Why Are the Four Noble Truths Called “Noble”?

K.R. Norman


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# ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABORI</td>
<td>Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ai.Gr.</td>
<td>J. Wackernagel, Alindische Grammatik</td>
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<tr>
<td>AJP</td>
<td>American Journal of Philosophy</td>
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<td>AMg</td>
<td>Ardha-Māgadhī</td>
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<td>AMg Dict.</td>
<td>Ratanachandraji, An Illustrated AMg Dictionary</td>
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<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>Acta Orientalia</td>
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<td>Apa.</td>
<td>Apabhraṃśa</td>
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<td>AR</td>
<td>Abhidhāna-rājendra, Ratlam 1913-25</td>
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<td>Aś.</td>
<td>Aśokan</td>
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<td>Āv.</td>
<td>Āvassaya-sutta</td>
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<td>Āyār.</td>
<td>Āyāranga-sutta (ed. H. Jacobi)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCDRI</td>
<td>Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute</td>
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<td>BD</td>
<td>Book of the Discipline</td>
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<td>B&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Burmese (Chaṭṭhasaṅgāyana) edition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhav.</td>
<td>Bhavisatta Kaha (ed. H. Jacobi, Munich 1918)</td>
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<tr>
<td>BHS</td>
<td>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit</td>
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<td>BHSD</td>
<td>F. Edgerton, BHS Dictionary</td>
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<td>BHSG</td>
<td>F. Edgerton, BHS Grammar</td>
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<td>BKS</td>
<td>Byḥat-kalpa-sūtra (ed. W. Schubring, Leipzig 1905)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bloch</td>
<td>J. Bloch, Les inscriptions d'Asoka, Paris 1950</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSL</td>
<td>Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSO(A)S</td>
<td>Bulletin of the School of Oriental (and African) Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDIAL</td>
<td>R.L. Turner, Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages</td>
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<td>Ce</td>
<td>Sinhalese edition</td>
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<tr>
<td>CII</td>
<td>Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum</td>
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<td>CPD</td>
<td>Critical Pāli Dictionary</td>
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<td>cty/cties</td>
<td>commentary/commentaries</td>
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<tr>
<td>cū.</td>
<td>cūrṇi</td>
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<tr>
<td>DED(R)</td>
<td>Dravidian Etymological Dictionary (revised edition)</td>
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<td>DNM</td>
<td>Deśīnāmamālā</td>
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</table>
DPPN  Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names
E²  European edition
Ep. Ind.  Epigraphia Indica
Erz.  H. Jacobi, Ausgewählte Erzählungen in Māhārāṣṭrī. Leipzig 1886
EWA  M. Mayrhofer, Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen,
Geiger  W. Geiger, Pāli Literatur und Sprache, Strassburg 1916
Gk.  Greek
GOS  Gaekwad’s Oriental Series
Hultzsch  E. Hultzsch, Inscriptions of Asoka, Oxford 1925
IA  Indo-Aryan
IE  Indo-European
IHQ  Indian Historical Quarterly
II  Indo-Iranian
IIJ  Indo-Iranian Journal
IL  Indian Linguistics
Ind. Ant.  Indian Antiquary
Isībh.  Isībhāsiāν (ed. W. Schubring)
IT  Indologicia Taurinensia
JA  Journal Asiatique
JAIH  Journal of Ancient Indian History
JAOS  Journal of the American Oriental Society
JASB  Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal
JAS Bombay  Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay
JIABS  Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies
JOI(B)  Journal of the Oriental Institute (Baroda)
JPTS  Journal of the Pali Text Society
JRAS  Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
Kapp.  The Kalpasūtra of Bhadrabāhu (ed. H. Jacobi, Leipzig 1879)
Kapp. Sām.  = part III of prec. (pp. 86-95)
Lüders, Beob.  H. Lüders, Beobachtungen über die Sprache des buddhistischen Urkanons, Berlin 1954
Lüders, Phil. Ind.  H. Lüders, *Philologica Indica*, Göttingen 1940
MIA  Middle Indo-Aryan
MRE  Minor Rock Edict
MSL  *Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique de Paris*
MS(S)  Manuscript(s)
NAWG  Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen
Nāyā.  *Nāyādhammakahāo*
NIA  New Indo-Aryan
Nirayāv.  *Nirayāvaliyāo*
Nisīh.  *Nisīha-sutta*
OIA  Old Indo-Aryan
OLZ  *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*
Ova.  *Ovavāiya-sutta* (ed. E. Leumann, Leipzig 1883)
Pā.  Pāli
Pañh.  *Pañhāvāgaraṇāṇīṇī*
Paum.  *Pauma-cariu*
PE  Pillar Edict
PED  The PTS’s *Pali-English Dictionary*
Pischel  R. Pischel, *Grammatik der Prākrit-Sprachen*, Strassburg 1900
Pkt  Prakrit
PMWS  F.B.J. Kuiper, *Proto-Munda Words in Sanskrit*, Amsterdam 1948
PTC  *Pāli Tipiṭakaṃ Concordance*
PTS  Pali Text Society
Ratnachandraji  see AMg Dict.
RE  Rock Edict
RV  *Ṛgveda*
SBB  Sacred Books of the Buddhists
SBE  Sacred Books of the East
SepE  Separate Edict
Sheth  see PSM
Sinh.  Sinhalese
Skt  Sanskrit
StII  Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik
Sutt.  Suttāgame
Sūyāg.  Sūyagaḍaṁga-sutta
Ṭhāṅ.  Ṭhāṅaṁga-sutta
ţī.  ţīkā
TPS  Transactions of the Philological Society
Turner. CDIAL  R.L. Turner, Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages
Uvās.  Uvāsaga-dasāo (ed. Hoernle)
Vivāg.  Vivāga-sutta
Whitney. Roots  W.D. Whitney, Roots and Verb-forms of the Sanskrit Language, Leipzig 1885
WZKS(O)  Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- (und Ost-)asiens
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 saccānaṃ³ “the truths which cause nobleness”. This probably indicates that that was either the only explanation known to the tradition of the Di:gha-bhānakas 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 ariyapaṭīviddhāni vā saccāni⁴ “the truths which cause nobleness or are penetrated by the

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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 text he quotes canonical authority for his statements from the set of suttas about the ariyasaccāni which is found in the Saṁyutta-nikāya:

(1) yasmā paṇḍitīṇī Buddhādayo ariyā paṭivijjhati, tasmā ariyasaccānī ti vuccanti: “Because noble ones, the Buddhas, etc., penetrate them, therefore they are called ‘the noble ones’ truths”.

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

(3) athavā etesām abhisambuddhātā ariyabhāvāsiddhītā pi ariyasaccāni: “Because of the attainment of nobleness arising from their discovery”, “the ennobling truths”.

(4) api ca kho panā ariyāni saccānī 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

1 Vism 495,17 foll. A similar list of explanations is found in Vibh-a 84.23–85.4.
2 SV 431 foll.
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 Digha-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 interpretations: (1) *ariyasaccāni ti arañiyato ariyāni avitathabhāvena saccāni cā ti ariyasaccāni*; (2) *ariyabhāvakarāṇi vā saccāni ariyasaccāni*; (3) *ariyehi vā buddhādhi paṭivijjhitabāṇi saccāni ariyasaccāni*; (4) *athaśv ariyassa saccāni ariyasaccāni*. sadavakena hi lokeṇa saraṇan ti arañiyato ariyo Bhagavā, tena sayambhū-ñāṇena diṭṭhātā tassa saccāni ti ariyasaccāni. Here it is to be noted that Dhammapāla gives the usual gloss for *ariya* (*araṇiyato 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 Ānīnamoli, even in the translation of the relevant portion of the Visuddhimagga: “The Noble Ones penetrate them, therefore they are called Noble Truths”, when in that particular context we might well have thought that “Noble Ones’ Truths” would have been more appropriate.

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1 It-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.