 4 kinds of persons

1 Bhikshus, there are these 4 kinds of persons existing in the world. What are the four?

(1) Here, bhikshus, some person has

abandoned neither the lower fetters,
nor the fetters that obtain rebirth,
nor the fetters that obtain existence.²⁵ [134]

(2) Here again, bhikshus, some other person has

abandoned *the lower fetters*,
 but neither the fetters that obtain rebirth
nor the fetters that obtain existence.

(3) Here again, bhikshus, some other person has

abandoned *the lower fetters* and
the fetters that obtain existence,
 but not the fetters that obtain existence.

(4) Here again, bhikshus, some other person has

abandoned *the lower fetters*,
the fetters that obtain rebirth and
the fetters that obtain existence.

(1) The once-returned

2 What person, bhikshus, who has abandoned neither the lower fetters nor the fetters that obtain rebirth,²⁶ nor the fetters that obtain existence²⁷?

He is **the once-returned** (*sakadāgāmi*).²⁸

This person, bhikshus, has abandoned *neither* the lower fetters *nor* the fetters that obtain rebirth, *nor* the fetters that obtain existence.

(2) The one bound upstream for Akaniṭṭha

3 What person, bhikshus, *has* abandoned the lower fetters, but *neither* the fetters that obtain rebirth *nor* the fetters that obtain existence?

He is **the one bound upstream for Akaniṭṭha** (*uddham, sota akaniṭṭha, gāmi*).²⁹

This person, bhikshus, has abandoned *the lower fetters*, but neither the fetters that obtain rebirth nor the fetters that obtain existence.

²⁵ *Idha bhikkhave ekaccassa puggalassa orambhāgiyāni saṃyojanāni appahīnāni honti, upapatti, paṭilābhiyāni saṃyojanāni appahīnāni honti, bhava, paṭilābhiyāni saṃyojanāni appahīnāni honti.*

²⁶ "The fetters that obtain rebirth," *upapatti, paṭilābha saṃyojana*: see (1.2.1).

²⁷ "The fetters that obtain becoming," *bhava, paṭilābha saṃyojana*: see (1.2.1).

²⁸ See (1.2.1).

²⁹ *Uddham, sotassa akaniṭṭha, gāmino puggalassa*: see SD (1.2.3).

(3) The one who attains nirvana in between

4 What person, bhikshu, *has* abandoned the lower fetters and the fetters that obtain rebirth, but *not* the fetters that obtain existence.

He is **the one who attains nirvana in between** (*antarā, parinibbāyī*).³⁰

This person, bhikshu, has abandoned *the lower fetters* and *the fetters that obtain rebirth*, but *not* the fetters that obtain existence.

(4) The arhat

5 What person, bhikshus, *has* abandoned the lower fetters, the fetters that obtain rebirth and the fetters that obtain existence?

He is **the arhat** (*arahata*).

This person, bhikshus, has abandoned *the lower fetters*, *the fetters that obtain rebirth* and *the fetters that obtain existence*.

6 Bhikshus, these are the 4 kinds of persons existing in the world.

— evaṃ —

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³⁰ See (1.3.3).