

# THE PATH TO FREEDOM

**PRACTISING THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS**

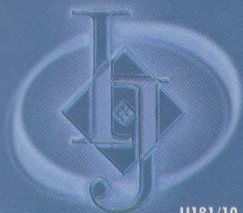
**ASHIN DR NANDAMĀLĀBHIVĀMSA**

Problems in life start with birth. Otherwise, if we hadn't been born, would we be subject to aging, sickness and death? Instead of seeing life's unsatisfactoriness, many of us see its problems as something good: even desirable.

Ignorance is the problem that is the starting point of the problem of existence itself. For those of us who realise problems arising as problems, some are deluded enough to search for external solutions — by praying, propitiating gods and deities, or consulting astrologers. That is why right understanding is crucial as a start; otherwise, we would not be able to proceed further in uncovering what the Buddha taught.

The author Ashin Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa will show us in this booklet how to overcome life's problems through the cultivation of right vision and learning the Dhamma.

This transcription is from one of his many Dhamma lectures at the CENTRE FOR BUDDHIST STUDIES, and the SĪTAGŪ INTERNĀTIONAL BUDDHIST ACADEMY in Sagaing, Myanmar between 2004 and 2005.



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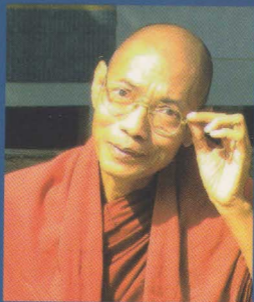
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sayādaw Dr Nandamālābhivaṃsa, born in Myanmar (Burma) in 1940, was educated in Mandalay and with 16 years of age he already passed Dhammācariya (Dhamma-teacher) and then the most difficult Bhivaṃsa-examination. He also studied in Sri Lanka at the Kelaniya University in Colombo (M.A.) and got his Ph.D. in India. Because of his excellent knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures and his teaching experience he was rewarded many high distinctions and titles.

In Myanmar together with his elder brother he is leading the traditional, well-reputed study-monastery "Mahāsubhodayon" in Sagaing Hills. He is rector of the "International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University" in Yangon and of "Sītagū International Buddhist Academy" in Sagaing. In Myanmar and abroad, since some years in Europe too, he is giving courses mainly on Abhidhamma for Western Vipassanā-teachers, -students and meditators.

He is the founder and leader of Dhammavijjālaya, Centre for Buddhist ►



► Studies (CBS) in Sagaing, which is connected to Mahāsubhodayon Monastery and serves foreigners for further studies and practice.

The Sayādaw's teaching method is very individual, lively, practical and practicable with many examples and references from daily life, from the Suttas, Abhidhamma-books and commentaries. Sayādaw is teaching in English and with a lot of humour and Mettā.

Self-study is necessary within all his Abhidhamma courses, to become familiar with the structure and logic of Abhidhamma and the most important Pāli-terms. Formal meditation-periods are included too.

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## The Path to Freedom

*...It is like us wanting to drive somewhere;  
we first need to know how to drive.*

*We need not actually need to know about  
the car's mechanism and how it runs.*

*In the same way if we want to end suffering  
we must first know at least  
how to walk the path as  
taught by the Buddha.*



## RIGHT VISION

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**P**roblems in life start with birth. Otherwise, if we hadn't been born, would we be subjected to aging, sickness and death?

Instead of seeing life's unsatisfactoriness, many of us see its problems as something good: even desirable. Many people even monks during the Buddha's lifetime saw no fault in enjoying sensual pleasures as much as possible:

*“life's too short and all will end in death anyway.”*

Such indulgence in one's desires is very easy to practise; even animals can have their enjoyment too. By choosing to ignore such problems, they only look to fulfil their happiness. But their

so-called and apparent happiness is just illusory, a cover for a host of unpleasantness such as worry, anxiety, boredom, jealousy, anger, grief and depression that permeate their everyday life and relationships. This way like a millipede walking round and round along a hoop, we will not be able to find an end to life's problems in *samsāra*, the never-ending cycle of rebirths.

Ignorance is the problem that is the starting point of the problem of existence itself. For those of us who realise problems arising as problems, some are deluded enough to search for external solutions — by praying, propitiating gods and deities, or consulting astrologers. That is why right understanding is crucial as a start; otherwise, we would not be able to proceed further in uncovering what the Buddha taught.

*Sammā ditṭhi* or literally “right vision” (in Pāli, *ditṭhi* is derived from *dīsa* = to see or view) is the first factor to understanding

the Noble Truths of suffering as taught by the Buddha. It is the keynote of seeing things as they really are: that there *really* are big problems confronting us — of impermanence, loss and decay, not to say, dying.

As an example, walking along a road we have to use our eyes to see where to go, which part to tread on. This is different from using the eye of knowledge (*Dhamma cakku*) which does not depend on our opinions and biases, or likes and dislikes, but rather what is right according to the Dhamma — the law of Nature which is self-existent, not the property of anyone nor any one religion, being neither religious belief nor prayer.

*The Dhamma can't be seen with the ordinary eye,  
which explains why so many of us  
remain blind to the Buddha Dhamma.*

We see wrongly so we can't arrive at the right solution to the problems of existence which the Buddha had found for Himself in the search for the end to suffering, as encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths.

Indeed the Buddha Himself at one point after His enlightenment thought it would be a waste of time to teach anybody.

*The world was dark, He said.  
With so many busily chasing after sensual pleasures,  
no one could realise the Dhamma.*

*Right Seeing is thus Purification of View.*

In the first place, we hold such a strong illusion and view — so hard to remove — of ourselves as a permanent entity. Equally hard to remove is our attachment and clinging to this being we identify

as “I”, “my self” and “mine” from birth. So much so it blinds us to the Buddha’s truth of suffering: seeing what is impermanent as permanent, although everything (even our body) is changing from moment to moment.

Whoever maintains this wrong view cannot be called a true Buddhist. And until we can call ourselves as one, we have to practise to see things as *they really are*.

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## THE TRUTH ABOUT DUKKHA



*Yam kinci samudaya dhammam,  
Sabbam tam nirodha dhammam.*

*(Whatever arises must cease.)*

**I**mpermanence (*anicca*) is a keynote in the Buddha's teachings. Down to the smallest dust speck, nothing is permanent. If it wasn't so, the Buddha had said, then there is nothing to practise for. Everything is conditioned, due to cause and condition joining together to create an effect; different combinations of different conditions giving rise to different effects.

In many of His *suttas*, He tells us to reflect on our condition:

*Subject to parents who have died or will die one day,  
how could we ourselves then be permanent?*

We cannot progress any further in right understanding without first understanding the first of the Four Noble Truths: **the truth of suffering.**

The Buddha never used words casually. In this case His choice of the term *dukkha* had a purpose to show the cause of life. Here it means not so much the suffering of aches and pains but “*du*” (to be disgusting) + “*kha*” (nothing, empty): that is, what we assume to be so doesn’t exist. What we take to be a person, as a self-existing, permanent entity (*atta*) is actually only mind-and-matter. What we had thought to be an “I” are only mental states and material qualities acting together to produce energy so that we think, talk and

act. We are only phenomena and energy in the guise of a compact living being we think ourselves to be. For example, we think we are sitting in a chair reading, apparently solid and still, yet our mental and material processes are running and ceasing all the time, like a river current flowing without stop.

What arises and falls constantly as a conditioned thing [or *sankhāra* = *sam* (joining together) + *khāra* (work)] can only be unreliable. It is disturbing and unsatisfactory because what we wish for can't be realised.

Seeing things in this way, seeing things as they really are, can we remain satisfied anymore? Right vision may not be a cause for enjoyment; yet it leads to cessation of suffering, once we penetrate the truth of suffering to clear away all doubt and wrong view about the Dhamma for good.



Going a step further, we ask, “Why is there suffering?”

*Dukkha, as the Buddha found by Himself,  
has a main cause (dukkha samudaya)  
which is craving (taṇhā).*

Everybody likes happiness and dislikes unhappiness. It is a bad situation to search for something — especially if it’s just a feeling — that is only momentary. If we want to have more and more of this feeling of happiness, this can only lead to craving. Unhappiness too leads to craving, if we want more and more to be rid of our unhappiness. What is the cause of problems and dissatisfaction in our life? It’s the desire or attachment that brings them about. Without cause, no attachment can arise.

Craving and ignorance (of the Dhamma) or *avijjā* are the two roots of cyclic existence. They firmly root and fortify our tree of

unwholesomeness/mental defilements. And it all starts with feeling. People exclaim, “Oh, how delightful! I’m so happy,” on seeing a nice, desirable object — and that leads to craving.

Craving has the aspect of enjoyment, or taking delight in. All *taṇhās* are alike in this respect. That is its nature, like heat is the nature of fire. So wherever it appears, *taṇhā* enjoys here, there, anywhere. It joins mind and its object together like two sheets of paper with *taṇhā* glue. So if we see something desirable, our mind starts wanting to see it again and again. This attachment like glue or a cord binds us together with the object. Even people who take on awesome, dangerous tasks (of climbing Mount Everest for instance) — when they could easily stay in comfort and safety at home — are led by *taṇhā*.

Three forms of *taṇhā* can be distinguished:

- sensual pleasure given our five senses thus craving for nice sight, sound, smell, taste and touch
- craving to be reborn and so to always remain in the cycle of *samsarā*. Those with this usually hold the view of eternalism (such as the Christians, Mahayanists and Muslims)
- craving to end life in the belief of annihilationism.

What can be done with desire and craving giving rise to *dukkha*? If there is *dukkha*, the Buddha said, there must surely be its end (*dukkha nirodha*) as all conditioned things cease at Nibbāna.

*This is the cessation of the cause:  
without its cessation, the effect cannot cease.*

It is like us wanting to drive somewhere; we first need to know how to drive. We need not actually need to know about the car's mechanism and how it runs. In the same way if we want to end suffering we must first know at least how to walk the path as taught by the Buddha.



## WAY WITHOUT EXTREMES



*I*t is not that the Buddha dislikes the idea of us living a happy life by telling us not to enjoy ourselves in sensual pleasures. On the contrary He Himself led the happiest of lives in *nekkhamma sukha* (happiness in renunciation). He only advises us to abandon *kāma sukha*, to abandon the desire for and attachment to desirable objects, not the things themselves. Remember that for 29 years as a layman He had lived very luxuriously. But had He remained a prince, He would never have realised the Dhamma.

Being completely free of all attachment, the Buddha Himself was always in a state of freedom. Seeing a desirable or undesirable object, He had neither attachment nor aversion. Yet He could

appreciate beauty as beauty. A deity Pañcasikha once sang and played the harp beautifully for the Buddha. Though He praised the deity, He did not ask to listen to more.

*Unlike us:  
what we like we are attached to,  
wanting more of it.*

All indulgence in one's sensual desires can only end in bad result, and is thus unbeneficial. At the same time the Buddha realised that the other extreme in the austere practice of self-torture was futile. After six years of trying it out for Himself — He could not even walk, only mental strength was left at the end — He began having doubts. Thinking there must be another more correct way for enlightenment, He then changed to *ānāpānassati*. Within two weeks ending on the full-moon day of Wesak, He attained enlightenment.

It is the Buddha's systematic way of teaching to first point out the harmful, then the beneficial: the former being more important due to the harm it causes. First what not to do and next what should be done. In this way the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-torture are dealt with first before He introduces His method of the Middle Way.

This begins of course with right seeing (*sammā ditṭhi*) in contrast to the usual deluded way of looking at things. How do we get the means of this right seeing as a start?

*By learning and listening to the Dhamma and  
by Vipassanā meditation.*

The latter by itself isn't enough. Without learning we wouldn't know the way, like travelling in unknown territory without a road map.

However right vision needs the help of other factors — the seven others of the Noble Eightfold Path. One is right thought (*sammā sankappa*). Wrong thought would only lead to wrong understanding. And to have right thought we need to have morality. If not, in breaking precepts, we can only have evil thoughts. So we need right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanta*) together with right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*). If these three factors aren't right, all thoughts would be wrong. For right seeing too, we need right mindfulness (*sammā sati*) to see things as they really are because they are mutually related. At the same time to be mindful, we need right effort (*sammā vāyāma*) to keep the mind from being scattered, thus attaining right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). Thus all are necessary and mutually linked.



*Study and practice are indispensable to  
remove the two problem roots of  
ignorance (avijjā) and craving (taṇhā).*

As *avijjā* conceals truth — that's its nature — that is where *taṇhā* is strong and flourishes. As we practise to realise the nature of sense objects — finding their faults through mindfulness (*sammā sati*) meditation, the link between feeling and the resultant craving can be cut. Thus through mindfulness we can lose our attachment. In removing our craving for desirable objects, we are much like a couple who after their divorce are no longer attached to each other.

Therefore through practice reinforced by learning the Dhamma, we can lead a peaceful life, be detached from any object, and be rid of worries. That is the purpose of Dhamma practice.

## HOW TO PRACTISE THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

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*B*y just keeping our attention on our breath or the rise-and-fall of our abdomen, we are practising the Buddha's Middle Way.

Our effort to stick to the breath is **right effort**. It is like in shooting an arrow, effort starts it off together with **right mindfulness** by pointing at the target. Aiming at it calls for **right view**. As a process in understanding, it sees the breath as it really is: comprehending the nature of motion, for instance. Concentrating on the breath is **right concentration**, while being mindful of it is right mindfulness. The thought to keep to the breath as the object is **right thought**. It also contemplates on its nature, finding out about the motion, touching, and so on.

*In trying to maintain a balance between  
mindfulness and tranquillity, we need effort.  
But for equilibrium, the effort and concentration  
must be on the same level.  
On the other hand mindfulness is  
always necessary and never in excess.*

These five factors above are the workers. The other three — right speech, right action and right livelihood — are present too as we are abstaining from bodily misdeeds and speech. They are also the preceding conditions of morality (*sīla*) before we begin to meditate. So with every breath we take in meditation, we are walking the Noble Path.

But how do we begin to see things as they really are? What can we do to increase our right understanding of the nature of *dukkha* in our practice?

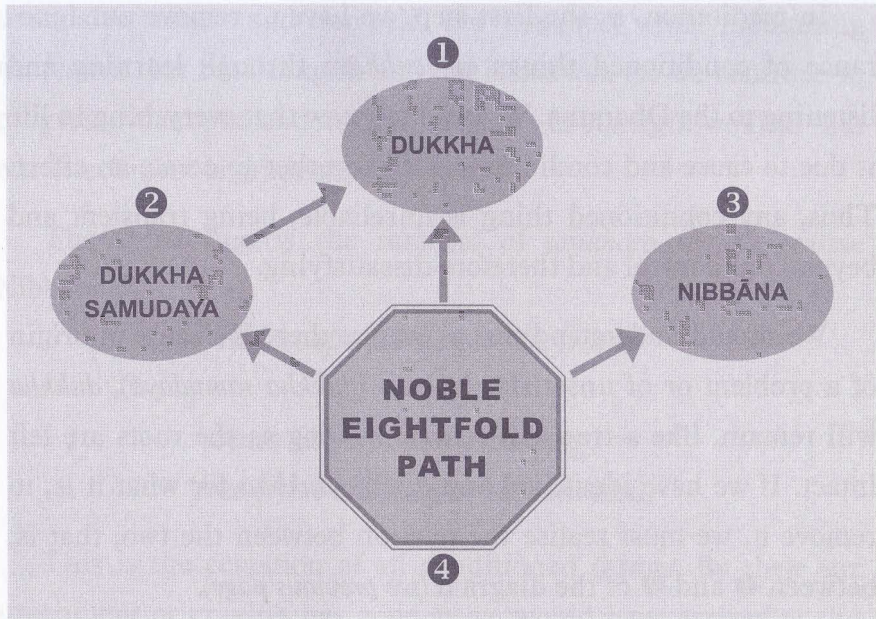
The Buddha through His own experience had understood and identified the problem of suffering as a start of the Noble Truths. He then realised what was to be done about it, and afterwards, what had been done. For our benefit, He had delineated these three steps in knowledge:

1. Knowledge of what is true (*sacca ñāṇa*)
2. Knowledge of what must be done (*kiicca ñāṇa*)
3. Knowledge of what has been done (*kata ñāṇa*)

This three-step process can be applied in any situation.

In step ❶, we must first identify the object — knowing that it's a camera we're having, as an example.

In step ❷: having identified the object as a camera, we find out how to use it.



Then in step ③, after having learnt how to use it, what has been done to take a picture.

In meditation, as the first step, we have to remove our ignorance of conditioned things or *sankhāra* through learning and listening to the Dhamma. We need to know that everything in life is due to cause and condition joining together to create an effect. Thus, any conditioned thing is unreliable, being transient and beyond our control and therefore dissatisfying.

We should understand that as long as there is a cause or origin of a problem or of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha samudaya*), *dukkha* will remain, like a tree will remain as long as the roots are left intact. If we have identified and dislike *dukkha* for what it is, to remove it, we must realise the relation between the two, that is, between ❶ and ❷ of the diagram (*see previous page*).

At the next step we try through the **Noble Eightfold Path** in meditation to find out the faults of conditioned things by seeing for ourselves the three universal characteristics of impermanence,

unsatisfactoriness and non-self. For instance, while meditating we realise that breathing in and out is *dukkha*. As we continue to progress, when our understanding grows in strength we find that our attachment is gradually lessened.

The third step is the removal of *sankhāra* as we realise Nibbāna:

*ni* (escape from, get out from)  
+  
*vana* (attachment, craving) =  
*free from craving or attachment.*

This is the cessation of all conditioned things. By then our attachment or craving has gone as we would have arrived at the cessation of suffering.

## THE END OF THE PATH: MAGGA



*Without vipassanā insight,  
and without reaching magga,  
we cannot see Nibbāna —  
the state of one who is free from  
craving or attachment.*

*A*s long as we have craving and other mental defilements, we are stuck in *samsāra*, stumbling in the darkness of ignorance.

*Magga* is composed of the eight factors of the Noble Path. Though it is usually translated as “path”, *magga* is actually an acronym of two words:



*Kilese marento (destroying mental defilements)*

+

*Nibbānam gacchati (goes to attain Nibbāna)*

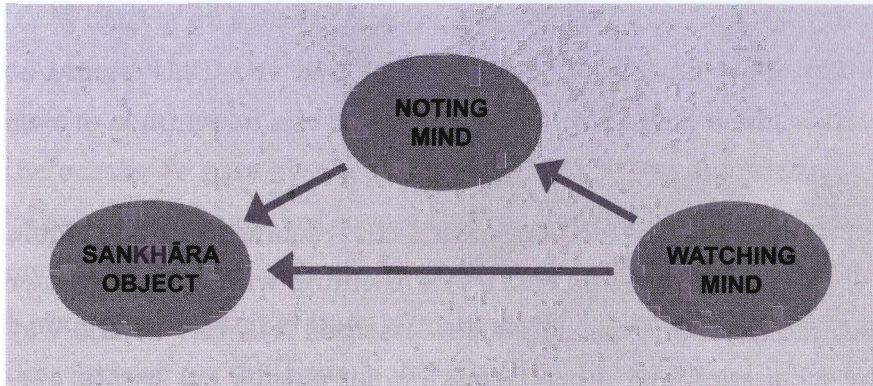
What it means is if you wish to attain Nibbāna, you must destroy your mental defilements of greed, anger and ignorance first in the process.

We begin with an object that has to be a present one, whatever it is. We cannot meditate on something that is not there. If anger is not present, can we meditate on it? We also cannot have more than one object or no concentration will result. For instance, if there is a pain in the leg and the head is itching, we have to choose between the two.

Eventually we get to a point in our *vipassanā* practice when, working together as a group, the eight path factors become very

strong. And the noting mind that is very strong now with this unity of factors traces the *sankhāra* object in meditation.

Then, following the noting mind, insight knowledge in the next mind arises that watches this process of mind noting the object, the rising-and-falling of the abdomen, for example. This watching mind contemplates both in the process of a pair of mind-and-matter arising and disappearing. At the stage of Nibbāna, the mind that is now very powerful traces the end of the rising-falling without losing the object. (In losing the object, that is, with no object, no mind can arise.) Seeing the end of the *sankhāra* object — that's Nibbāna, like the flash of a camera or laser. At this point all the mental defilements are burnt as we go beyond the conditioned state.



When we light a candle, four things happen all at once: light appears, darkness disappears, the wick and the wax starts to burn. *Magga* is like that. It removes the darkness of *avijjā* or ignorance, it destroys the mental defilements, and stops the *sankhāra* object. At that moment too, the Four Noble Truths are inherently comprehended for good as one realises a permanent state of freedom.

## USING THE BUDDHA'S YARDSTICK



**T**he fact that the Buddha started His teachings with the **Noble Eightfold Path** and ended His teachings with it 45 years later before His *parinibbāna* shows how essential it is. His Middle Way by meditation and other factors lie not outside but within ourselves: in human nature as qualities to be developed. We should improve these innate qualities in us by studying, listening to the Dhamma and practising meditation.

When young we went to school to study and be trained — even today we are still learning. In the same way we are like a precious stone that has to be cut, shaped and polished to bring out these precious qualities to shine within us: by using the Buddha's Middle Way as a guide and the eight Path factors as a tool.

Whatever we have no experience of we have to believe in or rely on others. Until our own realisation of the Dhamma, we would have to continue to ask how to get to our goal. And doubt is like the ocean. To pass over it is very difficult, as the knowledge to be gained for this is not acquired through book-learning or hearsay. Until we cross this ocean of doubt to become like Venerable Koṇḍañña, the first of Buddha's disciples to be enlightened at His first sermon on the Four Noble Truths — to become fully self-reliant and self-confident about the Dhamma — it is good to keep in mind the Buddha's yardstick:

*If a practice leads to the lessening and  
cessation of attachment and  
craving, hatred and delusion —  
leading to peace and Nibbāna — follow it!  
If it doesn't, then it is not the Buddha's Teaching.*

Whatever the Buddha taught can only lead to right understanding and realisation, removing attachment and worry. With such a criterion, we can tell whether any teaching is false or true, without having to rely on books or anyone to tell us. In this way we can keep to the Middle Way correctly, as sure as taking a train to reach our destination.

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*The answer may be just a book away!*

“Imagine someone is searching for some understanding, some answers to the confusion of life. This person knows that things aren’t quite right. There must be better ways to live one’s life than this. He or she searches and picks up yet another book and lo and behold finds the answer to his or her quest. ~THAT’S IT! ~ and life changes forever.”

~ Venerable Nāṇadassi

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