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(Sacca) Khandha Sutta

The (Truth) Discourse on the Aggregates | S 56.13
Theme: The 4 noble truths are ultimately about the 5 aggregates
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1 Sutta significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY. The (Sacca) Khandha Sutta, “the (truth) discourse on the aggregates” (S 56.13), teaches that **the 1st noble truth** [§1] is about the 5 aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness [§2]. **The 2nd noble truth** is that our sufferings arise from the 3 cravings: those for sensual pleasures, for existence and for non-existence [§3]. **The 3rd noble truth** is the uprooting of craving (that is, nirvana) [§4]. And **the 4th noble truth** is our moving along the path of awakening itself towards liberation [§5]. The Sutta closes with the Buddha exhorting us to reflect on the 4 noble truths [§6].¹

1.2 THE 4 NOBLE TRUTHS AS A SET. Traditionally, the 4 noble truths are listed as follows:

- (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.

1.3 THE INTRODUCTORY NOTES. For an overview of the Sutta context and related teachings on the 4 noble truths, read **SD 53.25 (2)** on **the Sacca Saṃyutta**.

2 Sequences of the 4 noble truths

2.1 THE TEACHING MODEL or 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)

¹ On the first 2 truths as constituting the meaning of life, and the last 2 truths as the purpose of life, see SD 1.1 (4.0.1).

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 (*kiicca*), centering upon the 5 aggregates, thus:²

| | | |
|--|---|-----------|
| (1) suffering : <u>comprehends</u> by <i>direct knowledge</i> | the 5 aggregates of clinging ³ | [3.1.2.1] |
| (2) arising of suffering : <u>abandons</u> by <i>direct knowledge</i> | ignorance and craving for existence | [3.2.1.1] |
| (3) the path ... : <u>cultivates</u> by <i>direct knowledge</i> | calm and insight ⁴ | [3.3.1] |
| (4) ending of suffering : <u>realizes</u> by <i>direct knowledge</i> | knowledge and liberation ⁵ | [3.3.2] |
| | (M 149,11/3:290) + SD 41.9 (2.4) ⁶ | |

² The Saḷ-āyatanika sequence of the 4 truths is also found in **Āgantuka S** (S 45.159/5:52), SD 74.10 & (**Sacca**) **Pa-riññeyya S** (S 56.29/5:436), SD 53.40.

³ Viz those of form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhārā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). See SD 41.9 (2.5).

⁴ Here calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) refer to the whole noble path itself. On calm and insight in meditation, see SD 41.9 (2.3); for background reading, see **Samatha & vipassanā**, SD 41.1.

⁵ I.e., spiritual knowledge (*vijjā*) and spiritual liberation (*vimutti*). Comy identifies “(spiritual) knowledge” (*vijjā*) with the knowledge of the path of arhathood and “liberation” (*vimutti*) with the path of arhathood. Elsewhere we usually see nirvana, the complete ending of suffering.

⁶ For further details, see 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-ḥ-abhiññā*).⁷ “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,” holding us in samsaric existence.⁸

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:⁹

¹⁰*Abhiññeyyaṃ abhiññātaraṃ
bhāvetabbañ ca bhāvitarā
pahātabbarā pahīnarā me
tasmā buddho’smi brāhmaṇa.*

¹¹What 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]¹² am I.¹³

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,¹⁴ is arranged as 1-4-2-3, as follows:

Suffering → the path → craving → nirvana (Sn 558 = 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

⁷ The 6 superknowledges are: (1) psychic powers (*iddh, vidhā*); (2) divine ear (*dibba, sota*); (3) mind-reading (*ceto, pariya, ñāṇa*); (4) retrocognition (*pubbe, nivāsānussati. ñāṇa*); (5) karmic recollection (or divine eye) (*cutūpapāta, ñāṇa*); (6) knowledge of the destruction of influxes (*āsava-k, khaya, ñāṇa*, only as an arhat’s “direct knowledge”). See **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2,89-99), SD 8.10; **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,55-66) SD 1.7; SD 27.5a (5).

⁸ There are these 4 influxes or “floods” (*ogha*) or “yokes” (*yoga*), those of: sensual desire (*kāma’āsava*), existence (*bhav’āsava*), views (*diṭṭh’āsava*) and ignorance (*avijjāsava*). See D 16,10.4 n (SD 9); SD 30.3 (1.4.2). An older set of 3 influxes omits that of “views”: see **D 33,1.10(20)/3:216**; **M 2,99.3** (SD 8.10); **A 3.58,5/1:165** (SD 94.5),

⁹ **Anurādha S** (S 22.86), SD 21.13; **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,38), SD 3.13; SD 40a.1 (11.1.1).

¹⁰ This verse occurs in **Brahmāyu S** (M 91/2:143); **Sela S** (M 92; Sn 558 = Tha 828); Nm 1:21, 2:460; Nc:Be 64, 85; Kvu 86, 88, 107, 108, 170, 216×2; quoted at UA 84, ItA 1:149, ThaA 3:49, BA 25, NmA 1:186, PmA 1:215, VA 1:115.

¹¹ Here, we must take *abhiññeyyaṃ abhiññātaraṃ* as tt, as the whole verse refers to the 4 noble truths. However, the sequence here is 1-4-2-3, which seems unique to this verse, a display of poetic licence. For the traditional sequence of the truths and other details, see **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,5-8) + SD 1.1 (6.2). See Cousins’ useful n, 1997:274.

¹² Here *buddho* can be either a noun (“the Buddha”) or a past participle (“awakened”).

¹³ Lines cd here recur in **Brahmāyu S** (M 91,31/2:143).

¹⁴ **Sela S** (Sn 558 = Tha 828 = M 92,19), SD 45.7a; SD 10.16 (1.4.3.3 f).

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.¹⁵

2.3.2.2 The Anurādhā Sutta (S 22.86) records the Buddha as stating: “**Only suffering and the ending of suffering do I declare!**”¹⁶ 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].

3 Analysis of the 4 noble truths

3.1 THE 1ST NOBLE TRUTH: SUFFERING

3.1.1 The 8 kinds of suffering

3.1.1.1 The 1st noble truth, **suffering**, comprises the 5 aggregates of clinging (*pañc’upādāna-k,kandha*), defined in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11), thus:

Now this, bhikshus, is **the noble truth [reality] that is suffering**.¹⁷

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| (1) birth | is suffering; | |
| (2) decay ¹⁸ | is suffering; | |
| (3) disease | is suffering; ¹⁹ | |
| (4) death | is suffering; | |
| [grief, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair | are suffering], ²⁰ | |
| (5) to be with the unpleasant ²¹ | is suffering; | |
| (6) to be without the pleasant ²² | is suffering; | |
| (7) not to get what one desires | is suffering, | |
| (8) in short, <u>the 5 aggregates of clinging</u> ²³ | are suffering. | (S 56.11,5), SD 1.1 |

¹⁵ On the lateness of **Sela S**, see SD 45.7a (1.1.1).

¹⁶ *Dukkhañ c’eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhan’ti* (S 22.86), SD 21.13. This remark is explained in **Yamaka S** (S 22.85,37/3:112), SD 21.12. See SD 21.13 (2).

¹⁷ On the list of sufferings, see SD 1.1 (4.1).

¹⁸ *Jarā*, incl old age, aging.

¹⁹ *Vyādhi pi dukkhā*: Only in the Vinaya & Saṃyutta versions; not mentioned in Comys. Vism Comy: “Disease is omitted here [eg D 22,18/2:305; S 56.11,5/5:421, etc] because no individual is meant, and there are persons in whom disease does not arise at all, such as the venerable Bakkula [M 124]. Otherwise, it may be taken as included in suffering itself. For, in the ultimate sense, disease is bodily pain conditioned by the imbalance of the elements” (VismAṬ 527). This is a common characteristic in later literature: see M Hara, 1977 &1980.

²⁰ Found in Ee Se (esp in daily chant) and other MSS but not in Be and Ce. This addition is prob late, as it is not found in the Chin versions. The Chin often speak of the “8 sufferings” (*bākhū*), as listed above.

²¹ “The unpleasant,” *appiya*, also tr “what one loves not.”

²² “The loved,” *piya*, also tr “what one loves.”

²³ *Pañc’upādāna-k,khandha*, viz, form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness (S 3:47; Vbh 1). What is briefly mentioned here is elaborated in the second discourse, **Anatta,lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59), SD 1.2.

3.1.1.2 Let us now investigate **the odd arrangement of the 8 kinds of suffering grouped into the 3 kinds of sufferings**, that is, as (1) physical suffering, (2) suffering that is the 5 aggregates, and (3) suffering due to change. Odd as it may be, this is the “official” sequence of the 3 kinds of suffering, often found elsewhere in the canon, such as **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33,1.10(27)),²⁴ **the (Sāriputta) Dukkha Sutta** (S 38.14) and **the Dukkhatā Sutta** (S 45.165).

The Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta (S 56.11,5) listing of the “8 sufferings,” on the other hand, culminates in the 5 aggregates, which are prominently listed last. This special position of the 5 aggregates is highlighted here in **the (Sacca) Khandha Sutta** (S 56.13), which explains the 4 truths in terms of the 5 aggregates [§2].

This sequence highlighting **the 5 aggregates** (the listing of the 5 aggregates in the 3rd and last place), is likely to be a later development in the canon in an effort to systematize the sutta teachings—as found in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** [3.1.1.1], which is a late compilation.²⁵ The idea is to present the kinds or levels of suffering in their natural deepening sequence of intensity or profundity.

3.1.2 The 3 kinds of suffering

3.1.2.1 Recall that the 5 aggregates are prominently mentioned *last* in the list of sufferings in **the Dhamma,cakka Pavattana Sutta** (S 56.11) [3.1.1] and in many other suttas. However, in **the (Sāriputta) Dukkha Sutta** (S 38.14), for example, the 3 kinds of suffering (dukkhatā) are listed as follows with the 5 aggregates as the 2nd kind of suffering, thus:

| | <u>poetic phrase</u> | |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| (1) bodily suffering | the suffering of pain | <i>dukkha,dukkhatā</i> |
| (2) the suffering that is the formations | the suffering of life | <i>saṅkhāra,dukkhatā</i> |
| (3) suffering due to change. | the suffering of the spirit | <i>vipariṇāma,dukkhatā</i> (S 38.14/4:259), SD 1.1(4.1) |

This is an “awkward” listing because the most profound kind of suffering—that arising from “formations,” that is, the 5 aggregates, is listed oddly *second*, while a more common occurrence of suffering—that is due to change—is listed *3rd and last*. One possible explanation for this odd arrangement is that, in terms of spiritual practice, it is easiest to suffer from physical pain (discomfort of posture, tiredness, etc). Such suffering can easily be corrected or removed by change of posture, taking health precautions, and so on. Hence, it is not a “spiritual” challenge.

Suffering arising from the 5 aggregates—comprising form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness—affect both body (form) and the mind (the other 4 aggregates). This is more difficult to notice, even though it is universal and profound. Without an understanding of the nature of these aggregates and the proper practice (which can be demanding), it is impossible to overcome this level of suffering. It is placed *second* in the well-known old list apparently as a passing note for practitioners to deal with when they are ready.

Suffering due to change is placed 3rd probably to highlight that it is the most prominent of the 3 kinds of suffering we need to deal with before we can even fathom the suffering due to formations. The 1st kind of suffering (the physical) is commonplace and easily remedied, the 2nd kind (the spiritual) is too

²⁴ This triad, however, has no counterpart in **Das’uttara S** (D 34).

²⁵ See SD 1.1 (8.1.1). On the lateness of **Dhamma,cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11), see **Notion of diṭṭhi**, SD 40a.1 (2.2).

profound for the neophyte. The 3rd kind of suffering (due to change) is the best place for the neophyte to start his spiritual training—by watching impermanence.²⁶

3.1.2.2 However, when explaining the 1st truth in terms of the 3 kinds of suffering, it is easiest and more effective to follow the sequence of suffering as listed in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta [3.1.1], that is, with the 5 aggregates listed 3rd and last. This **Dhammacakka model** of the 3 kinds of suffering are listed and explained as follows:

- (1) “physical suffering” or pain as suffering (*dukkha, dukkhatā*, literally, “the suffering of pain”) [3.1.3.1], that is, **affective suffering** (due mostly to physical conditions),
- (2) “suffering due to change” (*vipariṇāma, dukkhatā*), that is, suffering as change, or **temporal suffering** (due to the uncertainty or ending of pleasant feelings), and
- (3) “suffering due to formations” (*saṅkhāra, dukkhatā*), suffering as conditions, or **existential suffering**, that is, the inherent inadequacy of conditional existence, that is, of the 3 worlds (the sense-world, the form-world, and the formless world), on account of the rise and fall and the uncertainty of things, arising from the nature of the 5 aggregates, whether in full or in part.²⁷

3.1.2.3 Based on the teaching of **the 2 kinds of pain**—bodily pain and mental pain [3.1.3.1]—we can elaborate these 3 kinds of suffering philosophically, as follows:

- (1) “physical pain” is simply *pain as pain* (*dukkha, dukkhatā*), or more specifically, bodily pain due to the instability of the 4 elements (earth, water, fire and wind)²⁸ that constitute our body, including discomfort and illness, reacting to them as **physical suffering**;
- (2) “suffering due to change” or **emotional suffering** is *suffering due to change and uncertainty* in coping with the immediate manifestations of impermanence (*vipariṇāma, dukkha*), that is, in relationships, expectations, changes in fortune, and so on, that is, being tossed around by the worldly conditions of gain and loss, fame and obscurity, blame and praise, joy and pain; and
- (3) “suffering due to formations” is **spiritual suffering**, a universal sense of loss or dissatisfaction with what we *are* or what we *have*, which is basically a self-conjured suffering (“formations”) in terms of the 5 aggregates, characterized by a sense of spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*), a desire for letting go of the world, whether we know it or not.

3.1.3 Pain or suffering?

3.1.3.1 Pain (*dukkha, dukkhatā*, “the pain of suffering”) should be distinguished from suffering (*dukkha*). This distinction is not always clear from our modern perspective, but it is clear enough when we understand the teaching of the “2 kinds of pain.” **The Sall’atthana Sutta** (S 36.6) speaks of 2 kinds of pain as those of the bodily (*kāyika*) and the mental (*cetasika*). When an unawakened being experiences pain, he feels it both in his body and in his mind.²⁹

²⁶ For further understanding on the significance of impermanence, see **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), where the reflection of impermanence is said to lead to streamwinning, the 1st stage of sainthood (SD 16.7).

²⁷ D 33,1.10(27)/3:216; S 38.14/4:259; S 45.165/5:56; Vism 16.34-5/499,14-21; Nett 12. See also Gethin, 1998: 60-62.

²⁸ In Pali, *mahā, bhūta, rūpa* (the 4 great elements) or simply *dhatu* (the elements): respectively, *paṭhavī, āpo, tejo, vāyo*: see **Mahā Hatthi, pādōpama S** (M 28,6-22) SD 6.16.

²⁹ S 36.6,7-10/4:208 f (SD 5.5).

3.1.3.2 Early Buddhist psychology is aware of different layers of mental cognition. In simple terms, we can say that all our sensing (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking) are “conscious” because of the “mind” (*citta*) behind it.³⁰ Hence, the *mind* is behind both the bodily pain and mental pain. We can include what we understand as “involuntary” and “habitual” (done “without a thought”) in this category. Technically, such “low-level” experiences, especially the physical, bear no karmic significance, insofar as they occur “without a thought.”

3.1.3.3 However, there is a “deeper” or more potent mental layer which “decides,” as it were, how to react to the experience—this is the mind as *mano*. Its functioning is termed *manasi, karoti*, (literally, “mind-making”), usually translated as “attending to.” When we attend to an act—mental, verbal or bodily—with greed, hatred or delusion, it is karmically unwholesome (*akusala*). When the mind behind this attention is moved by non-greed, non-hate or non-delusion, it is wholesome (*kusala*).

3.1.3.4 The arhat, says **the Sall’atthana Sutta**, feels only one pain—the bodily—but not the mental pain. He suffers not mentally because he does not *react* or *value-add* to such experiences (all the 6 kinds) with greed, hate or delusion. Nor does he respond with the wholesome roots. Both the unwholesome and the wholesome roots of karma have been uprooted in the arhat. In this sense, the arhat is “beyond good and bad.”³¹

3.1.3.5 As unawakened beings, we need to understand how the mind (*mano*) works, how to train its function of attending to an action, active or passive (*manasikāra*), and to see it all as being impermanent. Moral training habituates us to prevent us from creating such unwholesome actions and reactions. Mind-training and meditation train us not to react with any of the unwholesome roots, not to “value-add” to what we experience, especially when it is painful [3.1.3.1]. We should learn to leave bodily pains on the body level, so to speak, and painful thoughts where they are, not to value-add to them.³²

In this connection, the Buddha advises the aged **Nakula, pitā**, thus: “My body may be sick, but my mind will not be sick.”³³ This means that we have a choice regarding how we react to pain, bodily and mental. With proper training, we can leave them where they are, at their source, as it were. In other words, we can say that **pain is natural, suffering is optional**.³⁴

3.2 THE 2ND NOBLE TRUTH: CRAVING

3.2.1 The 3 kinds of craving

3.2.1.1 The 2nd noble truth, **the arising of suffering**, is here defined as “ignorance and craving for existence” (*avijjā ca bhava, taṇhā*) [2.2.2.2]. **Ignorance** (*avijjā*), says **the (Sacca) Vijjā Sutta** (S 56.18) is not knowing the 4 noble truths. Conversely, **knowledge** (*vijjā*) is the understanding of these 4 truths, that we are free from suffering, that is, not as victims of outrageous fortune but as those who enjoy and share truth and beauty as awakening or awakened beings. [3.4.1]

The (Sacca) Khandha Sutta (S 56.13) applies the 4 truths to the 5 aggregates: to understand suffering is to understand form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. These are what we essen-

³⁰ It’s verb is *cinteti*, “to think.”

³¹ See **Beyond good and evil**, SD 18.7.

³² Cf **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,20) SD 49.4.

³³ **Nakula, pitā S** (S 22.1,4) SD 5.4.

³⁴ SD 48.9 (6.2.5); SD 51.14 (3.2.3).

tially are. Form is our body with its 5 physical senses; the other 4 aggregates constitute our mind. Suffering arises in us through our **craving** for sensual pleasures, for existence, and for non-existence.

3.2.1.2 The Mahā Saḷ-āyatanika Sutta (M 149) lists both “ignorance and craving for existence” as bringing about suffering. Ignorance refers to our not understanding the impermanent nature of the senses (which, with the mind, are **all** that we are).³⁵ What is impermanent is never satisfactory—pleasure is merely the absence of pain, and pain is the precursor of pleasure; the one can only be known by the other. Underlying all this is the principle that there is no essence or “something”: no self, soul, God or whatever we call it. There is no person suffering, *only suffering exists*. When we identify with the pain, then, “we” or “I” suffer. When we try to own anything in this world, we are only inviting suffering.

3.2.1.3 Craving for existence is the desire to be, to become again and again, to be reborn, to have eternal life. We may imagine the happiest paradise: it is still only imaginary. We may promise an eternal heaven; it is still only a promise. Eternity has no meaning except when contrasted with impermanence. Whatever exists must exist in time—it must be *impermanent*, no matter how long it may be imagined to last.

3.2.1.4 If the craving for existence is the desire to be, then, **the craving for non-existence**, its opposite is the desire to have. Those who hold this extreme view reject eternity in the theistic sense, but believe that this is our only life, that body and “soul” are the same thing, so that when we die, our “soul” perishes, too. All that there is, is this life, our only life, which we should make the best of it, and *have* whatever we want, or what we deem as beneficial for us. But what can we *be*, when everything is impermanent; what can we *have* when nothing in this world belongs to us?³⁶

3.3 THE 3RD NOBLE TRUTH: THE PATH³⁷

3.3.1 Calm and insight

3.3.1.1 The 3rd noble truth, **the path leading to the ending of suffering**, is usually stated as the noble eightfold path itself, but here only the “wisdom aggregate” (*paññā-k, khandha*) of calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) (omitting right effort)³⁸ are mentioned. **Calm** here refers to right concentration (*sammā, samādhi*), that is, the 4 form dhyanas [3.3.1.2], and **insight** is right mindfulness (*sammā, sati*), that is, the 4 focuses of mindfulness, that is, body-based contemplation (*kāyānupassanā*), feeling-based contemplation (*vedanānupassanā*), mind-based contemplation (*cittānupassanā*) and dharma-based contemplation (*dhammānupassanā*). [3.3.1.3]

3.3.1.2 The 4 form dhyanas are simply called the 1st, the 2nd, the 3rd and the 4th dhyanas. **The 1st dhyana** is attained when the body is calm and the mind free from all mental hindrances—that is, free from being distracted by the physical senses, from negative thoughts, from tiredness and sleepiness, from mental unease and guilt-feeling, and from doubt.³⁹

³⁵ See **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

³⁶ On nothing in this world is ours, see **Pacalā S** (A 7.58,11), SD 4.11.

³⁷ “The path” as the 3rd noble truth follows an older truth model [2.2.2.2].

³⁸ Meaning that right effort is implicit in the 2 path-factors.

³⁹ The 5 mental hindrances (*pañca, nīvaraṇa*) are: (1) sensual desires (*kāma-c, chanda*); (2) ill will (*vyāpāda*); (3) restlessness and worry (*uddhacca, kukkucca*); (4) sloth and torpor (*thīna, middha*); (5) doubt (*vicikicchā*). On overcoming the hindrances, see SD 53.18 (2.1.1).

The 1st **dhyana** (*paṭhama jhāna*) is characterized by 5 dhyana-factors (*jhān'āṅga*), that is, the mind directs its attention to the meditation object and stays there; it feels joyful and comfortable; and settles in itself. As the dhyanic mind settles further, it “loses” its dhyana-factors in stages, further “lightening” itself, resulting in a more refined mind.⁴⁰

Once the mind is naturally fixed on its object, it attains **the 2nd dhyana**, where the mental stillness becomes fully focused on itself. With the disappearance of zest or joy, the mind settles more peacefully and comfortably into **the 3rd dhyana**. Finally, with the disappearance of even the peaceful comfort, the mind reaches **the 4th dhyana**, where the peace is more sublime than any worldly joy.⁴¹ All this constitutes the practice of mental calm (*samatha*) which conduces to the arising of insight [3.3.1.3].

3.3.1.3 Having mastered at least the 1st dhyana, the meditator now turns to cultivating any of **the body-based contemplations**, especially the breath meditation. With his already calm and clear mind, the meditator, emerges from his dhyana and directs it to his breath, noticing its rise and fall, and impermanence. Even if his dhyana is weak or he is unable to attain dhyana, he can still calmly observe his breath so that his body becomes completely peaceful and settled.

When his breath fully settles, he turns his attention to the joy that arises as a result. He notices its rise and fall, and impermanence (as before). As the pleasant feeling settles, he is, as it were, left only with the thought of impermanence. This only happens outside of dhyana since dhyana is a thought-free state.⁴² He now notices that even these thoughts are “mind-made”; hence, impermanent. The 4th satipatthana refers to the “visions” of such realities as impermanence itself, which he contemplates as long as they last or as long as he wishes. In simple terms, this is how he cultivates **insight** through satipatthana.⁴³

3.3.2 The path

3.3.2.1 The noble truth as **the path** (*magga*) refers to the noble eightfold path, which comprises the 3 “aggregates” (*khandha*) of moral training (*sīla-k,khandha*), concentration or mental training (*samādhik,khandha*) and wisdom training (*paññā-k,khandha*). These “3 trainings” (*sikkha-t,taya*) form a solid and stable pyramid, with moral training as the broad foundation, upon which is built the level of mental training, and on top of these two, that of wisdom training.

3.3.2.2 The 3 trainings are each more than just “layers” of training but are the progressive growth or freedom we gain as we walk the path. Hence, our moral training frees us from immorality by refining our speech and bodily conduct, and this virtue pervades “upwards” into the other two trainings. Mental training, for its part, refines the way we think and feel, and also pervades wisdom training. Together, they all work to move us on towards true knowledge and full liberation [3.4].⁴⁴

⁴⁰ This is a simplified description of the 5 dhyana-factors: see SD 8.4 (6).

⁴¹ See SD 53.23 (2.1.2) for more details. On the 4 form dhyanas, see **Dhyana**, SD 8.4 (4-6).

⁴² On dhyana as a thought-free state, see **The Buddha discovered dhyana**, SD 33.1b (6.2).

⁴³ See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10), SD 13.1+13.3. On the relationship between *samatha* and *vipassana*, see **Samatha and Vipassanā**, SD 41.1.

⁴⁴ For a detailed study, see **Ariya aṭṭh'āṅgika magga** (SD 10.16).

3.4 THE 4TH NOBLE TRUTH: THE ENDING OF SUFFERING⁴⁵

3.4.1 Knowledge

The 4th noble truth, **the ending of suffering** comprises “knowledge and liberation” (*vijjā ca vimutti ca*). Here, **knowledge** (*vijjā*) is the breakthrough into the 4 noble truths, understanding the reality of the existential state as it is, the root condition of that state, evolving out of that state, and the realization of an open mind of calm and clarity even here and now. It is the opposite of ignorance (*avijjā*), not understanding the 4 noble truths [3.2.1.1].

3.4.2 Liberation

3.4.2.1 The suttas often describe the arising of **liberation** (*vimutti*) as follows: “dependent on solitude, dependent on fading away (of lust) [on dispassion], dependent on cessation (of suffering), ripening in letting go (of defilements).”⁴⁶ **Solitude** (*viveka*) here refers to the attainment of mental focus, especially *dhyana*, as a result of which he is completely free from lust (no more under the power of his physical senses). With body and mind completely free from all negative states, he is thus free from suffering, in the sense that he is profoundly joyful.

3.4.2.2 This profound joy arises from his mind being *thought-free*, so that he perceives directly the reality that is before him. In simple terms, he directly **feels** true reality as it arises. He sees the true nature of impermanence turning into unsatisfactoriness. When he has practised enough, he then sees how all such states have neither essence nor duration, that is, they are *momentary* and utterly lack any “self” or “thing-ness.” He realizes **non-self**.⁴⁷ When this happens, he is finally able to let go of all his mental defilements and becomes an arhat.⁴⁸

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(Sacca) Khandha Sutta The (Truth) Discourse on the Aggregates

S 56.13

1 Bhikshus, there are these **4 noble truths**. What are the four?

- | | |
|---|---|
| (1) The noble truth that is <u>suffering</u> . | <i>dukkham ariya, saccam</i> |
| (2) The noble truth that is <u>the arising</u> of suffering. | <i>dukkha, samudayam ariya, saccam</i> |
| (3) The noble truth that is <u>the ending</u> of suffering. | <i>dukkha, nirodham ariya, saccam</i> |
| (4) The noble truth that is <u>the path</u> leading to the ending of suffering. | <i>dukkha, nirodha, gāminī paṭipadā ariya, saccam</i> |

⁴⁵ “The ending of suffering” as the 4th noble truth follows an older truth model [2.2.2.2].

⁴⁶ *Viveka, nissitam virāga, nissitam nirodha, nissitam vossagga, pariñāmirim*: M 118, 42/3:88), SD 7.13.

⁴⁷ See **Is there a soul?**, SD 2.16.

⁴⁸ See *Viveka, nissita*, SD 20.4.

2 (1) What, bhikshus, is the noble truth that is suffering?

It should be said to be the 5 aggregates of clinging.⁴⁹

pañc'upādāna-k,khandho

2.2 What are the five?

(It should be said that)⁵⁰ they are as follows:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| (1) The aggregate of clinging that is <u>form</u> . | <i>rūpūpādāna-k,khandho</i> |
| (2) The aggregate of clinging that is <u>feeling</u> . | <i>vedanūpādānakkhandhā</i> |
| (3) The aggregate of clinging that is <u>perception</u> . | <i>saññūpādānakkhandho</i> |
| (4) The aggregate of clinging that are <u>formations</u> . | <i>saṅkhārūpādānakkhandho</i> |
| (5) The aggregate of clinging that is <u>consciousness</u> . | <i>viññāṇūpādānakkhandho</i> |

This, bhikshus, is called the noble truth that is suffering.

3 (2) And what, bhikshus, is the noble truth that is the arising of suffering?⁵¹

It is this craving that leads to renewed existence [rebirth], accompanied by pleasure and lust, seeking pleasure here and there; that is to say,⁵²

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| (1) craving for sensual pleasures, | <i>kāma,tanḥā</i> |
| (2) craving for existence, | <i>bhava,tanḥā</i> |
| (3) craving for non-existence [for extinction]. | <i>vibhava,tanḥā</i> |

This, bhikshus, is called the noble truth that is the arising of suffering.

4 (3) And what, bhikshus, is the noble truth that is the ending of suffering?⁵³

It is the utter fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, letting it go, being free from it, being detached from it.⁵⁴

This, bhikshus, is called the noble truth that is called the ending of suffering.

5 (4) And what, bhikshus, is the noble truth that is the path leading to the ending of suffering?

It is this very noble eightfold path,⁵⁵ that is to say,

⁴⁹ On the full list of sufferings, see SD 1.1 (4.1).

⁵⁰ Be *vacanīyaṃ, seyyathidaṃ rūpūpādānakkhandho*.

⁵¹ On the translation of this term, see SD 1.1 (4.3).

⁵² Comy to **Bhāra S** (S 22.22), SD 17.14: "Seeking delight here and there" (*tatra,tatrābhinandinī*) means having the habit of seeking delight in the place of rebirth or among the various objects, such as forms. "**Craving for sense-pleasures**" (*kāma,tanḥā*) means lust for the 5 cords of sense-pleasures. Lust for form-sphere existence or formless-sphere existence, attachment to dhyana, and lust accompanied by the eternalist view: this is called "**craving for existence**" (*bhava,tanḥā*). Lust accompanied by the annihilationist view is "craving for annihilation [extermination]" (*vibhava,tanḥā*). (SA 2:264). **Bodhi**: "This explanation of the last two kinds of craving seems to me too narrow. More likely, craving for existence should be understood as the principal desire to continue in existence (whether supported by a view or not), craving for extermination as the desire for a complete end to existence, based on an underlying assumption (not necessarily formulated as a view) that such extermination brings an end to a real 'I.'" (S:B 1052 n38). There is actually a simpler explanation: they are also unconscious cravings; hence, we are unlikely to even know that we have such views; see SD 49.2 (3.2.2.3). On craving for sensual pleasures, see **Kāma-c, chanda**, SD 32.2.

⁵³ On the tr of this term, see SD 1.1 (4.3).

⁵⁴ *Yo tassā,y'eva [or tassa-y-eva] tanḥāya asesā,virāga,nirodho cāgo paṭinissaggo mutti anālayo*.

⁵⁵ For a def and details of the 8 limbs that is the eightfold path, see **Sacca Vibhaṅga S** (M 141,23-31/3:250-252), SD 11.11; **Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna S** (D 22,21/2:311-313), SD 13.2; also **Mahā Cattārisaka S** (M 117/3:71-78), SD 6.10. See also Gethin 2001:190-226 (ch 6) for an insightful study.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) right view, | <i>sammā diṭṭhi</i> |
| (2) right thought [right intention], | <i>sammā saṅkappa</i> |
| (3) right speech, | <i>sammā vācā</i> |
| (4) right action, | <i>sammā kammantā</i> |
| (5) right livelihood, | <i>sammā ājīva</i> |
| (6) right effort, | <i>sammā vāyāma</i> |
| (7) right mindfulness, | <i>sammā sati</i> |
| (8) right concentration. | <i>sammā samādhi</i> |

This, bhikshus, is called the noble truth that is the path leading to the ending of suffering. [426]

5.2 These, bhikshus, are the 4 noble truths.

6 Therefore, bhikshus,

| | |
|---|--|
| You should devote yourself (to the reflection): ⁵⁶ | “This is suffering.” |
| <i>You should devote yourself (to the reflection):</i> | “This is the arising of suffering.” |
| <i>You should devote yourself (to the reflection):</i> | “This is the ending of suffering.” |
| <i>You should devote yourself (to the reflection):</i> | “This is the path leading to the ending of suffering.” |

— evaṃ —

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⁵⁶ *Idaṃ dukkhan’ti yogo karaṇīyo.*