

Study Guide for MN 141

Saccavibhanga Sutta

The Analysis of the Truths

At the Deer Park at Isipatana the Tathagata, accomplished and fully enlightened, set rolling the matchless Wheel of the Dhamma, which cannot be stopped by any recluse or Brahmin or god or Mara or Brahma or anyone in the world – that is, the announcing, teaching, describing, establishing, revealing, expounding, and exhibiting of the Four Noble Truths. (141.2)

The Buddha's first sermon is considered his most important because it "set rolling the Wheel of the Dhamma" (SN 56.11). This sermon is referred to four times in MN 141, twice by the Buddha and twice by Sariputta. Most of MN 141 contains Sariputta's explanation or analysis (*vibhanga*) of the Four Noble Truths, the key teaching briefly introduced in the Buddha's first sermon. Down through the ages there have been many and varied explanation of the Four Noble Truths. Here we have the explanation of the Buddha's right hand disciple, Sariputta.

This analysis in MN 141 is important for the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness because it also appears in the longer version of the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipatthana Sutta*) found in the *Digha Nikaya* (DN 22). The final and culminating "exercise" of the *Satipatthana Sutta* is using the framework of the Four Noble Truths to understand our experience. Having a good understanding of what these truths are is thus quite important. MN 141 can be seen as supplementing the shorter *Satipatthana Sutta* found in the Middle Length Discourses (MN 10).

The Four Noble Truths are sometimes referred to as *dukkha, samudaya, nirodha, and magga, i.e.*, suffering, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. This four-part way of analysis is frequently used elsewhere in the suttas for things besides the four truths. For example each of the seven factors of awakening should be understood by understanding it in itself, by understanding its origination, by understanding its cessation and by understanding the way leading to its cessation (SN V 195-6). Other things to be understood this way are the five aggregates, views, sensual desire, the taints, the elements, etc. The fact that the pattern or the framework of the Four Noble Truths is used for other things suggests that one of the important aspects of these truths is having insight into the process of origination and cessation. There is something quite significant about clearly seeing something come into existence because of a cause and then seeing it vanish. It seems that liberation in the suttas is contingent on this insight. The refrain for each of the exercises in the *Satipatthana Sutta* similarly emphasizes that one contemplates body, feelings, mind states, and *dhammas* in their arising and their vanishing. In addition, each of the five exercises in the fourth foundation of mindfulness

clearly emphasizes understanding the origination and disappearance of each *dhammas* being considered.

In considering the Four Noble Truths it is quite useful to reflect long and hard about what might be “liberating” about seeing the origination and ceasing of things. It is said that Sariputta had his initial glimpse of liberation and became a stream-enterer when, in his first encounter with the Buddha’s teachings, one of the Buddha’s first disciples told him

Of those things that arise from a cause,
The Tathagata has told the cause,
And also what their cessation is:
This is the doctrine of the Great Recluse.

Suffering (MN 141.10-20):

It is often pointed out that ‘suffering’ is an inadequate translation of *dukkha*. It is a word that is has slightly different meanings in different contexts. Thanissaro Bhikkhu prefers ‘stress’ in part because things that are not associated with suffering can, in some ways, be stressful and because it encompasses a broader range of meanings than does ‘suffering.’

In section 10 the list of things that are suffering are all subsumed under the five *upadana khandas*. This is a very important term for the Buddha. It reappears repeatedly in his teachings and so is important to understand if we want to understand his teachings. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates the term as “the aggregates affected by clinging.” Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as “clinging-aggregates.”

Khandha seems to have been originally an everyday word meaning a bundle, group, and aggregate, as well as a tree trunk. In the Buddha’s teachings they refer to the bundle of stuff that make up physical form, feelings, perception (or recognition), mental fabrications, and consciousness. There is no evidence that the Buddha used the five aggregates as a way of describing or defining a person, as is often assumed. Rather, it seems that the five aggregates are meant to be one way to describe the entire the range of ways that humans experience the world of causes and conditions. It is the primary way or avenue through which we build our understanding of the world.

Upadana has two meanings that play off each other. Most commonly it means clinging. But it also means fuel or sustenance. With both meanings, *upadana* suggests that clinging is fuel, for suffering as well as fuel for further clinging. The relationship between *khandha* and *upadana* is somewhat ambiguous and so the compound can be translated either as the ‘clung to aggregates’ or the ‘clinging aggregates.’

The five clinging-aggregates are important subjects for mindfulness practice. The fourth foundation in the *Satipatthana Sutta* includes instruction on being mindful of them.

Origination(MN 141.21):

It is noteworthy that the second noble truth is about the arising or origination of suffering; strictly speaking it does not describe the ‘cause’ of suffering, rather it describes a necessary condition for the appearance of suffering. The Pali word is *samudaya* which comes from the prefix *sam* meaning ‘with’ or ‘together with’ and *udaya* which means rise, growth, or origin. In other words, the second truth explains what suffering arises from or with. Sometime it is said that ‘desire’ is the second noble truth. However, this is a poor translation choice for the Pali word *tanha* which means thirst or craving. It should be noted that when *tanha* is first introduced it is described specifically in terms of three types of craving, i.e., for sensual pleasure, for being, and for non-being. These cravings are described as bringing about a ‘renewal of being,’ i.e., rebirth. Please notice how else this paragraph characterizes craving.

Cessation (MN 141.22)

The description of the third noble truth is unambiguous in stating that it involves the ending of craving.

Path (MN 141.23-31)

Here we have the standard explanation of each of the eight folds of the path. Significantly the Right View is defined as the Four Noble Truths.

Reflections:

Please read MN 2.5-11 then reflect on what categories and concepts you use to understand your life. Even seeing your life from the perspective of self and others is using categories. The Buddha teaches that it is useful to understand our life through the categories of the Four Noble Truths. Over the next weeks please explore how it is useful to apply the framework of the Four Noble Truths to circumstances in your life.

Monks, develop concentration. A monk who is concentrated understands things as they really are. And what does he understand as it really is? He understands,

‘This is suffering,’

‘This is the origin of suffering,’

‘This is the cessation of suffering,’ and

‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’

SN V.56.1