

Why Are the Four Noble Truths Called “Noble”?

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ABBREVIATIONS

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| ABORI | <i>Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute</i> |
| Ai.Gr. | J. Wackernagel, <i>Altindische Grammatik</i> |
| AJP | <i>American Journal of Philosophy</i> |
| AMg | Ardha-Māgadhī |
| AMg Dict. | Ratnachandrajī, <i>An Illustrated AMg Dictionary</i> |
| AO | <i>Acta Orientalia</i> |
| Apa. | Apabhraṃśa |
| AR | <i>Abhidhāna-rājendra</i> , Ratlam 1913-25 |
| Aś. | Aśokan |
| Āv. | <i>Āvassaya-sutta</i> |
| Āyār. | <i>Āyāraṅga-sutta</i> (ed. H. Jacobi) |
| BCDRI | <i>Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute</i> |
| BD | <i>Book of the Discipline</i> |
| B ^e | Burmese (Chattḥasaṅgāyana) edition |
| Bhav. | <i>Bhavisatta Kaha</i> (ed. H. Jacobi, Munich 1918) |
| BHS | Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit |
| BHSD | F. Edgerton, <i>BHS Dictionary</i> |
| BHSG | F. Edgerton, <i>BHS Grammar</i> |
| BKS | <i>Bṛhat-kalpa-sūtra</i> (ed. W. Schubring, Leipzig 1905) |
| Bloch | J. Bloch, <i>Les inscriptions d'Asoka</i> , Paris 1950 |
| BSL | <i>Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris</i> |
| BSO(A)S | <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental (and African) Studies</i> |
| Burrow, Skt Lang. | T. Burrow, <i>Sanskrit Language</i> , London 1955 |
| Burrow, Khar. Lang. | T. Burrow, <i>Language of the Kharoṣṭhi Documents</i> , Cambridge 1937 |
| CDIAL | R.L. Turner, <i>Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages</i> |
| C ^e | Sinhalese edition |
| CII | <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum</i> |
| CPD | <i>Critical Pāli Dictionary</i> |
| cty/cties | commentary/commentaries |
| cū. | cūrṇi |
| DED(R) | <i>Dravidian Etymological Dictionary</i> (revised edition) |
| DNM | <i>Deśināmamālā</i> |

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| DPPN | <i>Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names</i> |
| E ^c | European edition |
| Ep. Ind. | <i>Epigraphia Indica</i> |
| Erz. | H. Jacobi, <i>Ausgewählte Erzählungen in Māhārāṣṭrī</i> , Leipzig 1886 |
| EV I, II | K.R. Norman, <i>Elders' Verses I, II</i> , London 1969, 1971 |
| EWA | M. Mayrhofer, <i>Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen</i> , |
| Geiger | W. Geiger, <i>Pāli Literatur und Sprache</i> , Strassburg 1916 |
| Gk. | Greek |
| GOS | Gaekwad's Oriental Series |
| Hultzsch | E. Hultzsch, <i>Inscriptions of Asoka</i> , Oxford 1925 |
| IA | Indo-Aryan |
| IE | Indo-European |
| IHQ | <i>Indian Historical Quarterly</i> |
| II | Indo-Iranian |
| IJJ | <i>Indo-Iranian Journal</i> |
| IL | <i>Indian Linguistics</i> |
| Ind. Ant. | <i>Indian Antiquary</i> |
| Isibh. | <i>Isibhāsiāim</i> (ed. W. Schubring) |
| IT | <i>Indologica Taurinensia</i> |
| JA | <i>Journal Asiatique</i> |
| JAIH | <i>Journal of Ancient Indian History</i> |
| JAOS | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i> |
| JASB | <i>Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal</i> |
| JAS Bombay | <i>Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay</i> |
| JIABS | <i>Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies</i> |
| JOI(B) | <i>Journal of the Oriental Institute (Baroda)</i> |
| JPTS | <i>Journal of the Pali Text Society</i> |
| JRAS | <i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i> |
| Kapp. | <i>The Kalpasūtra of Bhadrabāhu</i> (ed. H. Jacobi, Leipzig 1879) |
| Kapp. Sām. | = part III of prec. (pp. 86-95) |
| Lüders, Beob. | H. Lüders, <i>Beobachtungen über die Sprache des buddhistischen Urkanons</i> , Berlin 1954 |

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| Lüders, Phil. Ind. | H. Lüders, <i>Philologica Indica</i> , Göttingen 1940 |
| MIA | Middle Indo-Aryan |
| MRE | Minor Rock Edict |
| MSL | <i>Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique de Paris</i> |
| MS(S) | Manuscript(s) |
| MW | Sir Monier Monier-Williams, <i>Sanskrit-English Dictionary</i> , Oxford 1899 |
| NAWG | Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen |
| Nāyā. | <i>Nāyādhammakahāo</i> |
| NIA | New Indo-Aryan |
| Nirayāv. | <i>Nirayāvaliyāo</i> |
| Nisīh. | <i>Nisīha-sutta</i> |
| OIA | Old Indo-Aryan |
| OLZ | <i>Orientalistische Literaturzeitung</i> |
| Ova. | <i>Ovavāyīya-sutta</i> (ed. E. Leumann, Leipzig 1883) |
| Pā. | Pāli |
| Paṇh. | <i>Paṇhāvāgaraṇāim</i> |
| Paum. | <i>Pauma-cariu</i> |
| PE | Pillar Edict |
| PED | The PTS's <i>Pali-English Dictionary</i> |
| Pischel | R. Pischel, <i>Grammatik der Prākṛit-Sprachen</i> , Strassburg 1900 |
| Pkt | Prakrit |
| PMWS | F.B.J. Kuiper, <i>Proto-Munda Words in Sanskrit</i> , Amsterdam 1948 |
| PSM | H.D.T. Sheth, <i>Pāiasaddamahāṇavo</i> , Calcutta 1928 |
| PTC | <i>Pāli Tipiṭakaṃ Concordance</i> |
| PTS | Pali Text Society |
| Ratnachandraji | see AMg Dict. |
| RE | Rock Edict |
| ṚV | <i>Ṛgveda</i> |
| SBB | Sacred Books of the Buddhists |
| SBE | Sacred Books of the East |
| SepE | Separate Edict |
| Sheth | see PSM |

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| Sinh. | Sinhalese |
| Skt | Sanskrit |
| StII | <i>Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik</i> |
| Sutt. | <i>Suttāgame</i> |
| Sūyag. | <i>Sūyagadaṅga-sutta</i> |
| Thāṇ. | <i>Thāṇaṅga-sutta</i> |
| ṭī. | ṭīkā |
| TPS | <i>Transactions of the Philological Society</i> |
| Turner. CDIAL | R.L. Turner, <i>Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages</i> |
| Turner. Nep. Dict. | R.L. Turner, <i>Dictionary of the Nepali Language</i> , London 1931 |
| Utt. | <i>Uttarajjhayaṇa-sutta</i> (ed. J. Charpentier, Uppsala 1922) |
| Uvās. | <i>Uvāsaga-dasāo</i> (ed. Hoernle) |
| Vivāg. | <i>Vivāga-sutta</i> |
| Whitney. Gram. | W.D. Whitney, <i>Sanskrit Grammar</i> , Cambridge (Mass.) 1889 |
| Whitney. Roots | W.D. Whitney, <i>Roots and Verb-forms of the Sanskrit Language</i> , Leipzig 1885 |
| WZKS(O) | <i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- (und Ost-)asiens</i> |

90. Why are the Four Noble Truths Called “Noble”?*

⟨11⟩ In an earlier study of the Four Noble Truths,¹ I attempted to explain the somewhat complicated syntax of the language in which the truths are formulated in Pāli. I did not address the wider question of the reason for the four truths being called “noble”. We are so accustomed to talk, in English, of the “four noble truths” that it comes perhaps as a shock to be asked “Why are they called noble?” I suppose that most people, faced with this question, would give an answer on the lines of “Because they are of a higher quality than any other truths”. As might be expected, Buddhaghosa, the great commentator of the fifth century A.D., gave consideration to the matter. To be quite accurate, Buddhaghosa did not ask “Why are the four noble truths called noble?” What he did was to give several reasons why the truths were called *ariyasaccāni*. This, as we shall see, is a very different matter. In this short paper, offered in honour of Dr. Ananda Guruge, I should like to consider the explanations which Buddhaghosa gave.

In his commentary on the Dīgha-nikāya,² Buddhaghosa gives only one explanation of the word *ariyasaccāni*: *ariyabhāvakarānaṃ saccānaṃ*³ “the truths which cause nobleness”. This probably indicates that that was either the only explanation known to the tradition of the Dīgha-*bhāṇakas* which he was presumably following at the Mahāvihāra, or at least the explanation thought by that tradition to be the most important. In his commentary on the Aṅguttara-nikāya, Buddhaghosa gives two explanations: *ariyabhāvakarāni ariyapaṭividdhāni vā saccāni*⁴ “the truths which cause nobleness or are penetrated by the

*Y. Karunadasa (ed.): *Ānanda: Essays in Honour of Ananda W.P. Guruge* (Colombo 1990), pp. 11–13.

¹See K.R. Norman, “The Four Noble Truths: a problem of Pāli syntax”, in *Indological and Buddhist Studies* (Volume in honour of Professor J.W. de Jong) (Canberra 1982), pp. 377–91.

²The abbreviations of titles of Pāli texts are those adopted by the *Critical Pāli Dictionary*.

³Sv 542,33.

⁴Mp II 281,1–2.

noble one[s]”. Once again, this probably represents the views of the *bhāṇakas*, this time the *Aṅguttara-bhāṇakas*. In this passage, however, he refers readers to the fuller explanation given in the *Visuddhimagga*, where he deals with the *ariyasaccāni nibbacanato* “as to derivation”.

In his lengthy treatment of the subject in that text¹ he quotes canonical authority for his statements from the set of suttas about the *ariyasaccāni* which is found in the *Samyutta-nikāya*²:

(1) *yasmā pan’ etāni Buddhādayo ariyā paṭivijjhanti, tasmā ariyasaccāni ti vuccanti*: “Because noble ones, the Buddhas, etc., penetrate them, therefore they are called ‘the noble ones’ truths”.

(2) *apī ca ariyassa saccāni ti pi ariyasaccāni*: “Moreover, they are the truths of the Noble One, ‘the Noble One’s (= the Buddha’s) truths”.

(3) *athavā etesaṃ³ abhisambuddhattā ariyabhāvasiddhito pi ariyasaccāni*: “Because of the attainment of nobleness arising from their discovery”, “the ennobling truths”. (12)

(4) *apī ca kho pana ariyāni saccāni ti pi ariyasaccāni*: “the noble truths”. They are also called *ariyāni* because they are *tathāni avitathāni avisamvādakāni* “true, not untrue, not uncertain”, although, since this explanation is that given elsewhere for *sacca*, this would seem rather to be the reason why they are called “truths”. The result, then, is a tautology “the true truths”.

Buddhaghosa is able to give these different interpretations because of the possibility of analysing the compound *ariyasacca* in various ways. In (1) and (2) it is analysed as a *tatpuruṣa* (dependent) compound, with the first element being taken as the equivalent of the genitive case, in either the plural or the singular. In (3) it is also being taken as a *tatpuruṣa* compound, but with the first element in the dative “truths for a noble

¹Vism 495,17 foll. A similar list of explanations is found in Vibh-a 84,23-85,4.

²S V 431 foll.

³So read with the Harvard Oriental Series edition. The PTS edition reads *ekesaṃ*.

one, for becoming a noble one”. In (4) it is a *karmadhāraya* (descriptive) compound. It is noteworthy that Buddhaghosa does not include (4) in either of the shorter explanations which he gives in the commentaries on the Dīgha-nikāya or the Aṅguttara-nikāya. From this we can deduce that the traditions which he was following when he composed those commentaries did not regard that explanation as being the most important of the possibilities.

The commentator Dhammapāla gives the same range of interpretations¹: (1) *ariyasaccāni ti araṇīyato ariyāni avitathabhāvena saccāni cā ti ariyasaccāni*; (2) *ariyabhāvakarāni vā saccāni ariyasaccāni*; (3) *ariyehi vā buddhādīhi paṭivijjhitabbāni saccāni ariyasaccāni*; (4) *athavā ariyassa saccāni ariyasaccāni. sadevakena hi lokena saraṇan ti araṇīyato ariyo Bhagavā, tena sayambhū-ñāṇena diṭṭhattā tassa saccāni ti ariyasaccāni*. Here it is to be noted that Dhammapāla gives the usual gloss for *ariya* (*araṇīyato ariyāni*; “‘noble’ from ‘being approachable’”, a word play on the syllable *ar-*) for the *karmadhāraya* compound, which avoids Buddhaghosa’s tautology. If we accept that the four explanations, of which the last three are introduced by *vā*, represent a series of “or preferably” propositions, then the final one (“the Noble’s [= the Buddha’s] truths”) is Dhammapāla’s most preferred explanation, with the *karmadhāraya* compound as the first, and therefore the least likely, explanation.

All these facts are well known to anyone who has read the Visuddhimagga, or has looked at the commentaries of Buddhaghosa or Dhammapāla, and I am not saying anything new. My reason for raising this matter is because of its implications for the correct way of translating the Pāli into English. It will have become clear that the simple answer to the question “Why are the noble truths called noble?” is “Because we choose to translate the compound *ariyasaccāni* in that way”. This is done, e.g. by Ñāṇamoli, even in the translation of the relevant portion of the Visuddhimagga: “The Noble Ones penetrate them, therefore they are called Noble Truths”,² when in that particular context we might well have thought that “Noble Ones’ Truths” would have been more appropriate.

¹It-a I 85,8 foll.

²*The Path of Purification*, p. 564.

It is impossible to be certain of the original meaning of the compound *ariyasaccāni*. Almost certainly, as is not uncommon in Indian languages, no one meaning was intended, and those who used the word were conscious of all the meanings simultaneously as they used it. In English it has become standard to use the translation “noble truth”. When we use this translation we are excluding the other explanations, and are in fact probably choosing the least important of the possible meanings. {13}

To conclude: those persons who first translated the compound *ariyasaccāni* into English could have translated “the noble’s truths”, or “the nobles’ truths”, or “the truths for nobles”, or “the nobilising truths”, or “the noble truths”, but they could have only one of them. The one they chose was perfectly correct, but it was only part of the translation. The word *ariyasaccāni* has all these various meanings simultaneously, and probably more besides. There is, in fact, at least one further possibility, where the first element is also taken in the genitive, but as a simple possessive — “the truths of, possessed by, the noble ones”. This could be a reference to the Buddhists as a whole, and these would then be the truths held by the Buddhists, as opposed to anything held by the Jains or the Brāhmaṇas. There is no way of telling which of these meanings the first user of the term *ariyasaccāni* intended, if he had only one meaning in mind. Similarly, if more than one meaning was intended, we cannot know how many — perhaps all of them. Buddhaghosa’s treatment of the subject in his commentaries on the *Dīgha-nikāya* and the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* makes one thing clear: in the view of some of the early Theravādin traditions which he was following, the explanation upon which the usually accepted English translation “the [four] noble truths” is based is one of the least important, and (we may say) one of the least likely.

This then is an excellent illustration of the difficulty of translating from one language to another.