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**(Sacca) Tathāgatā Sutta**

The (Truth) Discourse on the Tathagatas | S 56.12  
Ee **Tathāgatena Vuttā 2** The 2<sup>nd</sup> “Spoken by the Tathagata”

Theme: All the buddhas discover the same 4 truths  
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**1 Sutta significance**

**1.1 The (Sacca) Tathāgata Sutta**, “the (truth) discourse on the Tathāgata” (S 56.12) states how all the buddhas fully mastering **the 4 noble** truths, that is, in the “3 phases” (*ti,parivaṭṭa*) and “12 aspects” (*dvā-das’ākāra*)—they have fully broken through into them in theory, practice and realization [1.2]. It is this breakthrough into the “3 phases” and “12 aspects” of the 4 noble truths that constitutes the completion of **the task** (*kicca*) of the holy life, making one an arhat. An arhat, then, is one who has “done that which needs to be done” (*kata,karaṇīyam*),<sup>1</sup> he “has nothing further that needs to be done or to repeat what has been done,”<sup>2</sup> and for them there is “nothing further beyond this” (*nāparam itthattāyāti*)<sup>3</sup> [2.2.4.2].

**1.2** This Sutta appears as a section (§§9-12) of **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), which comes right before it in the same chapter [2]. This Sutta passage is identical to those in S 56.11 except there the Buddha himself addresses them, while here he declares them in terms of all buddhas (*tathā-gatā*). This is the section on “the 3 phases and 12 aspects.”<sup>4</sup>

**1.3 TATHĀGATĀ**

**1.3.1** The Sutta’s keyword is **tathagatas** (*tathāgatā*),<sup>5</sup> which is the plural form of *tathāgata*, an appellation that the Buddha uses to address himself. He is “thus come” (*tathā āgata*) in the sense that he is neither an emissary of any divine being (God, etc) nor prophets, but arises as the most highly evolved being amongst us as the natural process of spiritual evolution and awakening. He is “thus gone” (*tathā gata*) in the sense that, just like the truth he proclaims, he dies, thus authenticating the reality that he and we commonly are.

**1.3.2** “**The tathagatas**” (*tathāgatā*), literally, “those thus come or thus gone,” applies to all buddhas in general. They are “thus come” (*tathā āgatā*) in the sense that they are neither emissaries of any divine being (God, etc) nor prophets, but arise as the most highly evolved beings amongst us as the natural process of spiritual evolution and awakening. They are “thus gone” (*tathā gatā*) in the sense that, just like the truth they proclaim, they die, thus authenticating the reality that they and we commonly are.

**1.3.3** The fact that the historical Buddha and other buddhas before and after him arise naturally amongst humans, highlights our special human capacity for learning, evolving and awakening from the subhuman,

<sup>1</sup> See the “arhat’s review-knowledge pericope”: SD 51.18 (2.3.2.2); also SD 12.4 (5).

<sup>2</sup> *N’atthi khv-āvuso arahato uttari karaṇīyam, katassa vā paticayo. Sīlavanta S* (S 22.122,19), SD 47.4. On *paṭi-caya* and more refs for this pericope, see SD 47.4 (2.2) & SD 53.1 (3.2.2).

<sup>3</sup> See **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,21.6), SD 10.13.

<sup>4</sup> For details, see SD 1.1 (6.2).

<sup>5</sup> The -a- with the circumflex ^ (â) refers to conjunct vowels joining 2 words or elements (representing, respectively, the terminal vowel of the 1<sup>st</sup> element and the initial vowel of the 2<sup>nd</sup> element), thus: usually -a + a, or -ā + -ā-, but, broadly, -a + ā-, or -ā + a-, or even only -a/-ā terminal vowels + only an initial consonant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> element (as in the case of *tathāgata*. The compound *tathagata* can be resolved as *tathā + āgata*, or *tathā + gata*: see above.

through the human and the divine, and beyond both, to the unconditioned that is nirvana. Hence, awakening is a natural reality that is within our reach and needs to be attained by us so that we are liberated just like the buddhas, thus come and thus gone.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 The Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattana Vagga

### 2.1 THE 1<sup>ST</sup> DISCOURSE

**2.1.1 The Dhamma,cakka-p,pavattana Vagga**, “the chapter on the turning of the Dharma-wheel,” is the second and final “connected chapter” (*saṃyutta*) of the Mahāvagga, “the great chapter” (S 5), devoted to the truths discovered by the Buddha on the night of his awakening and which he regards as the heart of his teaching, that is, the 4 noble truths (*catu ariya sacca*). Significantly, this chapter closes the whole of the Saṃyutta Nikāya.

The very first text in this Vagga is significantly, **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta (S 56.11)**, which records the Buddha’s proclamation of the 4 noble truths to his first disciples, given in the deer park at Benares, 45 years before he passes away. This is the most comprehensive sutta in the whole Vagga.

Curiously, this sutta is almost hidden away inconspicuously near the end of the Saṃyutta Nikāya—suggesting its late entry into the canon. Another sign of lateness is the Sutta’s closing, comprising an exultation of the devas resounding throughout the physical universe, the ten-thousandfold world system.<sup>7</sup>

**2.1.2 The 1<sup>st</sup> discourse’s authenticity.** It is probable that the Sutta made a late entry into the canon. This does not, however, mean that it is a *late* sutta. It certainly has an ancient core, that is, the statement on the 4 noble truths. Upon this core, the early sutta compilers wove in the details already well known at that time. This text, then, serves as a vital document that pits together the core teachings which were familiar to all the sutta compilers *and* also the first 5 monks.

After all, the early Buddhist canon is not so much a historical document as it is **a canon of theory and practice** based on the Buddha’s personal experience. Even if this “first sutta” were to lack historicity (a scholarly assumption), in no way does it lack any spiritual authenticity. It well informs us on what the Buddha awakened to, and what we can learn and benefit from that awakening.

### 2.2 THE SACCA SAṂYUTTA

**2.2.1 Significance of the Sacca Saṃyutta.** The suttas of the Sacca Saṃyutta highlight the 4 noble truths as *the* teaching of universal significance. They are not merely a special teaching peculiar to the most evolved of humans—the buddha—of an epoch, but it is the very same liberating truth realized by *all* buddhas, past, future or present (S 56.3 + 4). The Buddha is called **the “fully self-awakened”** (*sammā,sambuddha*) because he has awakened to these truths (**S 56.23**); even more so, all the buddhas of the past, present, and future fully awaken to these very same truths (**S 56.24**).

The truths are described as being **noble** (*ariya*) because they are such, certain, not otherwise (**S 56.-27**),<sup>8</sup> and because they are taught by the Buddha (**S 56.28**).<sup>9</sup> They are also called noble because they are

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<sup>6</sup> For details on *tathagata*, see SD 15.7 (2).

<sup>7</sup> On the Sutta’s authenticity, see SD 1.1 (8). On the 10,000 world-system, see **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1,147), SD 25.2; **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,20), SD 1.1. For the early Buddhist conception of the universe, see SD 49.8b (15.1.3).

<sup>8</sup> **Tathā S 2** (S 56.27), SD 53.33b.

<sup>9</sup> (**Sacca**) **Loka S** (S 56.28), SD 104.5.

the truths understood by the noble ones, from the streamwinner upwards, and because their realization confers noble stature upon one.

### **2.2.2 Ignorance**

**2.2.2.1** Sentient beings roam and wander in samsara simply because they have not understood and penetrated the 4 noble truths (S 56.21). Ignorant of the truths, they go from one existence to the next like a stick thrown into the air, falling now on its tip, now on its butt (S 56.33). At the base of the conditioned arising of suffering is ignorance (*avijjā*), illustrated by the chain of dependent arising, where ignorance is a lack of understanding of the 4 noble truths (S 56.17).<sup>10</sup>

**2.2.2.2** Not knowing (that is, a lack of understanding) of the 4 noble truths keeps us in suffering. Only when we fully understand the 4 truths will we be freed from suffering. Ignorance of the 4 truths is more perilous than a great precipice (S 56.42)<sup>11</sup> and burns more painfully than hell-fire (S 56.43).<sup>12</sup>

When we are ignorant of the 4 truths, we—even though we have eyes—are spiritually blind, living in darkness like that in the dark interstices of outer space (S 56.46).<sup>13</sup>

**2.2.2.3** Its antidote is knowledge (*vijjā*), that is knowledge of the 4 truths (S 56.18).<sup>14</sup> But the world cannot find the way to liberation on its own. Before the arising of a buddha, the world is enveloped in thick spiritual darkness, just as the cosmos is enveloped in physical darkness before the sun and moon are formed.

When we fully understand even just *one* of the 4 noble truths, we understand all the other three. (S 56.30).<sup>15</sup> The 4 truths are closely inter-related and one truths reflect the other three, that is, they are not separate truths but aspects of suffering and its ending, which is said to be all that the Buddha teaches.<sup>16</sup>

**2.2.3 The Buddha's knowledge.** The task of a buddha is to discover the 4 noble truths and teach them to the world. This teaching, bringing liberating knowledge, is “the appearance of great light, great radiance” (S 56.38).<sup>17</sup> The Buddha does not disclose everything that he knows, which is vast like all the leaves in a simsapa forest. What he discloses is like the few leaves in his hand: that which is necessary or sufficient for salvation.

The “little” that he has taught are all comprised in the 4 noble truths. He teaches them because they are beneficial, pertain to the fundamentals of the holy life, and lead to awakening and nirvana (S 56.31).<sup>18</sup> For the same reason, the thought of a monastic should be connected with the truths and their talk confined to the truths (S 56.8-10).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>10</sup> (Sacca) Avijjā S (S 56.17), SD 53.30.

<sup>11</sup> Papāṭa S (S 56.42), SD 53.15 & SD 53.17 (1.2.1).

<sup>12</sup> Parilāha S (S 56.43), SD 53.16 & SD 53.17 (1.2.1).

<sup>13</sup> Andha,kāra S (S 56.46), SD 53.2.

<sup>14</sup> (Sacca) Vijjā S (S 56.18), SD 53.31.

<sup>15</sup> Gavampati S (S 56.30), SD 53.1.

<sup>16</sup> See Anurādha S (S 22.86), SD 21.13; Alagaddûpama S (M 22,38), SD 3.13; SD 40a.1 (11.1.1).

<sup>17</sup> Suriy'upamā S 2 (S 56.38), SD 49.16.

<sup>18</sup> Siṃsapā S (S 56.31), SD 21.7.

<sup>19</sup> See Viggāhika Kathā S (S 56.9), SD 65.13.

### **2.2.4 Breakthrough**

**2.2.4.1** The first penetration of the 4 noble truths occurs with breakthrough into the Dharma, that is, the attainment of streamwinning. This breakthrough is very difficult, more difficult, it seems, than an arrow piercing the tip of a hair, splitting it into seven strands (**S 56.45**).<sup>20</sup> But this attainment is of the utmost urgency; for, without making this breakthrough, it is impossible to put an end to suffering (**S 56.-44**).<sup>21</sup>

**2.2.4.2** Hence, the Buddha often urges us to “arouse extraordinary desire” and “make extraordinary effort” to make this breakthrough into the truths (**S 56.34**). Once we have made this breakthrough and see the truths, there is still more to be done. Each of the truths involves a task (*kicca*), and upon entering the path, we must fulfil these tasks so that we taste the final fruit, that is, arhathood. [1.1]

**2.2.5 The 4 noble truths in practice.** The Buddha discovered these tasks along with his awakening. These he defined and declared in the first discourse (**S 56.11**) [2.3]. These universal truths are also discovered and declared by all buddhas (**S 56.12**) [2.3]. That the truth of **suffering** ultimately consists of the 5 aggregates (**S 56.13**) and of the 6 internal sense-bases (**S 56.14**) [2.3] should be fully understood (*pariññeyya*). The truth of its arising, from *craving*, should be abandoned (*pahātabba*). The truth of suffering’s ending, nirvana, should be realized (*sacchikātabba*). And the truth of the path to this ending, the noble eightfold path, should be cultivated (*bhavetabba*).

When the path has been traversed, all the 4 tasks are completed. At this point, we become an arhat who roars the lion-roar of liberation, “What had to be done has been done.” There is nothing more that needs to be done—we are fully awakened to true reality, just like the Buddha.

**2.2.6 Repetition cycles.** The Sacca Saṃyutta ends with several long **repetition cycles** (*peyyāla*).<sup>22</sup> Such cycles are usually “highlighters” of key teachings that are repeated to remind us of their significance and help us remember them. In a modern scribal tradition (of reading texts), we are less likely to see the vital role of such repetition cycles: they are meant to be heard, although reading them often seems tedious.

In **chapter 6** (*abhisamaya vagga*), on “breakthrough,” **S 56.49-60** illustrate, with 12 similes, the significance of attaining breakthrough into the truths. **Chapters 7-10** (*cakka; appakā, virata; amaka, dhaññā, bahutarā sattā*)<sup>23</sup> give a series of suttas to show the negative consequences of not seeing the truths.

**Chapters 11-12** show how sentient beings invariably migrate among the 5 destinations (humans, animals, pretas, hell-beings, the devas), mostly “falling” from the higher realms, especially the heavens, to the lower ones out of ignorance of the truths. This is to reiterate that suffering persists throughout the universe, even in the heavens. On account of impermanence, suffering always lurks nearby and strikes without warning.

The Saṃyutta Nikaya closes with this dramatic highlighting of the insidious cycle of samsara. This is to arouse **samvega** (*samvega*) or spiritual urgency in us so that we are at once moved to work to end suffer-

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<sup>20</sup> **Chiggaḷa S 1** (S 56.45), SD 57.11.

<sup>21</sup> (**Sacca**) **Kūṭāgāra S** (S 56.44), SD 53.17 & SD 53.17 (1.2.1).

<sup>22</sup> On *peyyāla*, see SD 52.4 (1.3.3.4). On problem of omission, see **Sakkāya, diṭṭhi S** (S 22.154,3) n, SD 53.12.

<sup>23</sup> These are the “repetition cycle” (*peyyāla*) titles: the wheel cycle (*cakka peyyāla*); “the few abstain” cycle (*appakā viratā*); the raw grain cycle (*amaka, dhaññā peyyāla*) and the “more numerous beings” cycle (*bahutarā sattā*). These titles are from the PTS ed: the various textual traditions give their own titles to these cycles.

ing by directly seeing the 4 noble truths, discovered by the Buddha himself in his awakening and here presented to us as the one true path for our own salvation.

### 2.3 SUMMARIES OF THE SUTTAS OF THE DHAMMA,CAKKA PAVATTANA VAGGA

<b>S 56.11</b>	<b>Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta</b>	The Buddha’s “first discourse”: the 4 truths	SD 1.1
<b>S 56.12</b>	<b>(Sacca) Tathāgatā Sutta</b>	All the buddhas discover the same 4 truths	SD 53.25
<b>S 56.13</b>	<b>(Sacca) Khandha Sutta</b>	The 4 truths comprise the 5 aggregates	SD 53.26
<b>S 56.14</b>	<b>(Sacca) Ajjhatik’āyatana Sutta</b>	The 4 truths comprise the 6 internal sense-bases	SD 53.27
<b>S 56.15</b>	<b>Paṭhama Dhāraṇa Sutta</b>	The 4 truths should be remembered	SD 53.28
<b>S 56.16</b>	<b>Dutiya Dhāraṇa Sutta</b>	The 4 truths are incontrovertible	SD 53.29
<b>S 56.17</b>	<b>(Sacca) Avijjā Sutta</b>	Ignorance is ultimately that of the 4 truths	SD 53.30
<b>S 56.18</b>	<b>(Sacca) Vijjā Sutta</b>	True knowledge is that of the 4 truths	SD 53.31
<b>S 56.19</b>	<b>Sankāsana Sutta</b>	The 4 truths are profound in countless ways	SD 53.32
<b>S 56.20</b>	<b>Tathā Sutta 1</b>	The 4 truths are “such, certain, not otherwise”	SD 53.33a
<b>S 56.27</b>	<b>Tathā Sutta 2</b>	The 4 truths are “such, certain, not otherwise”	SD 53.33b

For a list of translations of Suttas from **the Koṭi,gāma Vagga** (S 56.21-30) and their notes, see SD 53.34 (1.1.2).

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## (Sacca) Tathāgatā Sutta

### The (Truth) Discourse on the Tathagatas

S 56.12

#### 1 THAT WHICH SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD [Mv 1.6.23]

##### (1) “This is the noble truth that is suffering” —

thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,<sup>24</sup>

in the tathagatas<sup>25</sup> the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.<sup>26</sup>

##### (2) “This noble truth that is suffering<sup>27</sup> is to be fully understood” —

thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,

<sup>24</sup> “Things unheard before,” *ananussutesu dhammesu*. Apparently, this statement on “things unheard before” refers to the fact that the liberating Dharma has been forgotten in India up to the Buddha’s time. On *ananussutesu*, see **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,9a) n, SD 1.1.

<sup>25</sup> “The tathagatas” (*tathāgatā*), lit “those thus come,” see (1.3).

<sup>26</sup> *Idaṃ dukkhaṃ ariya,saccan’ti bhikkhave tathāgatānaṃ pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhuṃ udapādi ñāṇaṃ udapādi paññā udapādi vijjā udapādi āloko udapādi*. The 5 key Pali terms are *cakkhu*, *ñāṇa*, *paññā*, *vijjā*, and *āloka*, all synonyms of liberating knowledge. *Vijjā* is derived from *vindati*, “to know,” but Comy glosses it as *paṭivedha*, “penetration,” as though it is derived from *vijjhati*, “to pierce,” acknowledge its sense here as a kind of liberating knowledge. (SA 2:22). As at **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,2/19.2), SD 49.8a.

<sup>27</sup> It is the suffering rather than the “truth” that is to be understood (*pariññeyya*). See Norman 1982:377-391.

*in the tathagatas the eye arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*

- (3) “This noble truth that is suffering **has been fully understood**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*

## 2 THAT WHICH SHOULD BE ABANDONED [Mv 1.6.24]

- (1) “**This is the noble truth that is the arising of suffering**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*
- (2) “This noble truth that is the arising of suffering<sup>28</sup> **should be abandoned**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*
- (3) “This noble truth that is the arising of suffering **has been abandoned**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*

## 3 THAT WHICH SHOULD BE REALIZED [Mv 1.6.25]

- (1) “**This is the noble truth that is the ending of suffering**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*
- (2) “This noble truth that is the ending of suffering **should be realized**”<sup>29</sup> —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*
- (3) “This noble truth that is the ending of suffering [425] **has been realized**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*

## 4 THAT WHICH SHOULD BE CULTIVATED [Mv 1.6.26]

- (1) “**This is the noble truth that is the path**<sup>30</sup> **leading to the ending of suffering**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*
- (2) “This noble truth that is the path leading to the ending of suffering **should be cultivated**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*
- (3) “This noble truth that is the path leading to the ending of suffering **has been cultivated**” —  
*thus, bhikshus, regarding what was unheard before,*  
*in the tathagatas the eye [vision] arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, insight arose, light arose.*

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<sup>28</sup> It is the arising rather than the “truth” that is to be abandoned (*pahātabba*). See Norman id.

<sup>29</sup> It is the ending rather than the “truth” that is to be realized (*sacchikātabba*). See Norman id. See Intro (6.2.2).

<sup>30</sup> It is the path that is to be cultivated (“walked”) rather than the “truth.” See Norman ib.