



***Pain and its Ending: The Four Noble Truths in the Theravāda Buddhist Canon***

Carol S. Anderson. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999,  
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Reviewed by

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This is a well-presented and clearly written book, based on a wide reading of both recent and older scholarship. Carol Anderson gives a detailed account of the various guises in which the four noble truths appear in the Pāli texts. Overall, this is a valuable and intelligent account of the material, and it will, I suspect, be required reading in Buddhist studies courses for some time. That said, I have some detailed criticisms and disagreements on particular points. So, I will begin this review by describing Anderson's principal thesis and then turn to a chapter-by-chapter evaluation.

The main distinction that Anderson presents is between the four noble truths as a symbol and as a category of doctrine. She sees the use in such biographical accounts as those found at the beginning of the *Mahāvagga* as a symbol, employed in descriptions of preaching (usually but not always by the Buddha himself). Usually, the teaching of the four truths in such contexts culminates in the arising of the *dhamma* eye, in most cases effectively the attainment of stream-entry. By contrast, in much of the rest of the canonical literature the four truths are presented as only one (albeit important) aspect of a wide and variously developed array of teachings and in that context occur most typically at the culmination of the development of a meditative path as part of the achievement of arahatship.

This seems in itself fair enough. I am a little uneasy with Anderson's choice of restricting the meaning of the term "four noble truths" to the form where *dukkha* ("pain") is the first item. It seems to me that such alternatives as "the world, the arising of the world" or "the *āsavas*, the arising of the *āsavas*" are just as much the "four noble truths" as the more well-known form. Or, to put it another way, the well-known form is simply shorthand for all of the forms. Be that as it may, I am not quite happy with Anderson's rather sharp distinction between uses as "symbol" and as a "statement of doctrine." In an account of the structure of traditional Theravāda teaching, which I first published in 1984, I pointed out the relationship between

meditative states and the teaching of the four noble truths in the contexts that Anderson considers symbolic.

I do not know if Anderson has seen that, but it points the way to a rather different understanding. For me, listening to the teaching of *dhamma* is itself a form of *bhāvanā* (meditative development). Like any other form of *bhāvanā* it can induce a state of mental clarity and relaxation; it is this that potentially enables the realization of the four truths. For *arahatship*, a much deeper and fuller realization of those same truths is required. Not surprisingly then, the prerequisite mental state entails a greater degree of clarity and inner peacefulness. Looked at in this way, the difference between the two contexts is not in fact very great. However, there is little doubt that the literary contexts in which the attainment of the *dhamma* eye is often presented are indeed in many respects symbolic, and so I would accept that Anderson's description correctly represents one aspect of the situation.

After a short preface giving some acknowledgements and personal motivations, and a longer introduction (twenty-seven pages) giving a rather clearly presented summary of the book as a whole, chapter one addresses the question of whether the four noble truths are a doctrine by examining right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*). The nature of wrong view and of ordinary (*lokiya*) right view is clearly described. I am less sure that there is any real understanding of what is meant by transcendent (*lokuttara*) right view. The whole point of this is that no specific content is attributed to it. In other words, it is simply the wisdom of the enlightened mind.

The next two chapters look at what Carol Anderson understands as "symbols" and "doctrines" respectively. So chapter two is entitled "Stories and a Symbol of the Buddha's Enlightenment" (thirty pages). Much use is made here of an important article of K. R. Norman, in which he analyzes the exact linguistic form of passages referring to the four truths, especially in the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*, traditionally the first sermon of the Buddha. Here and elsewhere, Anderson attributes to Norman the view that "the four truths were probably added after the earliest version of this sutta" (p. 68; cf. p. 20 and p. 149). I do not think this is what he says.

In this *sutta*, forms such as *idaṃ* are incorrect in gender, if, for example, they are taken to refer to a masculine noun such as *nirodha*. In Norman's interpretation, the apparent accusatives are in fact *sandhi* forms: *idaṃ-dukkha-nirodha-m-ariyasaccaṃ* is a syntactical compound, and the meaning is "the noble truth that this is the origin of suffering." If this interpretation is correct, *idaṃ* here is ultimately erroneous for an original *ayaṃ-dukkha-nirodha-m-ariyasaccaṃ*. In other words, it has been affected by the (correct) grammatical form for the first truth: *idaṃ-dukkha-m-ariyasaccaṃ*. *Idaṃ* is there appropriately neuter because it agrees with the neuter word *dukkha*.

As a result of this and other matters, Norman concludes that the simpler form of the truths, which occurs elsewhere, (*idaṃ dukkhaṃ . . . ayaṃ samudayo*, and so forth) must be earlier. He also concludes that the term *ariya-sacca-* probably did not occur in the earliest versions of the four truths. He does not, however, say that no references to the four truths occurred in the original version of the *sutta*. (He does say that the first brief statement of the four truths is probably a later addition.) In fact, the idea of an earlier version of the discourse without the four truths seems very unlikely. If the whole section with the twelvefold presentation of the truths is later, then the cry repeated through the heaven worlds must also be an addition. This leaves very little in this short discourse! A *sutta* that contained only the mention of the middle way is highly improbable. It is better to suppose simply that the composer of the twelvefold

presentation was familiar with the notion of the middle way and something of the Buddha's practice and abandonment of asceticism. There is no need to posit any earlier version of the text.

Norman's arguments do accord with the view (of many scholars) that this discourse was identified as the first sermon of the Buddha only at a later date. That, of course, is possible. It needs to be noted, however, that Norman's arguments are not in fact quite conclusive. They depend on two assumptions. (Both are stated explicitly by Norman.) Firstly, it is assumed that the grammatical form should be the same for each of the four truths. If you do not require that, then it is possible to translate the four in these contexts, taking *idaṃ* as agreeing with *dukkhaṃ* for the first truth, and agreeing with *saccaṃ* for the other truths. This entails also treating *dukkha-samudayaṃ* and *dukkha-nirodhaṃ* as adjectival compounds and taking *dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-paṭipadā-ariyasaccaṃ* as a single compound. This might seem unlikely, but if you suppose that the *sutta* is created in its present form for euphonious chanting, then it is a more than acceptable "poetic" license.

The second assumption involved in Norman's arguments is that it is unreasonable to say that the truth of arising should be abandoned, because what is meant is the truth that arising, that is, craving, should be abandoned. The word *sacca*, however, means equally "reality" or "what is really there." For later Buddhist thinkers, craving is something that is a reality; that really existing thing (*sacca*) must be abandoned. Even if one supposes that this is unlikely to have been the original meaning of *sacca* in the earliest Buddhism, it most certainly is how it was understood by the early *abhidhamma* period. Such an interpretation of *sacca* in this *sutta* could, in that case, be ruled out only if one was certain that it was composed at a relatively early date. But why should we assume it couldn't have been the original meaning? Perhaps it is precisely part of the Buddha's deconstruction of Brahmanism? Where the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-upaniṣad* has a *satya* that is brahman —twofold, as dying and undying —the Buddha substitutes a fourfold *sacca*. If so, *sacca* may have been related from the beginning to brahminical speculations about *sat*.

Despite this long digression I do not think that this misunderstanding of Norman's position critically affects Anderson's thesis. Even if these arguments do not prove that the four truths are definitely a later insertion in the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*, it is certainly possible to take the position that the *sutta* itself is relatively late. Definite proof either way seems at present unattainable. In either case, it seems reasonable to assert a symbolic element to the presentation in such contexts (mostly biographical). I am less happy with Anderson's acceptance of the view of some scholars that the four noble truths were originally introduced into the *sutta* literature from the biographical accounts in *Vinaya* works. I tend to suppose that biography of any kind develops rather later and would concede only that the influence of the biographical accounts tends to increase the prominence of the four truths. I do not believe that all mention of the four truths was absent in the oldest *suttas*.

The subject of Carol Anderson's third chapter is the four truths "regarded as propositions," and so the principal concern is with the remaining bulk of references to the four truths in the *Nikāyas*. Quite correctly, she emphasizes the fact that the four truths are not separated out and set apart from the other teachings; they are simply one approach among an array of different ways of developing *dhamma*. I will return later to the question as to whether it is really adequate to regard the truths as either propositions or doctrines. In general, this is a good and clear description, although I feel that some of the material in this chapter could have been treated in a little more depth.

Particularly welcome is the next chapter, which examines "Abhidhamma Analysis of the Four Noble

Truths" (pp. 108-30). Too many accounts of the Buddhism of the Pāli Canon have neglected or glossed over the *abhidhamma* material. By contrast, Carol Anderson offers an intelligent and useful survey of the materials relating to the truths found in the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. She comments, "In all of the passages examined in this chapter, the point is for the practitioner to learn how the four noble truths intersect with other teachings" (p. 127). They are, in fact, interpreted in terms of her categories as "propositions of doctrine."

The fifth chapter (thirty-seven pages) turns to the specific issue of the four truths and the path. As I indicated, I am not quite happy with some of what she has to say here, although there is much of interest and value. Drawing particularly on the work of Schmithausen and Bronkhorst, she eventually concludes that the four noble truths "were introduced into what became the canonical writings first in relation to attaining the jhānic states and to the eradication of the āsavā, and later in the context of the Buddha's biographies, such as the Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta" (p. 148f). Again, "What we emerge with is the tentative conclusion that the four noble truths were first conceptualized as related to the highest form of enlightenment: the attainments of an arahat" (p. 149). In actual fact, I do not have a problem with this in itself, but I would not see any reason to doubt that it was the Buddha himself who first conceptualized them in this context. Proving (or disproving) that in any conclusive way is of course impossible, given the paucity of available historical evidence.

I would have more of a problem with the following: "After the Buddha's death, . . . there are no examples of followers cultivating the dhamma eye by hearing a graduated talk or a talk praised by the Buddhas. The only way that a follower of the Buddha can learn the four noble truths after the Buddha's parinibbāna is by learning them as propositions, and within a broad range of teaching styles and practices" (p. 151). I suspect that this last statement would come as a great surprise to many of the more experienced practitioners in the Theravāda countries today. Even as a purely historical claim, the first statement is not really adequate. After all, there is not much said in the Pāli Canon about what happened to followers after the Buddha's departure, so the argument from silence is really rather weak. The later literature of the Theriya tradition has, of course, many examples that refer to the arising of the *dhamma* eye as a result of discourses by *arahats*.

The weakest chapter of this book is without doubt the sixth (pp. 168-211). A detailed account is offered of past scholarship in "Europe and the U.S.!" (It isn't quite clear how various Sinhalese, Indians, and Japanese have managed to creep in under this heading.) The model adopted is that of G. R. Welbon's account of the history of studies of *nirvāṇa*. Anderson does provide what appears to be a good overview of the sources, although there are some serious gaps. Scandinavian scholarship, for example, is completely ignored. The problem is not that, but the complete failure to examine the materials contextually.

So we learn that "the four noble truths have become an integral part of, if not a significant vehicle for, the hegemonic structures of colonialism" (p. 197). In a sense, of course, this is correct by definition (and therefore tells us nothing). But it is hopelessly bad historical method. In history, context is everything. If we read the statement: "Jews are evil, but we should not kill them," we may say that this is the expression of an unacceptable anti-Semitism. If we learn that the statement was made in Germany in 1943, we may read it rather as a heroic attempt to resist the implementation of the Holocaust. Without knowing the precise motives and context, quotations from a past historical period are worse than useless. Good historical research requires a careful examination of that context. Without it, we have only an inadequate

scholarship that tells us nothing of the real motivations and deeds of the past. This serves only an agenda which seeks to devalue the achievements of great scholars by proving the obvious: they were prisoners of their times, as indeed are those who criticize them.

It is only in the last chapter (pp. 212-232) that we learn the full basis for Anderson's methodology. The chapter begins with a brief account of some of the views of Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim as they relate to the nature of symbols. It then turns to contemporary theories of "symbols and propositions" with an account of the ideas of Paul Ricoeur and Dan Sperber. It is Sperber's notion of symbols as evocative that is particularly utilized here. "It is the evocative capacity of the four noble truths that sets them apart as a symbol and the memory of the Theravāda canon that provides the paths by which other symbolic statements are recalled" (p. 226).

When it comes to considering the four noble truths as "propositions of doctrine," Anderson relies on three criteria for a definition of doctrine put forward by Paul Griffiths. As she recognizes, this is not entirely successful—largely because the third criterion is "Being taken by its community to be binding upon its members." Anderson attempts to rescue this, but it is highly doubtful if any form of traditional Buddhism ever thought of belief in or assent to the four noble truths as something in any sense required. Rather they (or at least the first truth) are typically considered something to be investigated, questioned, explored, and discussed.

According to Anderson, "As a logical proposition, we should understand that the four noble truths are . . . claims about experience. . . . As a primary doctrine, the four noble truths are considered to be true" (p. 227). She then asks if they can be verified by practicing them, but denies that there is any consistent statement as to "what one is supposed to do with the four truths" in the Canon. I do not believe that this is correct, except in the sense that there is nothing one should do with all four truths. Rather, they each have their own injunction: to fully comprehend, to abandon, to experience, and to practice, respectively. The problem here is created precisely by viewing the four truths as propositions. Rather, they are categories in which we order the things that we experience. So everything that falls into the category of the fourth truth is something to practice. And conversely, everything to be practiced falls into the category of the fourth truth. For me, then, the truths are rather more prescriptive than descriptive.

In this final chapter Carol Anderson does in fact recognize that the two categories of symbol and proposition are not quite adequate and so seeks to complement them with the notion of right view. To be more exact, at one point she writes, "In the end all three categories are necessary to fully understand the breadth of the four noble truths as accurately as possible" (p. 225). Later, however, she seems rather to suggest that "As an efficacious right view, the four noble truths embrace both functions" (p. 229).

In the course of this review, I offer a fair number of criticisms. Let me reiterate that this is an important study, written in a stimulating and clear manner. I have enjoyed reading it and found it frequently both thought-provoking and useful. A few more detailed comments I reserve to an appendix. If there is an overall weakness in Carol Anderson's work, it is perhaps that she has drawn on and combined the work and conclusions of many scholars whose methodologies may in some cases be incompatible. A more specific lack is the absence of any serious attempt to explore the original meaning of the word *sacca/satya* in pre-Buddhist contexts.

The practice of sometimes referring to Pāli words in their stem form, for example, sometimes in the masculine plural and sometimes in the nominative singular, is rather unsatisfactory. It would be better to simply use the stem form in all cases, but at all events there should be consistency. There are also two stylistic barbarisms: the ugly mixing of italicization and Roman in the same word, and the use of the slash in "s/he." I noted in passing the presence of about 50 typographic errors, a majority in Pāli words.

- p. 37 "Resorting to even one theory" is an odd rendering of *laddhimatta* [sic] *diṭṭhigataṃ*.
- p. 41 The commentary of Buddhaghosa does not in fact associate transcendent right view with the adept (*asekha*) in particular.
- p. 41 *Vipassanāsammādiṭṭhi* is not "right view regarding insight," but "right view that occurs during insight." Similarly, in the case of *maggasammādiṭṭhi*.
- p. 41 *Antamaso lokiya-paññāya pi paccaya-paṭivedho kato hoti* does not mean "knowing the causes of the world with wisdom," but rather "at minimum conditions have been penetrated by ordinary wisdom." The reference is to the insight knowledge of the fourth *visuddhi*.
- p. 45 *-paccaya* is not a suffix.
- p. 87 *Paṭṭhāna* is not usually translated as "establishing" or "setting up." It is *upaṭṭhāna* that is so translated.
- p. 92 "Gethin identifies this as the ekayāna ('one way') formula." This is slightly unfortunate, because Gethin in fact has a section precisely rejecting such a translation of *ekāyana* (not *ekayāna*). He remarks in his book (*The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 63) that "nowhere is the sense 'one and one only' clearly and definitely the proper sense, and in most cases definitely not."
- p. 100 *Nibbedhika-* probably means penetrating or piercing, not "discriminating"; cf. BHSD.
- p. 111 The translation of *ye vā pana* and so forth is wrong.
- p. 113ff It is not quite clear whether the intention of the *Vibhanga* in its exegesis of the fourth truth has been fully understood. One is meant to supply the full expansion of *lokuttara citta* from the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, that is, it is not restricted to first *jhāna*.
- p. 121 The terms *suttanta-vibhanga*, etc. must be erroneous for *suttanta-bhājanīya*, etc.
- p. 125 The *Yamaka* "is terse and not designed to be recited." This would be a great surprise to the Burmese monks who learn it by heart and chant it.
- p. 134; p. 143; p. 150 & n *Sāmuḥkaṃsikā* is rendered as "praised by" and "standard." I would think it means either "supreme" or "particular to."
- p. 167 n. 117 The use of *vetulla-* or *vedalla-* or *vedaḷha-* in the commentaries to refer to *Mahāyāna* is not really related to the question of the original meaning of *vedalla* in the *sutta* list of the nine kinds of *dhamma* (known as the nine *Angas* in postcanonical sources).

#### Note

- (1) Now reprinted in John R. Hinnells, *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 393-403.