

Truth sequences

An interesting discovery

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One of the first things we know about the early Buddhist teachings is regarding **the 4 noble truths**. These truths are arranged as:

- (1) The 1st noble truth: suffering;
- (2) The 2nd noble truth: the arising of suffering: craving;
- (3) The 3rd noble truth: the ending of suffering: nirvana;
- (4) The 4th noble truth: the path leading to the ending of suffering: the noble eightfold path.

2.1 THE TEACHING MODEL

2.1.1 The Dhamma,cakka sequence. The well-known sequence of **the 4 noble truths** as “(1) suffering—(2) arising—(3) ending—(4) the path” is commonly found in the suttas. However, it is possible, in fact, very likely, that its original arrangement was “**1-2-4-3**,” that is,

suffering → craving → eightfold path → nirvana.

In terms of teaching, it is easier to use the former sequence—which is called “**the teaching model**” or theoretical model, famously found in the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta (S 56.11); hence, we can also call it the “Dhamma,cakka” sequence (SD1.1), which is familiarly listed as “**1-2-3-4**” in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), thus,

suffering → arising → ending → path. (S 56.11,5-8) + SD 1.1 (6.2.2.2)

2.2 THE PRACTICE MODEL

2.2.1 The Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika sequence

2.2.1.1 However, in practice, it makes better and more natural sense to *comprehend* suffering, *abandon* craving, *cultivate* the path, and *attain* nirvana. This is called “**the practice model**” or “natural sequence” since it is given as “**1-2-4-3**,” following the natural flow of conditionality (cause and effect) ending with the attaining of nirvana. This is the sequence given in a number of other suttas [3.1.1.2], especially **the Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika Sutta** (M 149); hence, we can also call this the “Saḷ-āyatanika” sequence, which is thus:

suffering → arising → path → ending. (M 149,11+14+17+20+23+26) + SD 41.9 (2.4)

2.2.1.2 The teaching model may also be called “**the mundane model**” of the 4 truths because this is the way that we, the unawakened, are normally taught these truths. We are told to identify and understand suffering; to know that it arises from craving; to understand that it has an ending, that is, nirvana; and to cultivate the path so that we will be liberated.

2.2.2 The supramundane model

2.2.2.1 In contrast to *the mundane model* [2.2.1.2], the practice model is also called “**the supramundane model**” because we must reach the path of awakening—becoming at least a streamwinner—before we can effect the “practice model” or even the “natural sequence” in terms of conditionality (causes and effects).

The real practice, then, starts with streamwinning. This is the model laid out in **the Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika Sutta** (M 149) [2.2.1].

2.2.2.2 The practice sequence (the 4 truths naturally arranged as 1-2-4-3) or **supramundane model** is well presented in **the Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika Sutta** (M 149) in terms of the 4 tasks (*kicca*), centering upon the 5 aggregates, thus:

- (1) **suffering**: comprehends by *direct knowledge* the 5 aggregates of clinging
 - (2) **arising of suffering**: abandons by *direct knowledge* ignorance and craving for existence
 - (3) **the path to the ending of suffering**: cultivates by *direct knowledge* calm and insight
 - (4) **ending of suffering**: realizes by *direct knowledge* knowledge and liberation
- (M 149,11/3:290) + SD 41.9 (2.4)

2.2.2.3 Note that the term “**direct knowledge**” (*abhiññā*) or “higher knowledge,” refers to the arhat. It is, however, more generally translated as “superknowledge” when referring to mundane states or powers, as in the “6 powers” (*cha-ḷ-abhiññā*). “Direct knowledge” specifically refers to the arhat’s liberating knowledge, that is, “the knowledge of the destruction of the influxes” (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*), in reference to a set of 3 or 4 influxes, the flow of defilements into our “system,” keeping us in samsaric existence.

2.3 THE BUDDHA’S MODEL

2.3.1 A 3rd model. Besides the well-known mundane sequence of the “teaching model” of the 4 noble truths [2.1] and the saints’ model [2.2], there is a rare 3rd model of the truths, which we shall call **the Buddha’s model** of the truth. This is the sequence of the 4 noble truths recorded, for example, in **the Sela Sutta** (M 92 = Sn 3.7) where the Buddha declares what he has himself gone through that awakens him, thus:

What is to be known has been known,
what is to be cultivated has been cultivated,
what is to be abandoned has been abandoned by me—
therefore, brahmin, awakened [the Buddha] am I.

Sn 558 = Tha 828

2.3.2 The Sela sequence

2.3.2.1 This sequence of the 4 noble truths, found in the Sela Sutta (Sn 3.7) and elsewhere, is arranged as 1-4-2-3, as follows:

Suffering → the path → craving → nirvana (Sn 559 = Tha 828 = M 92,19), SD 45a.7

This is a unique arrangement that is difficult to explain by any pre-existing model. In other words, it is likely to be the most ancient 4-truth model in the canon, used by the Buddha

himself. It is also located in an ancient section of the suttas, that is, **the Sutta Nipāta**. Although the Sela Sutta itself is mostly late, the verse preserving this Buddha-word (Sn 558) [2.3.1] is certainly old.

2.3.2.2 The Anurādha Sutta (S 22.86) records the Buddha as stating: “**Only suffering and the ending of suffering do I declare!**” Looking at this statement and **Sn 558**, I sensed their close connection. To begin with, the **Sn 558** statement begins with “suffering” and ends with “the ending of suffering (nirvana).” In between these *beginning* and *ending* of the truths lie the path and what the path overcomes (craving). The Buddha, as it were, is simply putting **his own awakening experience** into words.

As it is, this is not something easy to comprehend. Hence, based on this *earliest* 4-truth sequence, there evolved the “practice sequence” of the arhats [2.2], followed by *the best known* mundane model for the unawakened, the “teaching model” [2.1].

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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