

Four Stages of Enlightenment

The *four stages of enlightenment* in Buddhism are the four progressive stages culminating in full enlightenment as an Arahant.

The four stages are *Sotapanna*, *Sakadagami*, *Anagami* and *Arahant*. The Buddha referred to people who are at one of these four stages as noble people (*ariya-puggala*) and the community of such persons within the *bhikkhu-sangha* as the noble sangha (*ariya-sangha*).

The teaching of the four stages of enlightenment is a central element of the early Buddhist schools, including the Theravada school of Buddhism, which still survives.

Origins

In the *Sutta Pitaka* several types of Buddhist practitioners are described, according to their level of attainment. The standard is four, but there are also longer descriptions with more types. The four are the Stream-enterer, Once-returner, Non-returner and the Arahant.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, the four stages are the culmination of the seven purifications. The descriptions are elaborated and harmonized, giving the same sequence of purifications before attaining each of the four paths and fruits.

The *Visuddhimagga* stresses the importance of *prajna*, insight into *anatta* and the Buddhist teachings, as the main means to liberation. Vipassana has a central role in this. Insight is emphasized by the contemporary Vipassana movement.

The Ordinary Person

An ordinary person or *puthujjana* (Pali) is trapped in the endless cycling of *samsara*. One is reborn, lives, and dies in endless rebirths, either as a *deva*, human, animal, male, female, neuter, ghost, *asura*, hell being, or various other entities on different categories of existence.

An ordinary entity has never seen and experienced the ultimate truth of Dharma, and therefore has no way of finding an end to the predicament. It is only when suffering becomes acute, or seemingly unending, that an entity looks for a "solution" and, if fortunate, finds the Dharma.

The Four Stages of Attainment

The Sangha of the Tathagata's disciples (*Ariya Sangha*) can be described as including four, or eight, kinds of individuals. There are four [groups of noble disciples] when path and fruit are taken as pairs, and eight groups of individuals, when each path and fruit are taken separately:

1. (1) the path to stream-entry; (2) the fruition of stream-entry;
2. (3) the path to once-returning; (4) the fruition of once-returning;
3. (5) the path to non-returning; (6) the fruition of non-returning;
4. (7) the path to arahantship; (8) the fruition of arahantship.

Stream-enterer

The first stage is that of *Sotāpanna* (Pali), literally meaning "one who enters (*āpadyate*) the stream (*sotas*)," with the stream being the supermundane Noble Eightfold Path, regarded as the highest Dharma. The stream-enterer is also said to have "opened the eye of the Dharma" (Pali: *dharmacakkhu*).

A stream-enterer reaches arahantship within seven rebirths upon opening the eye of the Dharma.

Due to the fact that the stream-enterer has attained an intuitive grasp of Buddhist doctrine ("right view") and has complete confidence or *saddha* in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), that individual will not be reborn in any plane lower than the human (animal, *preta*, or in hell).

Once-returned

The second stage is that of the *Sakadāgāmi* (Pali), literally meaning "one who once comes". The once-returned will at most return to the human world one more time.

Both the stream-enterer and the once-returned have abandoned the first three fetters (identity view, doubt, ritual attachment). The stream-enterer and once-returned are distinguished by the fact that the once-returned has weakened lust, hate, and delusion to a greater degree.

The once-returned, therefore, has fewer than seven rebirths. They may take place in higher planes but will include rebirth in the human world at most only once more. Once-returneds do not have only one more rebirth, as the name suggests, for that may not even be said with certainty about the non-returned who can take multiple rebirths in the five "Pure Abodes".

Non-returner

The third stage is that of the *Anāgāmi* (Pali), literally meaning "one who does not come". The non-returner, having overcome sensuality, does not return to the human world, or to any unfortunate world lower than that, after death.

Instead, non-returners are reborn in one of the five special worlds in *Rūpadhātu* called the *Śuddhāvāsa worlds*, or "Pure Abodes", and there attain Nirvana (Pali: *Nibbana*); some of them are reborn a second time in a higher world of the Pure Abodes.

An *Anāgāmi* has abandoned the five lower fetters (craving for fine corporeal existence, craving for non-material existence, conceit, restlessness, ignorance), out of ten total fetters (self-illusion, scepticism, attachment to rules and rituals, sensual lust, ill will, and the five previously listed), that bind beings to the cycle of rebirth. An *Anāgāmi* is well-advanced.

Arahant

The fourth stage is that of *Arahant*, a fully awakened person. He has abandoned all ten fetters and, upon death (Pali: *Parinibbāna*), will never be reborn in any plane or world, having wholly escaped *samsara*. An Arahant had attained awakening by following the path given by the Buddha. In Theravada, the term *Buddha* is reserved for Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, as being the one who discovered the path by himself.

Source: Taken and adapted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_enlightenment (accessed March 22, 2014)