

Brāhmaṇas. In their capacity as *ācāriyas* they are considered to be half layman and half monk, and they serve as congregation leaders of Buddhist temples (*vihāras* or *āvāsas*), where they mediate between the world of the LAITY (*gharāvāsa*) and the sacred world of the monkhood (SAṄGHA). Although this office is not specified in the Buddhist CANON, it is extremely important to the everyday practice of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. In their capacity as Brāhmaṇas, spiritually powerful men can also serve as healers and as priests to the Vedic gods, particularly INDRA, Brahmā, and the Lords of the Four Quarters. In urban areas this service can be a profession.

Even men who do not take this profession or wear such exalted titles seek to acquire some degree of personal spiritual potency. The male literacy rate was traditionally quite high in Southeast Asia, in part because a knowledge of the Brahmanical religious texts was the best means to such potency. Even illiterate men are likely to have some practical ritual or magical knowledge, for such things are a necessity in daily life. The Brahmanical texts contain varieties of ritual knowledge. They include, for example, knowledge of the direction in which the earth-dragon lies in each season, which is important to consider when building a house or plowing a field. Various kinds of numerical magic squares figure as means of calculating auspicious days and directions for undertaking certain activities, such as setting out on a journey. There are also texts to be recited as spells for healing, love, and protection. In addition, certain texts contain the words required for sacrifices to the Vedic gods. In each case, however, the texts contain only the words for the rite. Knowledge of the proper materials to use and the proper performance of the rites must be learned from a teacher.

See also: Ancestors; Death; Festivals and Calendrical Rituals; Ghosts and Spirits; Hinduism and Buddhism; Local Divinities and Buddhism; Merit and Merit-Making

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FOREST MONKS. *See* Wilderness Monks

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The four noble truths are known best for their appearance in the classic *Turning of the Wheel of Dharma* (*Dharmacakrapravartana-sūtra*). This address appears in the Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese canons of various Buddhist schools, with relatively little variation in the actual content and terminology of the speech itself. The larger setting for this speech begins with the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha (566–486 B.C.E. or 470–350 B.C.E.). In the *Basket of Discipline* (*Vinaya-piṭaka*), a lengthy sequence describes how the Buddha left his five companions to pursue his own path toward enlightenment. He ate a bowl of rice porridge, and sat down under a pipal tree, vowing not to move until he was enlightened. Successively, during that night, in a series of three watches (each watch was about three hours long), the Buddha realized the four noble truths. During the first watch, he became aware of each of the four truths; during the second watch, he realized that he had to fully *know* the truth of each of the four truths; and during the third watch, he knew that he had, in fact, realized just how each truth was true. With that, he knew that he had reached BODHI (AWAKENING), that he had escaped the endless cycle of birth and death and had experienced NIRVĀṆA.

The Buddha spent the next seven weeks in a state of bliss, enjoying his newfound experience of enlightenment. A divinity from the heavens came down and asked the Buddha when he would begin to teach what he had just realized. The Buddha refused to teach, saying that what he had realized was far too difficult for other beings to know for themselves. After the divinity convinced him that there were others who could learn what he had to teach, the Buddha agreed to teach. He took time deciding to whom his first teaching should be delivered, and settled on his five companions from whose company he had parted in order to

seek his own enlightenment. After he approached them and convinced them that he had attained the state in which there is no death or suffering (that is, the state of *nirvāṇa*), they settled down to listen to this first talk. The Buddha's first talk on dharma is titled "Turning of the Wheel of the Law" because after he spoke to his five former companions, explaining the four noble truths and the middle way of the eightfold PATH, one of them, Kauṇḍinya, cultivated the eye of dharma—that is, he became fully enlightened. When he was enlightened, Gautama Buddha had turned the wheel of dharma in this world for the first time, and nothing could stop the teaching of dharma and the enlightenment of other beings.

The four noble truths

The story of the Buddha's enlightenment and the turning of the wheel of dharma is the setting for the Buddha's first talk on dharma to an audience. He explains that his companions should pursue the middle way, avoiding the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, and then lays out the four noble truths and the eightfold path. The four noble truths present the fact of suffering in this world and the means to end suffering in the following verses:

This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth that is suffering. Birth is suffering; old age is suffering; illness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and grief, physical and mental suffering, and disturbance are suffering. Association with things not liked is suffering, separation from desired things is suffering; not getting what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are suffering.

This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth that is the arising of suffering. This is craving that leads to rebirth, is connected with pleasure and passion and finds pleasure in this or that; that is, craving for desire, existence, and the fading away of existence.

This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth that is the ending of suffering. This is the complete fading away and ending of that very craving, giving it up, renouncing it, releasing it, and letting go.

This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth that is the way leading to the ending of suffering. This is the eightfold path of the noble ones: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. (*Book of Kindred Sayings [Samyutta-nikāya]*, vol. 5, line 410ff)

DUḤKHA (SUFFERING; Pāli, *dukkha*), the first of the four noble truths, is defined in the first verse above. Suffering in the Buddhist sense means far more than suffering is usually understood in a Judeo-Christian context. For Buddhists, anything that one wants and

does not have is suffering. Having something that one does not want is also suffering. Clinging to the five SKANDHA (AGGREGATE) that make up a person is suffering. In other words, if a person holds onto any aspect of his or her being, whether the physical body, feelings, perceptions, formations, or consciousness, in the hope that any of those things exists permanently, that person will experience suffering. BUDDHAGHOSA, a Buddhist commentator who lived during the late fourth and early fifth centuries C.E. in what is now Sri Lanka, explained that there were three kinds of suffering: suffering that is inherent in a thing, suffering that emerges because things change, and suffering that develops because something else influences an experience. An example of the last type of suffering would be the pain from an earache or a toothache that arises because of an infection. In short, all life is suffering, according to the Buddha's first sermon.

The second truth is *samudaya* (arising or origin). To end suffering, the four noble truths tell us, one needs to know how and why suffering arises. The second noble truth explains that suffering arises because of craving, desire, and attachment. Because one wants to avoid things that cause discomfort, and because one wants to have things that bring pleasure, these "desires" are the origin of suffering. If one does not desire things, then one will not experience suffering. If one wants to avoid the suffering that comes from thinking that the self (who "I" am) is permanent and unchanging, then one should not be attached to the idea of a self.

The third truth follows from the second: If the cause of suffering is desire and attachment to various things, then the way to end suffering is to eliminate craving, desire, and attachment. The third truth is called *nirodha*, which means "ending" or "cessation." To stop suffering, one must stop desiring.

The Buddha taught the fourth truth, *mārga* (Pāli, *magga*), the path that has eight parts, as the means to end suffering. Taken together, the four truths present a concise and logical analysis of the cause of human suffering and an equally straightforward solution to the problem of human suffering: the eightfold path.

The eightfold path

The eightfold path is the middle way that the Buddha described during his first sermon, the way between the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. The eight limbs of the path consist of: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood,

right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These are not sequential, because each one depends upon the other: They are meant to be followed and practiced in cooperation with one another. One cannot fully perfect the first step (for example, right view) until the last one, right concentration, is perfected. When all are practiced and perfected, then one attains enlightenment. Each of these components of the path is “right” in the sense that it is an ideal that should be undertaken and practiced seriously. One should follow the path not just because the Buddha taught it but because this is the way to attain the same perfection and enlightenment that Gautama Buddha reached while sitting under the bodhi tree. The word for *right* (Pāli, *sammā*; Sanskrit, *samyāñc*) in each of the compounds that are found in the fourth truth can be translated as right, proper, or good; the meaning becomes clearer when contrasted with its opposite (Pāli and Sanskrit, *pāpa*), which means wrong, bad, or even EVIL.

Buddhaghosa grouped the eightfold path into three different stages, as shown in Table 1. According to Buddhaghosa, *right view* means having nirvāṇa as one’s goal through eliminating ignorance. One should strive to see clearly, always envisioning reaching nirvāṇa in one’s mind. Other commentaries have explained that right view means understanding the four noble truths. *Right intention* (sometimes translated as *right thought*) involves thinking according to the Buddha’s teachings, and always directing one’s intentions and thoughts toward nirvāṇa, with keen attention to the proper ways of understanding the world. If one has abandoned wrong intentions or thoughts, then one knows that one is on the way to developing right intention. Some commentaries also explain that right intention involves the cultivation of *maitrī* (loving-kindness; Pāli, *mettā*) toward all other beings. Taken together, Buddhaghosa wrote that both right view and right intention make up *right wisdom*, for one is then focused on the ultimate goal of the Buddha’s teachings, which is nirvāṇa.

The second group, *right ethical conduct* (sometimes translated as *right morality*), is more readily understood than the first. *Right speech* means not lying, not engaging in gossip, not slandering others, and not speaking harshly. *Right action* involves not killing living things, not stealing, and not engaging in sexual misconduct. When one practices *right livelihood*, one avoids careers or jobs that harm others. Specifically, one should not earn a living by engaging in trading weapons, slaughtering animals, dealing in slavery, sell-

TABLE 1

Buddhaghosa's three stages of the eightfold path	
Right wisdom	right view right intention
Right ethical conduct	right speech right action right livelihood
Right concentration	right effort right mindfulness right concentration

ing alcohol or other intoxicants, or selling poisons. When one practices right speech, right action, and right livelihood, one lays the proper ethical foundation for the other remaining stages of the path.

The third and last group of the eightfold path, *right concentration*, includes right effort, right MINDFULNESS, and right concentration. Each of these limbs of the path requires focus and deliberate cultivation of certain meditative practices. *Right effort* means deliberately preventing undesirable mental attitudes, such as sensual desire, hatred, sluggishness, worry and anxiety, and doubt, as well as deliberately letting go of such attitudes if they have already arisen. Right effort means bringing about and maintaining positive mental attitudes, such as the seven factors of enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. *Right mindfulness* means cultivating an awareness of one’s body, one’s feelings, one’s mind, and of mental objects. The development of mindfulness is explained in detail in *The Foundations of Mindfulness* (Pāli, *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*); it involves simply watching and observing, for example, one’s body or mind. Right mindfulness is then accompanied by meditative practices of *right concentration*, which enable one to develop “one pointedness of mind.” By closing the doors of the senses to the outside world, one focuses on one of a variety of objects that are designed to enable the practitioner to attain specific mental states that lie beyond one’s usual daily consciousness.

Taken as a whole, the four noble truths and the eightfold path are emblematic of all of the Buddha’s teachings. Because the Buddha is said to have taught these in his first sermon, they represent the most fundamental teachings of Buddhism. The four noble truths are woven throughout all of the Buddhist worlds; they appear in countless texts, and the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment has been told even in

fourteenth-century Japanese Nō plays. The eightfold path, too, is representative of the path to enlightenment. The eight stages of the path are broadly designed to take a practitioner from the initial steps of right intention and right view—being properly focused on the attainment of nirvāṇa—to the more strenuous meditation practices that enable one to cultivate awareness and insight and one pointedness of mind.

However, because the four noble truths and the eightfold path are construed so broadly, it is difficult to talk about them as specific and explicit guides to the practices that lead to nirvāṇa. While there are certain practices enumerated in the commentaries on the four noble truths and the eightfold path, the first talk on dharma in which the Buddha lays out the teachings contains no specific instructions on how one should recognize the truth of the four noble truths and the eightfold path. The Buddha himself simply states that he *knew* that he had to know the truth of the four noble truths for himself, and that he came to realize the truth of the four noble truths. The Buddha then instructs his audience to do the same. In short, the four noble truths and the eightfold path are illustrative of the progressive path toward enlightenment, rather than being specific teachings on how one should meditate in order to reach enlightenment.

There are other meditation practices that employ the four noble truths and the eightfold path, such as the practice of the foundations of mindfulness. In that practice, one meditates upon the ways in which mental objects such as the four noble truths or the eightfold path are constructed in the world, how they come to be, and how they pass away. Buddhist texts also offer an extensive set of teachings on how to meditate in order to reach enlightenment that incorporate the four noble truths and the eightfold path as objects of contemplation. At the same time, however, there are countless references to the significance of the four noble truths as a means to fully understand the dharma and to fully comprehend the right view that will lead one to nirvāṇa.

The four noble truths are often employed as an organizing principle to describe the more detailed and

complex set of teachings that are the framework for more specific meditation practices. As a representation of the enlightenment that the Buddha reached, and as an illustration of the path that others might follow to gain enlightenment, the four noble truths are the most significant teaching in all of Buddhism's varied schools and traditions.

See also: **Meditation; Prajñā (Wisdom); Pratītyasamutpāda (Dependent Origination)**

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