

The *Ekottarika-āgama* Parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* and the Four (Noble) Truths

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ABSTRACT: The present article offers a translation of the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, followed by a discussion of a significant difference to be found between the Pāli and the *Ekottarika-āgama* versions of this discourse. This difference supports the suggestion that at an earlier time references to the four noble truths in this and other discourses may have been without the qualification ‘noble’.

INTRODUCTION

The *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*¹ treats a subject that lies at the very heart of early Buddhist philosophy and practice: the four noble truths. The Pāli version of this discourse has altogether three Chinese counterparts. One of these three Chinese parallels is found in the *Madhyama-āgama* collection translated under the leadership of Gautama Saṅghadeva.² Another parallel is attributed to An Shi-gao (安世高), whose opus belongs to the earliest stages of translation activity in China.³

The third Chinese parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* occurs in the *Ekottarika-āgama*,⁴ a discourse collection probably translated by Zhu Fo-nian (竺佛念), based on a text recited from memory by Dharmanandī. The identity of the translator of this collection is uncertain, since it is not entirely clear if the translation now extant in Chinese has only been revised by Gautama Saṅghadeva, or whether it is an actual retranslation undertaken by him, a retranslation that then replaced the earlier translation by Dharmanandī and Zhu Fo-nian.⁵

1. MN 141 at MN III 248-252.

2. MĀ 31 at T I 467a-469c, parts of which have been translated by Minh Chau (1991: 96-8, 122-126).

3. T 32 at T I 814b-816c. Harrison (1997: 277) lists T 32 among translations by An Shi-gao that may stem from an *Ekottarika-āgama* collection. On the opus of An Shi-gao cf. also Harrison (2002: 4).

4. EĀ 27.1 at T II 643a-c.

5. T 2145 at T LV 71b29; T 2146 at T LV 127c29; T 2153 at T LV 422b6; and T 2154 at T LV 511b15 attribute the *Ekottarika-āgama* translation to Dharmanandī (and Zhu Fo-nian); while according T 2034 at T XLIX 70c Gautama Saṅghadeva retranslated the *Ekottarika-āgama*; cf. also Bagchi (1927: 159, 337); Enomoto (1986: 19); Lamotte (1967: 105); Lü (1963: 242); Mayeda (1985: 102);

The latter suggestion is not easy to reconcile with the considerable differences in translation terminology found between the *Madhyama-āgama* and the *Ekottarika-āgama* collections. Though to translate an Indic text into Chinese was usually undertaken as a co-operative effort of a group of translators, and the person officially responsible for the translation may at times have mainly acted as a guarantor for the authenticity of the Indic original,⁶ one would nevertheless expect a basic degree of consistency in the translation terminology employed in two *Āgama* translations undertaken under the supervision of the same translator. This is not the case for the *Madhyama-āgama* and the *Ekottarika-āgama*, as these two collections differ considerably from each other in their translation terminology. In the case of the parallels to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, for example, the *Madhyama-āgama* and the *Ekottarika-āgama* versions differ from each other in the way they render proper names like Jeta's Grove and Sāriputta,⁷ or in the way they translate a standard expression like 'right intention' (*sammā saṅkappa*).⁸ Such differences are not isolated cases, but are common between these two collections and seem to go beyond the variations that the terminology employed by a particular translator might show during successive stages of his translation activities. In view of this, it would be more natural to attribute the translation of these two collections to different translators.

The school affiliation of the *Ekottarika-āgama* is also an issue still open to discussion. What can positively be said about this collection, however, is that the *Ekottarika-āgama* shows the recurrent influence of early Mahāyāna thought.⁹

Waldschmidt (1980: 169 n. 168); and Yin-shun (1983: 91). It is also not clear to me on what Gautama Saṅghadeva would have based such a retranslation, since whereas in the case of the *Madhyama-āgama* his translation was based on a written original read out to him by Saṅgharakṣa, cf. T I 809b26, Zhu Fo-nian translated the *Ekottarika-āgama* based on an original Dharmanandi had memorized, cf. T LV 10b25, and there is no indication that Gautama Saṅghadeva had also memorized this collection.

6. Zacchetti (1996: 352) explains that Chinese translations undertaken during this period were the outcome of a tripartite group effort that involved a principal translator, an interpreter and redactor(s); cf. also Boucher (1998: 487). Forte (1984: 316) explains that every translation was 'registered under the name of a single person, usually the actual guarantor of the text, either because he had brought the Sanskrit text to China or else because he knew it by heart ... This need to make one person responsible often meant that the actual contribution of other members of the team tended to be unacknowledged'.
7. MĀ 31 at T I 467b1: 勝林給孤獨園 (*Sheng-lin Ji-gu-du-yuan*) against EĀ 27.1 at T II 643a26: 祇樹給孤獨園 (*Qi-shu Ji-gu-du-yuan*); and MĀ 31 at T I 467b13: 舍梨子 (*She-li-zi*) against EĀ 27.1 at T II 643b4: 舍利弗 (*She-li-fu*).
8. MĀ 31 at T I 469a14: 正志 (*zheng zhi*) against EĀ 27.1 at T II 643b23: 正治 (*zheng zhi*).
9. For relevant passages in the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection cf. Huyen-Vi and Pāsādika (1998a: 65 n. 4, 69 n. 15; 1998b: 206 n. 3, 208 n. 8; 2001: 224 n. 17; 2002: 49 nn. 4, 5, 188 n. 22); and Pāsādika (2006: 339).

TRANSLATION¹⁰[Discourse on the Four Truths]¹¹

1. I heard like this: At one time the Buddha was in Jeta's Grove at Sāvattthī.
2. At that time the Blessed One addressed the monks: 'This, monks, is called the teaching that we always proclaim, that is to say, the four truths. Using countless means and explaining this teaching,¹² analysing its meaning [we] have widely expounded it to mankind.
- 3-4. What are the four? We have used countless means and explained this teaching, that is to say, the teaching about the truth of *dukkha*, [we have] analysed its meaning and widely expounded it to mankind; [we] have [also] used countless means to proclaim the truths of arising, of cessation and of the path, and to explain this teaching, to analyse its meaning and to widely expound it to mankind.
5. Monks, you should associate with *bhikkhu* Sāriputta, support him and revere him! [Why?] Because *bhikkhu* Sāriputta proclaims these four truths using countless means, he widely expounds them to mankind. Whenever *bhikkhu* Sāriputta has analysed their meaning and widely expounded them to mankind and to all beings of the four assemblies, incalculable numbers of beings have been freed from stains and attained the pure eye of the *Dhamma*.
Monks, you should associate with [*bhikkhu*] Sāriputta and *bhikkhu* Moggallāna, support and revere them! [Why?] Because *bhikkhu* Sāriputta is [like] a parent to beings. [Once] they are "born", [as it were], *bhikkhu* Moggallāna raises them to adulthood. [Why?] Because *bhikkhu* Sāriputta proclaims the essential teaching about attaining the four truths to mankind, [while] *bhikkhu* Moggallāna proclaims the essential teaching about attaining the supreme to mankind, about attaining the dwelling without influxes. You should associate with [*bhikkhu*] Sāriputta and *bhikkhu* Moggallāna!
6. Having said this, the Blessed One went back to [his] meditation room.
- 7-9. Then, soon after the Blessed One had left, Sāriputta addressed the monks: 'One who is able to attain [insight into] the teaching of the four truths, such a person quickly attains good fortune.

10. To facilitate comparing my translation of EĀ 27.1 with the English translation of the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, I have adopted the same paragraph numbering as used in Nāṇamoli (2005: 1097-1101). For the same reason I adopt Pāli terminology, which does not intend to take a position on the Indic language of the *Ekottarika-āgama* original. Waldschmidt (1980: 137) explains that the *Ekottarika-āgama* was translated 'from some Middle Indic or mixed dialect of Prakrit with Sanskrit elements'.

11. The Taishō (大正) and Fo-guang (佛光) editions do not give a title to this discourse. I follow Anesaki (1908: 144), who gives EĀ 27.1 the title 四諦 (*si di*), 'four truths'.

12. EĀ 27.1 at T II 643a28 reads 觀察 (*guan-cha*), which Hirakawa (1997: 1066) indicates to correspond also to *vibhāvana*, a meaning that suits the present context better than its usual sense 'to examine'.

- 10–20. What are the four? That is to say, the truth of *dukkha* - using countless means [1] widely expound its meaning. What is the truth of *dukkha*? That is to say, birth is *dukkha*, old age is *dukkha*, disease is *dukkha*, death is *dukkha*, dejection, sorrow and vexation are *dukkha*, associating with what is disliked is *dukkha*, being dissociated from what is liked is *dukkha*, not obtaining what is searched for is *dukkha*, in short, the five aggregates of clinging are *dukkha* - this is called the truth of *dukkha*.
21. What is the truth of the arising of *dukkha*? That is to say, it is the fetter of craving.
22. What is the truth of cessation? That is to say, the truth of cessation is the final and remainderless cessation of the fetter of craving and lust - this is called the truth of cessation.
- 23–31. What is the truth of the path? That is to say, it is the noble eightfold path – right view, right intention, right speech, right effort,¹³ right livelihood, right action, right mindfulness, right concentration – this is called the truth of the path. Those beings, who are able to hear this teaching on the four truths, will quickly attain good fortune’.
32. At the time when the venerable Sāriputta proclaimed this teaching, countless and incalculable numbers of beings, while hearing this teaching, were freed from the stains and obtained the pure eye of the *Dhamma*, [reflecting afterwards:] ‘We have quickly attained good fortune. The teaching proclaimed by the Blessed One to us [leads to] a peaceful abiding and a fortunate state’.

[The Buddha said:] ‘For this reason, [members of] the four assemblies, seek for the means to practise these four truths! Thus, monks, you should train in this way!’

At that time the monks heard the Buddha’s word, were delighted and put it into practice.

COMPARISON

What makes this *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse interesting is not so much what it says, but what it does not say, since it does not use the qualification ‘noble’ in regard to the four (noble) truths.¹⁴ At first sight, this absence strikes an odd note, since the expression ‘four noble truths’ is so familiar that to speak of ‘four truths’ may sound just wrong.

13. EĀ 27.1 at T II 643b23: 正方便 (*zeng fang-bian*), literally ‘right means’, which is the standard rendering for right effort employed in *Āgama* discourses; cf. also Zacchetti (2005: 1262–4).

14. EĀ 27.1 e.g. at T II 643a28: 四諦 (*si di*). T 32 at T I 814b8 uses the same expression already in its title, 四諦經 (*si di jing*), the ‘Discourse on the Four Truths’ (in some instances T 32 uses 賢者 (*xian-zhe*) in close proximity to a truth statement, which, however, does not seem to render ‘noble’, but rather appears to stand for *āvuso). MĀ 31 agrees with MN 141 on speaking of the ‘four noble truths’, cf. e.g. MĀ 31 at T I 467b3: 四聖諦 (*si sheng di*).

Of the four *Āgamas* preserved in Chinese, the *Ekottarika-āgama* is not the best-preserved collection, so that one may wonder how serious this reference to ‘four truths’ should be taken. The translation of the *Ekottarika-āgama* was based on a text recited from memory and was undertaken during a time of warfare and turmoil,¹⁵ circumstances that would have contributed to the relatively frequent occurrence of internal inconsistencies and textual irregularities in this collection.

However, the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* does employ the qualification ‘noble’ in regard to the eightfold path. This makes it improbable that there would have been a conscious choice to omit this qualification in regard to the ‘four truths’ if it had been in the original.¹⁶

Moreover, the absence of the attribute ‘noble’ is not confined to the *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel to the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*, as *Ekottarika-āgama* discourses in general speak only of the ‘four truths’.¹⁷ The same is also the case for several discourses found in the partial *Samyukta-āgama* translation.¹⁸ In contrast, discourses in the *Dīrgha-āgama* collection, the *Madhyama-āgama* collection and the more completely preserved *Samyukta-āgama* collection regularly use the expression ‘four noble truths’.

References to the ‘four truths’ without the qualification noble also occur in several individual translations, for example in a parallel to the *Mahāpadāna-sutta*,¹⁹ in two parallels to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*,²⁰ in a parallel to the *Dasuttara-sutta*,²¹ in a parallel to the *Mahāgopālaka-sutta*,²² and in a parallel to the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*.²³

15. T 2145 at T LV 10b25 and T 125 at T II 549a18.

16. EĀ 27.1 at T II 643b22: 賢聖八品道 (*xian-sheng ba pin dao*). EĀ 46.8 at T II 779a12 also introduces all four as the ‘four truths’, but then at T II 779a13 qualifies the truth of the path as a ‘noble truth’.

17. EĀ 4.1 at T II 557a20; EĀ 24.5 at T II 619a9; EĀ 25.1 at T II 631a8; EĀ 26.9 at T II 639b8; EĀ 28.1 at T II 649b20; EĀ 28.3 at T II 650b17; EĀ 29.6 at T II 657c29; EĀ 29.9 at T II 658c9; EĀ 30.2 at T II 659c25; EĀ 30.3 at T II 665b8; EĀ 31.9 at T II 672c20; EĀ 37.8 at T II 714c5; EĀ 37.10 at T II 717a25; EĀ 39.8 at T II 733a25; EĀ 41.2 at T II 745a17; EĀ 42.4 at T II 753c6; EĀ 45.5 at T II 773b11 (not taking into account verses, where the absence of the qualification ‘noble’ could be due to the need to fit the syllable count).

18. SĀ² 81 at T II 402a23; SĀ² 92 at T II 405b15; SĀ² 152 at T II 431b21 and SĀ² 184 at T II 439c13 refer to the ‘four truths’ (not taking into account verses). SĀ² 322 at T II 481c8 uses the expression ‘four truths’, but then at T II 481c10 refers to the ‘four noble truths’. SĀ² 198 at T II 445b9 qualifies only the first truth as a ‘noble truth’, while the other three are simply ‘truths’. A similar pattern occurs in SĀ² 340, which at T II 487b20 qualifies the first truth as a ‘noble truth’, and then treats the remaining three without bringing in any truth qualification at all.

19. T 3 at T I 157a8 (translated by Fa-tian, 法天), parallel to DN 14 at DN II 41,15, which only refers to *dukkha*, its arising, its cessation and the path, without using ‘truth’ or ‘noble’.

20. T 6 at T I 188b9 (by an unknown translator), parallel to DN 16 at DN II 155,23; and T 7 at T I 204b3 (translated by Fa-xian, 法顯), parallel to DN 16 at DN II 153,7. In both instances the Pāli passages do not refer to the four noble truths at all.

21. T 13 at T I 234a29 (translated by An Shi-gao, 安世高), parallel to DN 34 at DN III 277,8: *cattāri ariya-saccāni*.

22. T 123 at T II 546b21 (translated by Kumārajīva), parallel to MN 33 at MN I 221,33, which instead refers to the noble eightfold path.

23. T 109 at T II 503c9 (translated by An Shi-gao), parallel to SN 56:11 at SN V 422,30: *imesu catusu ariya-saccesu*.

References to the four truths that do not use the qualification 'noble' can additionally be found in the Chinese translations of the Dharmaguptaka, Mahīśāsaka and Sarvāstivāda *Vinayas*. The same *Vinayas*, however, employ the qualification 'noble' in their version of what according to the traditional account was the first discourse given by the Buddha in the Deer Park at Vārānaśī, the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*.²⁴

A closer examination of the Pāli version of this discourse brings to light that the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* presents the second noble truth as something that needs to be abandoned.²⁵ Yet, what needs to be abandoned is the origin of *dukkha*, not the noble truth itself. Thus this statement would be more meaningful without the expression 'noble truth'.²⁶

From a grammatical viewpoint, the readings *dukkhasamudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ* and *dukkhanirodhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ*, found in the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta* and also in the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta*,²⁷ are puzzling, as one would rather have expected *dukkhasamudayo* and *dukkhanirodho*.²⁸ Weller takes *dukkhasamudayaṃ* and *dukkhanirodhaṃ* to be a faulty transformation of an earlier Māgadhī nominative *dukkhasamudaye* and *dukkhanirodhe*, undertaken in analogy to the correct transformation of the neuter *dukkhe* to *dukkhaṃ* and without taking into account that a Māgadhī nominative in *-e* could also be a masculine form and thus should not be transformed into *-aṃ*, but into *-o* (Weller, 1940: 77).

Norman instead suggests that the expression *ariyasaccaṃ* was added later, an addition during which an *-m-* was inserted in order to avoid hiatus, producing *dukkhasamudaya-m-ariyasaccaṃ* and *dukkhanirodha-m-ariyasacca*. Norman

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24. The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* speaks only of the 'four truths' in T 1428 at T XXII 606a19 and at T XXII 910a4, but then uses the qualification 'noble' in its version of the Buddha's first discourse at T XXII 788a14. The Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* speaks of the 'four truths' in T 1421 at T XXII 105b12, but then uses the qualification 'noble' in its version of the first discourse at T XXII 104b28. The Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya* refers to the 'four truths' in T 1435 at T XXIII 122b23; at T XXIII 122c1+9; at T XXIII 131c25; at T XXIII 193a11; at T XXIII 244b12; and at T XXIII 368b16; but then uses the qualification 'noble' in its version of the first discourse at T XXIII 448b19.
25. SN 56:11 at SN V 422,12: *tam kho pan' idaṃ dukkhasamudayaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pahātabaṃ*, which Bodhi (2000: 1845) translates as: 'this noble truth of the origin of suffering is to be abandoned'.
26. Woodward (1979: 358 n. 1) observes that a Burmese manuscript has a variant reading without *ariya* and comments: 'but we must omit *ariya-saccaṃ*, otherwise the text would mean "the Ariyan truth about the arising of ill is to be put away"'. Norman (1984: 385) explains that 'what the Buddha said was that pain should be known, its origin given up, its cessation realised, and the path to its cessation practised. Woodward did not, therefore, go far enough. He should have suggested the removal of the word *ariya-saccaṃ* from all four' truth statements. Harvey (2007) suggests to understand *sacca* as a 'reality' in the present context, so that the second noble truth would refer to 'a reality to abandon, not a truth to abandon'. Though on this interpretation the word *sacca* would fit the context better, one would still not expect the 'reality' of craving to be qualified as 'noble', or 'ennobling', as Harvey puts it.
27. SN 56:11 at SN V 421,25+29 (cf. also B^c-SN V 369,17+20) and MN 141 at MN III 250,33 and 251,3 (cf. also B^c-MN III 293,27 and 294,3).
28. The corresponding passages in the Ceylonese and Siamese editions do in fact read *dukkhasamudayo* and *dukkhanirodho*, cf. C^c-MN III 516,21+25 and S^c-MN III 453,6+10; and C^c-SN V 270,22+24 and S^c-SN V 529,4+6.

explains that the development that led to this may have taken place in two stages:

The original form ... was ... *idaṃ dukkhaṃ, ayaṃ dukkha-samudayo, ayaṃ dukkha-nirodho, ayaṃ dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-paṭipadā* ... Their designation as *saccāni* led to the introduction of the word *-sacca* into each item: *cattāri saccāni -- dukkha-saccaṃ samudaya-saccaṃ nirodha-saccaṃ magga saccaṃ* ... When the truths became known as *ariya-saccāni*, then this word was added ... The introduction of the word *ariya-* ... gave a set: **dukkha-ariya-saccaṃ* etc. (Norman, 1984: 385–6)

Norman's suggestion would find support in the substantial number of references to 'four truths' in Chinese discourses and *Vinayas*, which might correspond to the second stage described by him, when the qualification 'noble' had not yet been added to all truth statements. These passages support the impression that the qualification 'noble' may have originally been found just in some selected instances, and only during the process of oral transmission the same qualification may have been applied to all references to the four (noble) truths.

A discourse where this qualification would have been present from the outset can be found in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, according to which the four noble truths are called noble because the *Tathāgata* is noble.²⁹ Without the qualification 'noble', the statement made in this discourse would no longer be meaningful.

Another discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya*, together with its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel, explains that the four noble truths are so called because they are 'such' and not otherwise.³⁰ This explanation does not seem to be concerned with the qualification 'noble', but rather with the reason why the term 'truth' is used, so that the statement made in this discourse would be meaningful even without the qualification 'noble'. According to yet another *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse and its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel, a *Tathāgata* is so called because of his insight into the four noble truths.³¹ This explanation, too, would hold true even if the statement were to use merely the expression 'four truths'. The same is the case for the *Saccavibhaṅga-sutta* and the *Dhammacakkapavattana-sutta*. Thus it seems that in a fair number of occurrences of the expression 'four noble truths', the passages in question would remain meaningful even if one were to assume that at an earlier stage these passages only spoke of the 'four truths'.

In a way, to just speak of 'four truths' would fit the predominantly pragmatic orientation of early Buddhism and in particular of the diagnostic scheme that underlies the four (noble) truths, which treats the human predicament in a

29. SN 56:28 at SN V 435,28: *tathāgato ariyo, tasmā 'ariyasaccāni' ti vuccanti*; cf. also Vism 495,22. This discourse does not seem to have a Chinese parallel.

30. SN 56:27 at SN V 435,18: *tathāni avitathāni anaññathāni, tasmā 'ariyasaccāni' ti vuccanti*, cf. also its Chinese counterpart SĀ 417 at T II 110c4. Norman (1993: 172) comments that the qualification *avitathāni anaññathāni* 'would seem ... to be the reason why they are called "truths"'.³¹

31. SN 56:23 at SN V 433,21: *catunnaṃ ariyasaccānaṃ yathābhūtaṃ abhisambuddhattā 'tathāgato arahaṃ sammāsambuddho' ti vuccati*, a statement found similarly in its parallel SĀ 402 at T II 107c26.

manner that mirrors ancient Indian medicine. Thus to leave aside the qualification 'noble' need not in any way belittle the indubitable importance of the four (noble) truths. In the end, their status as truths remains the same, independent of whether they receive the epithet 'noble'. Nobility in early Buddhism is, after all, not something to be inherited, nor is it to be found in mere words, as true nobility can only be acquired through inner purification and progress on the path to liberation.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | | | | | |
|----------------|---------------------|----|------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| B ^e | Burmese edition | EĀ | <i>Ekottarika-āgama</i> | SĀ ² | <i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 100) |
| C ^e | Ceylonese edition | MĀ | <i>Madhyama-āgama</i> (T 26) | S ^e | Siamese edition |
| DĀ | <i>Dīrgha-āgama</i> | MN | <i>Majjhima-nikāya</i> | SN | <i>Samyutta-nikāya</i> |
| DN | <i>Dīgha-nikāya</i> | SĀ | <i>Samyukta-āgama</i> (T 99) | T | Taishō |

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