
THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

AN INTEGRATIVE BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Nguyen Thi Quyet¹, Pham Thi Lan^{2*} and Nguyen Thi Phuong¹

¹ *Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, 1 Vo Van Ngan Street,
Thu Duc City, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*

² *Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, 12 Nguyen Van Bao Street,
Go Vap, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*

(Received 10 September 2022, revised 26 September 2022)

Abstract

From a philosophical perspective, the Four Noble Truths are a profound expression of human emancipation, ethics and epistemology conveyed by Buddhism. The article analyses the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, highlighting the Buddhist philosophy of life, focusing more specifically on the suffering inherent to human life. The purpose of the study is to critically analyse core Buddhist philosophies pertaining to man's inner attitude in facing suffering, searching for the root cause of suffering, and providing a path to liberation for sentient beings. Our analysis, combined with contemporary assessments of the Four Noble Truths' significance and meaning, will help us gain new understandings and perspectives on Buddhism - an egalitarian religion that has been able to combine religious and scientific thinking into an integrative whole with a strong potential for human individuals and communities.

Keywords: Buddhism, ignorance, impermanence, no-self, The Four Noble Truths

1. Introduction

Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BC) was born in Lumbini (present-day Nepal) to the Shakya clan. After achieving enlightenment, Gautama assumed the name of 'Buddha' and became the founder of Buddhism [1-5; M. Siderits, *Buddha*, 14.02.2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/buddha/>]. Worried about the suffering of sentient beings, he left his wife and children to become a monk. Besides asceticism, Gautama practiced meditation for several decades, finally attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. He gave his first sermon on the Four Noble Truths in Sarnath [6]. In Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths play a fundamental role in the entire system of teachings from the original to its most modern branches [7]. Buddha often alluded to "...all the things I taught you in the Four Noble Truths" [8].

In general, the entire doctrine of the Four Noble Truths and the whole teaching of Buddhism revolves around suffering [9, 10]. Buddha saw that people of all eras will continue to be haunted by a common predicament - a cycle of

*Corresponding author, e-mail: phamthilan_llct@iu.edu.vn

suffering. This situation is predicated upon the widespread misunderstanding of the nature of human life. With a dialectical view of life, the nature of suffering is constantly changing because suffering arises and ceases and arises again in another form. Whether it is physical or psychological suffering, as long as people are subject to subjective and objective determination, they still have to endure suffering in one form or another. The emergence of the Four Noble Truths has helped increase human awareness of the nature of human life. From the perspective of Philosophy and religion, the Four Noble Truths have pointed out the nature, origin, clue and possibility of this common human predicament's transformation from suffering to liberation through the causal relationship between the world (Dukka - Samudaya) and the worldly existence's outside (Nirodha - Magga) as two inevitable sides of a contradictory reality taking place in the process of continuous movement, development and transformation of each person. According to the Four Noble Truths, people can create heaven or hell for themselves. The atheistic and equal-liberation path is a self-disciplined path, depending on each person's level of awareness and practical activities. It amounted to an ideological revolution against the theocratic tradition of Brahmanism in India then.

Our research will start by elucidating the important content of the Four Noble Truths, including Dukka, Samudaya, Nirodha, and Magga [9, 10]. The logic of our approach is to determine the nature of suffering (Dukka) and classify suffering, then apply the principle of dependent origination (paticcasamuppada) [11] to establish gnoseologically that the cause of suffering (Samudaya) is ignorance. After eliminating ignorance, people will overcome greed (raga), aversion (dvesha), and ignorance (avidya) by themselves through the "cessation of dukkha" [12] or Nirodha. From a Buddhist perspective, this appears to be the only path to liberation and reaching the Nirvana realm. The Noble Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering (Magga) [6, 13] consists of eight branches that continuously combine to cultivate the practitioner's body, mind, morality, wisdom and faith on the path to liberation. Our article contributes to a better understanding of the categories of the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths from a philosophical-religious perspective, along with contemporary assessments of the role and contributions of the Four Noble Truths to the Buddhist development.

2. Research methods

The Four Noble Truths are the fundamental doctrines of Buddhist philosophy containing many profound ideas that need to be analysed and interpreted while considering several different levels of meaning. To achieve the research purpose, the authors used a combination of carefully selected research methods. First, the authors used the method of dialectical materialism and historical materialism to study the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism from a philosophical-religious perspective. In addition, the authors used knowledge from different fields, such as history, culture, politics and society, to clarify the philosophical-religious issues of the Four Noble Truths in their historical

situatedness. This further enabled us to identify dialectical elements contained therein. The following research methods were used simultaneously: the method of going from the abstract to the concrete, the method of unifying the logic and the historical, analytical-synthetic approach, comparison and contrast, as well as inductive and deductive reasoning. Philosophical-religious issues were clarified by using interdisciplinary overlaps of Philosophy with religion, education, ethics, culture, and history.

3. The Four Noble Truths

3.1. *Suffering (Dukka)*

The Truth of Suffering (dukka) is the truth about suffering and its forms. From Buddha's point of view, suffering (dukka) is the universal experience and form of being human approached from the perspectives of ontology (impermanence, no-self) and epistemology (ignorance) as taught by Buddhism. Moreover, this is Buddha's first message to humankind under the Four Noble Truths [14].

- Impermanence (anitya) means impermanent, uncertain and ever-changing. That is the common characteristic of all existence.
- No-self (anatman) means there is no internal, immutable self (atman); rather, it is constantly changing according to the laws of birth, aging, illness, and death.
- Ignorance (avidya) is not knowing, not seeing things 'as they really are', so clinging to the illusion of self (atman) that seems to be permanent, without knowing that it is only no-self (anatman). This gives birth to suffering in greed, hatred, delusion, love, and anger.

Buddha preached: "Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering" [15].

So, the reason why people get stuck in the bondage of constant suffering is because of their own greed and craving. They want to stay forever, but the reality is constantly changing (due to impermanence, no-self). They always revolve in the cycle of birth - aging - illness - death until there is no such thing as self (atman) or selfness. Due to ignorance, sentient beings should not be able to see the impermanence, no-self of themselves and all things, so they are permanently attached to self. As a result, lust and thirst arise in human consciousness. Suffering is caused by mind-physiology, and human consciousness, such as separation from love and unsatisfactory demand. The combination of five aggregates causes suffering.

Buddhism has identified three following levels of suffering:

- (1) the suffering of *suffering* (Dukkha-dukkha): Buddhism believes that the sufferings of birth, aging, illness, and death are the fundamental changes of life in samsara. When a person is still in the cycle of birth and death, all

other forms of suffering result from the starting point (birth). In other words, life in the Buddhist concept is an existing reality of the cycle of birth and death; in the interval between those two turning points, there are many other sufferings that people have to bear. Therefore, it can be understood that suffering is natural suffering that everyone has to endure.

- (2) the suffering of *change* (Viparinama-dukkha): Buddhism holds that the experiences that we consider pleasure and joy are actually relative (impermanence) because the nature of things is constantly changing. Many things can make people happy and satisfied, but according to the impermanent law and change of things, they are the cause of human suffering.
- (3) the suffering of *existence* (Sankhara-dukkha): According to Buddhism, the existence of all things is due to the combination of causes and conditions, so there is only relative existence (impermanence, no-self). However, due to ignorance, people do not understand the nature of impermanence and no-self, mistakenly thinking of their actual existence (self) [16]. This leads them to develop delusion and attachment, which gives rise to suffering. The more people pursue their cravings, the more they suffer.

On that basis, Buddhism also divides suffering into eight types [17].

3.1.1. *Suffering of birth*

“Birth is already suffering; it is subject to physical and mental regulations and is governed by all laws and regulations in daily life. Even all species (ovulation, foetus, low birth, and biochemistry) that have a form at birth and achieve the image of a lifetime, and then be reborn are called birth and are completely miserable.” [18]

The suffering of birth is called birth suffering. Humans have been conscious since they were babies. Because there is consciousness, there is emotion. When I eat cold food, I feel like I am on ice. When I eat hot food, I feel burning. The foetus in the mother’s womb suffers from a narrow, dark, and dirty place. As soon as she was born, she cried. Since then, when cold, hot, hungry, thirsty, or bitten by mosquitoes or ants, they can only cry and cry, “Having suffering means that both the birth and the unborn child suffer and endure filth [...]” [18, p. 144].

3.1.2. *Suffering of aging*

People are subjected to aging; their body is worn out, and their spirit is weak, so they suffer physically and mentally. However, aging suffering is also natural human suffering. When getting old and weak, everyone suffers blurred vision, distracted ears, tired back, shaky legs, not feeling good tastes while eating, not sleeping well, memory is no longer clear, skin is dry and wrinkled, and teeth are aching, falling off gradually.

3.1.3. Suffering of sickness

Having a body means having a disease, from mild (external) diseases to serious (internal injuries). Patients not only suffer from physical pain but also worry about material and spiritual pain. Suffering is not only limited to oneself but also makes one's relatives miserable.

3.1.4. Suffering of death

Of the four phenomena of birth, aging, illness, and death, death is the one that scares people the most. It is suffering when death is near. When dying, the body is paralyzed, the spirit is panicked, shocked about a strange and terrible world, not knowing what to do and where to go. This situation engenders extreme anxiety.

3.1.5. Suffering of separation from what is pleasant

Separation is of two types - birth and death, like separation of love between husband and wife. It is the suffering of having to leave a loved one/thing/place that people miss every day. In a war situation, the pain of loss or separation is often associated with much pain of death, illness, and casualty caused by people killing each other.

3.1.6. Suffering of encountering what is unpleasant

People suffer when they have to deal with things they hate, such as dealing with hostile people and being afflicted by slander. These things make people sorrowful, fearful, and insecure. Alternatively, in a family, there are arguments and disagreements between parents and children, which causes suffering that stems from anger, hatred and sadness.

3.1.7. Suffering of not getting what one wants

In life, people have a lot of high hopes, dreams, and wishes. For example, the poor want to be rich, the ugly wish to be beautiful, and the unemployed wants a job. Desires and wishes that are not fulfilled are also suffering.

3.1.8. Suffering of the flourishing of the five aggregates

The human body is composed of the five aggregates (5 skandhas) [19], all of which are temporary. Together they form the body, mind, and appearance, including:

- material image, an impression (form due to the four elements: earth, water, fire, wind) (rupa);
- sensations (or feelings, received from Form) (vedana);
- perceptions, conception, cognition or discrimination (samjna);

- mental activity or formations (activities of body, speech and mind) (sankhara);
- consciousness (consciousness due to the impact of sensory factors with external factors) (vijnana).

The five aggregates combine to form a person. The mind is the combination of seven emotions (pleasure, anger, love, hate, sadness and desire) divided into four categories (feeling, perception, action, and consciousness).

The eight types of suffering cover both physical suffering (birth, aging, illness and death) and mental suffering (separation from what is pleasant, encountering what is unpleasant, not getting what one wants, the flourishing of the five aggregates) [20]. Everyone is equal in suffering; even the self-described Brahmins have to endure these sufferings. The human predicament encompasses a series of seemingly endless sufferings. As long as people's understanding is obscured by ignorance, they are bound and immersed in craving, greed, hatred, and delusion; they cannot free themselves from suffering.

"There will be a time when all oceans will dry up and disappear, the earth will be destroyed by fire, but the sentient beings' sufferings are bound in ignorance and lust, so they keep wandering around in the deep cycle of rebirth, never-ending." [21]

Furthermore, while sentient beings endure endless suffering, they still need to find the cause of their suffering.

3.2. The cause of suffering (*Samudaya*)

In the Noble Truths, the cause of suffering is explained according to the theory of dependent origination. Buddhism considers all things in the universe to be impermanent because they are always in flux like a waterfall, never stopping. Everything is related to each other. That stream of changes is beginningless, endless, without beginning, and without end. Buddha was consistent with the idea of dependent origination when searching for and explaining the causes of human suffering (*samudaya*).

Dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) [11, 22, 23] is a unique Buddhist theory that analyses the principle of self-arising and self-moving of the world, also known as the principle of 'dependence on the origin'. This theory holds that all things depend on each other to give birth, exist, develop, and then perish. This is a scientific and objective view of the world as a living whole that constantly moves on its own in interactions with each other by condition (*pratyaya*) [24, 25]. Buddhism classified *pratyaya* into four types: *hetu-pratyaya*, *samanantara-pratyaya*, *alambana-pratyaya*, *adhipati-pratyaya* [24]:

- (1) condition *qua cause* (*hetu-pratyaya*) is a condition closest to that of a grain of rice (*hetu-pratyaya*) to the rice plant;
- (2) *equal-immediate* condition (*samanantara-pratyaya*) is the unbroken continuum of the causes and conditions necessary for the arising, maturity and existence of results;
- (3) condition *qua object* (*ālambana-pratyaya*) are the conditions that strengthen the relationship to create results;

- (4) condition of *dominance* (adhipati-pratyaya) is the additional and strengthening conditions for the cause and effect; for example, fertilizer and water are conditions of dominance for the rice grain.

Buddhism applies the theory of dependent origination to generalize the causes of suffering. Accordingly, all things cannot overcome the nature of no-self and impermanence. No-self means no permanent and unchanging self (or things) exists in the human being. Because 'self' is due to a temporary combination of many factors, it is essentially just an 'imaginary' belief. There is an appearance of 'self' when all conditions are met, but intrinsic nature is 'emptiness'. 'Impermanence' is a non-permanent attribute that always passes and disappears from all things. Everything (dharma) is an 'imaginary' reality because they are constantly changing (impermanent), so what is perceived is not real. Things are no longer what they are then; what can be seen and described is just an illusion [26].

Suffering is not caused by Gods or superhumans outside. While Buddhism lists ten causes of human suffering, the main among them is each person's 'ignorance'. Sentient beings do not understand the dependent origination and the nature of emptiness of all things, so they create their karma:

- (1) greed: greed is bottomless. Get one and desire ten; get ten and desire a hundred. In short, because of greed, sentient beings are stuck in countless sufferings.
- (2) hatred (anger): When encountering scenes against the will of the heart, anger emerges as a fierce fire that burns people. Because of anger, parents and family are separated, and compatriots become hostile.
- (3) delusion: making people unable to see the truth, not being able to judge the good and the bad. Delusion has caused countless sins, including self-harm and harming others without knowing it. Moreover, because of delusion, greed becomes bottomless, and anger does not abate. Human beings driven by sentiment can commit all evil things because of delusion.
- (4) conceit (arrogance): seeing himself as essential but looking down on everyone. Due to arrogance, sentient beings do many wrong things, then blessings are reduced, and sins are increased.
- (5) doubt: is not having faith. Doubt hinders one's progress and prevents all valuable things, making one's life miserable and inescapable.
- (6) blind faith (ignorance).
- (7) extreme prejudice.
- (8) conservative: is stubborn, not willing to change.
- (9) wrong view: adhering to the wrong way, contrary to the truth, contrary to the law of cause and effect.
- (10) precepts forbidden: following the prohibition of heresy.

It can be said that samudaya is a fabulous Buddha's accomplishment about the causes leading to human suffering. Among the causes, Buddha emphasized desire (craving) as the primary (direct) cause of suffering, which is the desire to exist and enjoy all the pleasures. Overall, Buddhism believes that people continue to be immersed in the ocean of suffering, unable to escape the flow of samsara. Reincarnation and Karma are always in an interactive

relationship; one creates the other and vice versa. Karma itself is also the result of many other causes (chains), such as ignorance which gives rise to lust and greed, then causes suffering [27, 28].

According to the theory of dependent origination, there are many causes of human affliction (suffering), and there is always a close correlation between them. The Buddha generalized them into a chain of cause and effect called the twelve links of dependent origination [29-31; Rigpa Shedra, *Twelve links of dependent origination*, 13.12.2020, https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Twelve_links_of_dependent_origination], leading to the sea of suffering in the past, present, and future lives, consisting of:

- (1) ignorance (avidya): blind faith, lack of understanding. Ignorance is the cause of suffering [32].
- (2) actions/formation (saṃskara): due to ignorance, formation (body, speech and mind) create karma.
- (3) consciousness (vijñana): if there is action (saṃskara), there is consciousness, including six consciousnesses: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, tongue consciousness, nose consciousness, body consciousness and mind consciousness [33]. Consciousness is generated from action (saṃskara) to create karma and gives birth to a foetus in the mother's womb.
- (4) name and form (nama-rupa): The mind distinguishes between Name and Form because of consciousness. Name (nama) is only attributed to sentient beings. Thanks to the discriminating mind (name) and the discriminative scene (Form: rupa) that rely on each other to create a person with a whole body and consciousness.
- (5) six entrances (ṣaḍayatana: the five sense organs and the mind): Thanks to nama-rupa, there is an interaction between the six external factors (Six Entrances) and the internal senses, creating awareness, that is, the six senses. Six Entrances are: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. These Six Entrances are generated from the Name and Form. The six corresponding objects are: visible form, sound, odour, taste, tangible things, thoughts and ideas.
- (6) contact (sparsa): when we grow, the Six Entrances are completed, and sensibility is developed. And we are able to discern six corresponding objects (visible form, sound, odour, taste, tangible things, thoughts, and ideas). This stage is called 'Contact' [33]. There are six contacts (eye contact, ear contact, nose contact, tongue contact, body contact, and mind contact).
- (7) sensation (vedana): receptor (the perception of the outside world) is generated from the Six Contacts. That is, the feeling stems from the six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind).
- (8) desire/craving (trṣṇa): the psychological state of longing and desire due to the interaction of the senses with external influences. Desire (craving) is generated from Sensation; there are three types of craving: craving for sensing (kama-tanha), craving for becoming (bhava-tanha), and craving for non-becoming (vibhava-tanha).

- (9) clinging/grasping (upadana): the grasp of the experience includes four types: sense- pleasure clinging (kamupadana), wrong-view clinging (ditthupadana), rites-and-rituals clinging (silabbatupadana), self-doctrine clinging (attavadupadana) [*Tibetan Buddhist Encyclopedia, Upādāna*, 30.12.2014, <http://tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Up%C4%81d%C4%81na>]. Clinging (grasping) is generated from desire.
- (10) existence/becoming (bhava): the mind affirms the individual's existence from birth to adulthood, including sex, material possession, and immaterial existence. Becoming (desire to exist) is generated from clinging.
- (11) birth/rebirth (jati): the appearance of the aggregates and achievements of the so-called birth. Birth is born from existence.
- (12) old age and death (Jara-maraṇa): getting old and weak, debilitated and dying. The aggregates over time perish, and the body disintegrates and dies (old age and death).

In this connection, Buddha said to Ananda: “Now this, Ananda. Because of this, there are causes and conditions. Because of ignorance, there is formation; because of formations, there is consciousness. Because of consciousness, there is name-and-form, because of name-and-form as condition there are six senses, because of six senses there is contact, because of contact, there is sensation, conditioned by feeling, conditioned by craving; when conditioned by craving, there is grasping, by grasping as the condition for existence, conditioned by becoming, there is birth, conditioned by birth, aging and death, grief, suffering, and pain, concentrated as one great fire. That is the cause and effect of great suffering (body).” [34]

Each cause (link) of the twelve-links chain is both a cause and an effect, so they are dependent and related to each other. Those twelve links are an interactive circle in a unified continuity. The human being is a dharma in the Universe, so it is both the cause and the harmonious result of those twelve causes. Buddhism's twelve causes and conditions are aimed primarily at helping sentient beings get rid of the afflictions of life. Each link is both the effect of the previous cause and the cause of the following effect, so they are dependent and related to each other. The twelve causes and conditions model the process of reincarnation of human life and death as karma created and received by each person. This teaching convincingly analyses that the source of all suffering and samsara is self-created by each person's karma [35], thereby aiming to help sentient beings find a self-conscious path out of suffering. The Buddha showed the possibility of cessation of suffering by a gradual elimination of the causes in the twelve links of dependent origination. Condition is always born in the forward direction (birth), creating ignorance and suffering for sentient beings. On the contrary, if sentient beings actively cultivate their self in the opposite direction, they will stop the causes of suffering and be liberated to attain Nirvana.

3.3. The cessation of suffering (Nirodha)

The Buddha used nirodha (निरोधा) in the Four Noble Truths to mean ‘cessation’ or stopping all suffering. The Cessation of Suffering (nirodha) is the

truth of liberation or cessation, extinguishing defilements, and extinguishing all causes leading to suffering. Nirodha is the Cessation of Suffering, sometimes considered synonymous with 'Nirvana' [36-38].

The Buddha reverses the twelve-links cycle of dependent origination to eliminate the first link (ignorance) - the root of all cravings. According to cause-and-effect Buddhism logic, once the first cause of suffering is eradicated, suffering is also eradicated.

"Ignorance is destroyed, so Action is destroyed. Name and Form are destroyed, and Consciousness is destroyed. Consciousness is destroyed, so Six Entrances are destroyed. Six Entrances are destroyed, so Contact is destroyed. Contact is destroyed, so Sensation is destroyed. Sensation is destroyed, so Craving is destroyed. Furthermore, Craving is destroyed, so Clinging should be destroyed. Clinging is destroyed, so the life (birth) should be destroyed. Life is destroyed, so Old age and death should be eliminated from grief." [34, p. 34-35]

According to the Cessation of Suffering (nirodha), when people eliminate the causes of suffering, they also reach the state of enlightenment and liberation (moksha). Therefore, it is impossible not to mention liberation when it comes to Buddhist teachings. These are two categories in a dialectical relationship, reciprocating with each other, contributing to highlighting the philosophy of suffering and ending suffering in the Four Noble Truths.

Liberation is the state beyond all ties of the phenomenal world and self-desire. The cessation extinguishes the fire of desire and attains the state of absolute purity and peace. The Cessation of Suffering outlines the paths of self-discipline to cultivate morality, strictly observe the precepts, and practice meditation (spiritual experimentation) to attain enlightenment (bodhi). The Buddha identified the threefold training (trisikṣa): *śīla* (discipline or ethical living), *śamādhi* (concentration), and *prajñā* (insight or wisdom) [39, 40]. He believed that human beings are completely capable of destroying their own desires, breaking self-grasping, and eradicating ignorance, not by divine or superhuman gifts. When people are freed from their attachments, they will reach the state of Nirvana. Buddhism's Nirvana (a state of being, one's spirit) is not quite like a Christian paradise (an actual place, an afterlife) [41]. Nirvana is a state of mind that is completely serene, tranquil, lucid, free from agitation, eliminating craving, eradicating ignorance, and ending all suffering.

In short, Cessation of Suffering is the step-by-step practice of liberation and then attaining Nirvana. It can be achieved only when the ignorance about self is eliminated, thereby eliminating greed, hatred and delusion. The mind naturally will not be bound by defilements, attachments and delusions, which then enables it to reach Nirvana. Buddhism does not consider Nirvana as an object of conceptual thinking or language. However, it considers it a state of absolute peace and happiness when the mind is free of greed, hatred, delusion, while transcending verification, and description. It is also the consistent expression of emptiness in the concept of liberation in the spirit of the middle way, 'form-emptiness' of Buddhism.

3.4. The middle way (Magga)

The Middle Way is developed when there is full awareness of the three truths above. If people do not look at the real suffering in life, people cannot find the way. This shows, once again, that the Buddhist Dependent Origination is always consistent relative to its content. The Middle Way has shown the way for people to liberate themselves. The Noble Eightfold Path that the Buddha experienced and learned can help people achieve full enlightenment and liberation. These eight righteous methods are the actions of the eyes, mouth, thoughts and even the body, which also have a chain effect. Right understanding to correctly recognize all things that are not mistaken belongs to Right View (*Samma ditthi*). Right thought/intention (*Samma sankappa*) does not bring evil thoughts that are harmful to others. The mouth always speaks truthfully, gently, without intentionally putting anything in vain (*Right Speech Samma vaca*). Action includes righteous deeds, *Right action (Samma kammanta)*. They choose jobs suitable to their ability that do not harm others in making a living (*Righteous livelihood: Samma ajiva*). Always be diligent in pushing the work to good results (*Right Effort: Samma vayama*). Set your mind on the truths (*Righteous mindfulness: Samma sati*). Always aiming for good thoughts and practical things in their life is *Right Concentration (Samma samadhi)*. These eight valuable methods can be immediately applied to personal practice life. Buddhism believes that this is the only true path as a guideline for a meaningful and peaceful life.

The Noble Eightfold Path is a path that has eight successively combined parts and is practiced in all eight parts evenly. These eight consecutive steps are aimed at simultaneously performing the proper cultivation in three aspects, Discipline (*Sila*), Concentration (*Samadhi*), and Wisdom (*Prajna*). It can also be seen as a circular motion because it begins with Right View and ends with Right View. The persistent practice of the threefold partition (Discipline, Concentration, Wisdom) will help people go on the path of liberation. If one lacks morality (Discipline), firm faith (Concentration), and understanding (Wisdom), one will fall more and more into suffering and forever in *samsara*.

4. Some contemporary observations on the Four Noble Truths' role

4.1. Buddhist core teachings about life

Suffering is expressed with a concentrated focus in the Four Noble Truths. In addition, the cessation of suffering is the ultimate goal of Buddha's entire teaching. In his teaching, Buddha completely eliminated the divine element - the supreme power of the Universe - in reference to suffering. It can be affirmed that suffering is the most common reality associated with daily human life that everyone encounters and gets stuck with because no one can escape old age, sickness, and death. Despite its heavy focus on suffering, the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths does not show a pessimistic mood or boredom with the worldly life, nor is it the stalemate of people living in a fleeting, transient world.

The entire content of the Four Noble Truths exudes the spirit of searching for the root cause of suffering and the way to ending suffering. The results of Buddha's contemplation show that the origin of suffering is not the arrangement of some mysterious transcendent force, but it is hidden in the inappropriate relationship between man's outlook on life and the Universe. It is also implicit in the desires and aspirations of people that go against the laws of all things. In other words, it is due to the unbalanced relationship between spirit and matter, subjectivity and objectivity.

4.2. The red thread throughout the development of Buddhism

At its inception, Buddhism was a movement against the theocracy of Brahmanism and harsh caste discrimination. With that in mind, Buddhism became an equal religion for everyone, with no distinction in spiritual ability and liberation between castes. Based on the principle of dependent origination, Buddha realized that, in essence, all castes, including Brahmins, are equal in terms of suffering when under the influence of the law of impermanence (birth, aging, illness and death) and psycho-physiological laws (greed, hatred, delusion, love, joy). Thus, the possibility of being free from suffering will also be equal when it is known that the cause of suffering is not determined by any God but by each person creating his/her own karma through ignorance and a series of causes. Once people understand that the law of impermanence and human nature is no-self, liberation is the way to go against the Twelve-links to eradicate ignorance, eliminate birth, aging, and death and end the cycle of suffering. The method of ending suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, which combines the cultivation of morality, faith and wisdom (the threefold training).

From that initial, unified starting point, Buddhism experienced a historical splintering into factions, but the Four Noble Truths continued to serve as the theoretical basis for both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Both acknowledge the primary content of the Four Noble Truths, including Dukkha, Samudaya, Nirodha, and Magga, and all take the Four Noble Truths as the core. Accordingly, everyone can decide their own path to liberation. There is no God to help with it; instead, people must achieve it with their own efforts. The Buddha is only the one who outlines the path and methods. Each person trains, becomes enlightened, and frees himself from suffering by following Buddha's path. This has made Buddhism different from theocratic religions. The Buddhist philosophy expressed in the Four Noble Truths is that people need to rely on themselves for liberation - by their own light. They are to take the righteous dharma as a lamp, take the righteous dharma as their refuge, and not rely on anything else. This is an honest reflection of Buddha's life of seeking, practicing, and witnessing. Therefore, the Four Noble Truths are both the experience of a master on the path of seeking the truth and the master's teaching to his disciples.

The Four Noble Truths have a vital place in the Buddhist system of thought, a deep understanding of which is synonymous with attaining enlightenment in Buddhism. Because not understanding those four noble truths will cause sentient beings to roll around forever in the cycle of birth and death.

The Four Noble Truths are considered the Buddha's overall view of human suffering. Having to be aware of suffering, people can search for the cause of suffering. From there, people can create a virtuous life by their own will and efforts, accumulate goodness, and advance towards liberation.

4.3. A concentrated expression of the thinking style of Buddhist teachings

4.3.1. First

Using harmful thinking methods to approach issues about the Universe and human nature. This is expressed boldly through concepts such as impermanence (anitya), no-self (anatman), cessation, abandonment, no-speech, and no-concept. 'No-self' and 'impermanence' refers to the nature of emptiness and the impermanent movement of humans and the Universe. Furthermore, cessation, abandonment, no-speech, and no-concept are the cultivation methods for people to liberation. The Four Noble Truths affirm that the source of human suffering misunderstands the universal law (impermanence), and human beings only really exist in the relationship; there is no permanent self (no-self). This also means that when people deeply realize the impermanent universe and their own changing existence, they will realize the origin of suffering and will be free from suffering.

4.3.2. Second, introspective, self-aware thinking

This is the fundamental difference between Buddhism compared to other religions. Buddha noticed that most people yearn for happiness and look outward to seek it. So people mistake the happiness obtained from extraneous material such as money, fame and houses as real. Therefore, they get stuck and bored once these material things are gone. Accordingly, Buddha pointed out that happiness must originate from within and not from without. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism have pointed out the origin, cause, and way to eliminate human suffering, all related to the human mind. Buddhism believes that each person needs to look inward and transform their mind; the outer world also changes when the mind changes. Buddhism focuses on leading people to follow the path of inner self-balancing and liberation. The positive value of this method is to emphasize personal experience and effort instead of external knowledge of the world. Through the Four Noble Truths, Buddhism holds that one can be freed from suffering by practicing a virtuous life through moral cultivation, meditation, and deepening thoughts into own inner self.

4.3.3. Third, equal thinking and limit theocracy

All Buddhist teachings show the spirit of entering the world, reducing theocracy. That is the basis for affirming that Buddhism has brought religion and equality back to people. When considering that everyone is equal in suffering and the possibility of liberation, Buddhism has pointed out that the way to

liberation is by the person returning to himself, realized by ethical living (sila), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (prajna). This process belongs to human practice, not to Gods or supernatural beings. Buddha always emphasized the active role of people in 'making a living': (1) adequate means, i.e. having a legitimate occupation; (2) protection and preservation ultimately, i.e. not to lose the fruits of labour; (3) good knowledge, that is, having the correct understanding of wholesome deeds and avoiding unwholesome deeds; (4) whole righteous life, that is, know how to control life, to do good deeds and make offerings. This amounts to the rule of treating people with people in which self is the center of all relationships. "The East is the parents; the South is the brother, the West is the wife and children, the North is the friend, the bottom is a servant, and the above is a religious teacher. Relationships must have two-way balance, mutual respect, both obligations and interests, and cannot be one-sided." [42, p. 30]

Buddhism has focused on people's inner self with a profound philosophy of life, awakening rather than dealing with external relationships; thus, Buddhism maximized personal autonomy in moral practice. This proves that Buddhism is a religion with 'atheistic tendencies' [43-45], not accepting the creation, control, or judgment of any supernatural being. The Universe and all things are created by the cause (hetu) compatibility with condition (pratyaya), which creates the effect or result (vipaka), and then from the effect (vipaka) becomes another cause, so on in the impermanent movement of birth and death. By persistent practice, man frees himself without needing the salvation of Gods [46], and of course, "the Buddha is not revered as a god" [47]. This is a different outlook on life that shows the humane and progressive spirit of Buddhism (journey to freeing) compared to other theocratic religions (Christianity, Islam). 'Progressive' here primarily refers to the dynamic/evolutionary nature of Buddhism is evolving and assuming full responsibility for its liberation. This process exhibits a kind of 'progress' based on the ability of the subject to implement experientially Buddha's teaching and practice. Facing suffering, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but realistic. The Buddhist view of life strives to remain objective and always tries to find the cause of suffering, thereby showing the potential way to peace and happiness.

In a nutshell, the Four Noble Truths are meant to be the philosophical-religious reasoning about suffering, its origin, and the guiding paths of self-awareness, thereby contributing to the creation of human life, a society in which people know how to visualize selflessness, surpassing themselves. The Four Noble Truths are also the journey of life's experience from oneself to return to oneself, from the compassion of human suffering to the eternal beauty and peace of Nirvana.

5. Conclusions

In the historical, economic, political, and social context of ancient Indian civilization, marked by harsh caste distinctions that oppressed people, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism met the spiritual needs of the people in a new and

surprising way. It reflected on the omnipresent phenomenon of human suffering and actively opposed the caste system. At the same time, the Four Noble Truths, with the policy of rejecting divine authority and building faith in human beings, opposed the domination of the Vedas and Brahmin teachings, aiming for freedom, justice and equality.

The Four Noble Truths play an essential role in the Buddhist doctrinal system, the theoretical basis for forming sects in Buddhism. Through the Soles, Buddha showed people the nature of human life. The Truth of Suffering (dukkha) has pointed out two types of suffering: natural suffering (hunger, thirst, cold, illness) and psychological suffering (separation from pleasure, encountering unpleasant things). The cause of suffering (samudaya) indicates that ignorance is the root cause of human suffering. Nirodha (the cessation of suffering) is a state of peace and happiness when people end their greed, hatred, and delusion, known as Nirvana. The middle way (magga) is the path or method of eliminating defilements (the eightfold path). Therefore, it can also be affirmed that the Four Noble Truths philosophy covers all major tenets of Buddhist philosophical thought; it deals with ontological and epistemological issues, worldview, and human life. Buddhism is not a harmful, pessimistic religion but a realistic one with a profound sense of humanity and a positive outlook on life in general. It is not a religion that only deals with escapism but also with the secular. The Four Noble Truths are not only theoretical and philosophical thinking but also a philosophy of action and practice, showing people the ultimate truths. At birth, it is human nature to be suffering, the cause of suffering, and the way to end suffering to achieve liberation. Buddhist philosophy offers a way to attain liberation that is quite different from the philosophical schools of the time. Buddhism does not agree with the ascetic practice, forcing the body to achieve the purity of the soul but integrates one instead into the absolute being. Buddhism advocates accepting real life with all the joys and sufferings of life. Through the Four Noble Truths, Buddhism emphasizes the path of daily cultivation and meditation practice.

References

- [1] H. Bai, A. Cohen, M. Miyakawa and T. Falkenberg, *Learning: Research and Practice*, **4(1)** (2018) 12-28.
- [2] R.M. Gross, *Buddhism*, in *Her Voice, Her Faith: Women Speak on World Religions*, K.K. Young & A. Sharma (eds.), Routledge, London, 2003, 59-98.
- [3] B.P. Bista, *SIRJANĀ - A Journal on Arts and Art Education*, **6(1)** (2019) 46-53.
- [4] D., Denver, *The Dharma in DNA: Insights at the Intersection of Biology and Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, 224.
- [5] K.P. Wasnik, *Buddha on Happiness*, Blue Rose Publishers, Delhi, 2021, 262.
- [6] M.W. King, *Changan to India*, in *In the Forest of the Blind: The Eurasian Journey of Faxians Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2022, 17-33.
- [7] S. Dhiman, *Buddhist Perspectives on Personal Fulfillment and Workplace Flourishing*, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Fulfillment*, S. Dhiman, G. Roberts & J. Crossman (eds.), Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2018, 1-32.

- [8] Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, *Majjhima Nikāya*, Buddhist Association, Ho Chi Minh City, 1994, 409-410.
- [9] P.V. Dhammavajiro, K. Vaisopha and P. Srinonyang, *Journal of Roi Kaensarn Academi*, **5(2)** (2020) 256-270.
- [10] L. Fernando, *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, **39(2)** (2017) 57-68.
- [11] P. Kumar, *Patīccasamuppāda: The Theory of Dependent Origination: A Scientific Means of Changing Outlook and Behaviour*, in *Transition Strategies for Sustainable Community Systems: Design and Systems Perspectives*, A.K.J.R. Nayak (ed.), Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2019, 51-56.
- [12] J. Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness*, **7(1)** (2016) 277-278.
- [13] M. Aung, *Journal of International Buddhist Studies*, **12(2)** (2022) 28-40.
- [14] T.K. Aich, *Indian J. Psychiat.*, **55(Suppl. 2)** (2013) S165-S170.
- [15] R.L. Wicks (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Schopenhauer*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, 338.
- [16] W. Oh, *J. Relig. Health*, (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01437-w>.
- [17] D. Lopez, *Buddhism, the Pandemic, and the Demise of the Future Tense*, in *Being Human during COVID*, K.A. Hass (ed.), University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2021, 117-121.
- [18] T.Q. Nhuan, *The brief Buddhist studies*, Vol. 1, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi, 2004, 175-176.
- [19] P.P. Gokhale, *Religions*, **12(12)** (2021) 1081.
- [20] S.S. Ho, Y. Nakamura and J.E. Swain, *Hypothesis and Theory*, **11** (2021), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.603385>.
- [21] Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies, Hanoi, 1993, 203.
- [22] D. Cummiskey and A. Hamilton, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, **24(1)** (2017) 1-37.
- [23] K. Javanaud, *J. Indian Philos.*, **46(4)** (2018) 773-803.
- [24] K.L. Dhammajoti, *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.682>.
- [25] D. Arnold, *4. Can Consciousness Be Explained? Buddhist Idealism and the Hard Problem in Philosophy of Mind*, in *Philosophy's Big Questions: Comparing Buddhist and Western Approaches*, S.M. Emmanuel (ed.), Columbia University Press, New York, 2021, 97-128.
- [26] H.X. Dang, *Buddhism and the mind*, Labor Publishing House, Hanoi, 2014, 54.
- [27] A.S. Grant, *What Exactly Are We Trying to Accomplish? The Role of Desire in Transhumanist Visions*, in *Religion and Human Enhancement*, T.J. Trothen & C. Mercer (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017, 121-137.
- [28] V. Lysenko, *The Problem of Qualia: Perspectives on the Buddhist Theories of Experience*, in *Self, Culture and Consciousness: Interdisciplinary Convergences on Knowing and Being*, S. Menon, N. Nagaraj & V.V. Binoy (eds.), Springer Singapore, Singapore, 2017, 303-318.
- [29] J. Shi, *The Path to Liberation*, in *Mapping the Buddhist Path to Liberation: Diversity and Consistency Based on the Pāli Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas*, J. Shi (ed.), Springer Singapore, Singapore, 2021, 21-50.
- [30] J. Shi, *The Sequential Process: Gradual Training*, in *Mapping the Buddhist Path to Liberation: Diversity and Consistency Based on the Pāli Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas*, J. Shi (ed.), Springer Singapore, Singapore, 2021, 81-114.
- [31] C.-f. Yü, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Zhuohong and the Late Ming Synthesis*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, 5-37.

- [32] B. Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, Vol. 1, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi, 1994, 331.
- [33] Y. Cao, *J. Indian Philos.*, **50(2)** (2022) 201-222.
- [34] Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, *Digha Agama*, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003, 218.
- [35] R.P.K. Whitley, *Philos. East West*, **55(1)** (2005) 15-32.
- [36] G.J. Ferguson, *Buddhism*, in *Rituals and Practices in World Religions: Cross-Cultural Scholarship to Inform Research and Clinical Contexts*, D.B. Yaden, D. Bryce, Y. Zhao, K. Peng & A.B. Newberg (eds.), Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2020, 59-71.
- [37] A.C.v. Gorder and L. Balani, *Fragrant Rivers of Wisdom: An Invitation to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene (OR), 2021, 187.
- [38] L. Beng Keong, *Prajñā Vihāra: Journal of Philosophy Religion*, **22(2)** (2021) 83-93.
- [39] W.L. Mikulas, *Buddhist Ethics, Spiritual Practice, and the Three Yanas*, in *Handbook of Ethical Foundations of Mindfulness*, S. Stanley, R.E. Purser & N.N. Singh (eds.), Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2018, 101-119.
- [40] S. Kalra, G. Priya, E. Grewal, T.T. Aye, B.K. Waraich, T. SweLatt, T. Khun, M. Phanvarine, S. Sutta and U. Kaush, *Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism*, **22(6)** (2018) 806-811.
- [41] R.B. Arrowood, K.E. Vail III and C.R. Cox, *Int. J. Psychol. Relig.*, **32(2)** (2022) 89-126.
- [42] T.T. Hoang, *Philos. Rev.*, **7(1)** (2002) 30-35.
- [43] R.R. Covell, *Am. Presbyterian.*, **71(4)** (1993) 233-242.
- [44] J.E. Smith, *The Religions Proper and Quasi-Religions*, in *Quasi-Religions: Humanism, Marxism and Nationalism*, J.E. Smith (ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1994, 1-14.
- [45] H. Wai-lu, *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, **4(4)** (1973) 4-72.
- [46] J.T. Bixby, *The Biblical World*, **12(5)** (1898) 307-317.
- [47] W. Herbrechtsmeier, *J. Sci. Stud. Relig.*, **32(1)** (1993) 1-18.