

An aerial photograph of a river with large pieces of weathered driftwood in the water. The water is a deep blue, and the driftwood is a mix of brown and orange. The text "ALONG THE WAY" is centered in the upper half of the image, flanked by two vertical lines.

ALONG
THE
WAY

*Along
the
Way*

ESSAYS ON THE BUDDHIST PATH

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(*Geoffrey DeGraff*)

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Acknowledgements

The Buddha's primary metaphor for his teaching was a path of practice: ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that would lead to a goal, the end of suffering and stress. If you are interested in following his path, the essays in this book are intended to help you along the way.

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Safety in a Duality

When the Buddha listed the duties of teachers to their students (DN 31), the final and most prominent item on the list was this: that the teacher provide the student with protection in all directions. Of course, this didn't mean that teachers were duty-bound to follow their students around with shields to ward off potential dangers. Instead, it meant that they should provide their students with knowledge that the students could use to protect themselves in every situation. And in a dialogue where the Buddha criticized some teachers of other sects for leaving their students unprotected ([AN 3:62](#)), he made clear that protective knowledge was expressed in terms of a duality: clearly seeing the difference between what should and shouldn't be done.

That's right: a duality. For all the dualities the Buddha avoided, this was one he adhered to consistently in his role as a responsible teacher.

The need for this kind of protective knowledge is based on the Buddha's analysis of how we shape our experience. Instead of being passive recipients of the results of past kamma, we're proactive: Through our desires—expressed in acts of attention, perception, and intention—we shape the input of the senses coming from past kamma into a present-moment experience. The problem is that we're often ignorant of what we're doing, so we shape things unskillfully and suffer as a result. When we suffer, we react in two ways. The first reaction is bewilderment: "Where does this suffering come from?" The second is a search: "Is there anyone who knows a way out of this suffering?" ([AN 6:63](#)) The search explains why people go looking for teachers in the first place. The bewilderment explains why we can easily look to the wrong people for help.

So we need two sorts of protection: protection against ourselves, to overcome our ignorance of what we're doing; and protection against teachers—and this can include anyone who offers advice, even well-meaning friends and acquaintances—who might take advantage of our ignorance to knowingly or unknowingly do us harm.

The knowledge that the Buddha offered as protection attacked these problems on many levels—and the word "attack" is appropriate here. In [AN 3:62](#) he did something that he rarely ever did, which was to seek out other teachers and attack them for their teachings. The harm they were

causing was, in his eyes, that serious. He criticized, in particular, three doctrines: that whatever pleasure or pain you experience is (1) determined by past actions, (2) determined by a creator god, or (3) occurs randomly, without cause or condition.

In each case, his criticism was the same: If you adopted any of these teachings, you'd believe yourself powerless in the present moment to change things here and now. You'd have no motivation to think in terms of what should and shouldn't be done, because the choice would be meaningless. All your actions in the present moment, in your eyes, would either be predetermined or ineffectual; the duality between good and evil, an empty convention.

The Buddha's argument was identical in each of the three cases, so here are his words on just the first:

"In that case, a person is a killer of living beings because of what was done in the past. A person is a thief... uncelibate... a liar... a divisive speaker... a harsh speaker... an idle chatterer... greedy... malicious... a holder of wrong views because of what was done in the past.' When one falls back on what was done in the past as being essential, there is no desire, no effort (at the thought), 'This should be done. This shouldn't be done.' When one can't pin down as a truth or reality what should & shouldn't be done, one dwells bewildered & unprotected."

The implication here is that if a teaching is going to protect you, the first level of protection has to be on the theoretical level: You have to understand that your present actions are free, to at least some extent, to shape the present moment—for good or bad—and to have an impact on the future. This understanding of kamma would then provide you with motivation for looking carefully at what should and shouldn't be done right now to avoid causing suffering.

And this is precisely the understanding of kamma that the Buddha taught: As he pointed out in [AN 3:101](#), past actions do have their impact on the present moment, but your experience of that impact is filtered through your present-moment state mind. This is one of the reasons why Buddhist meditation focuses on being alert to what the mind is doing right now. If you're sensitive to your present actions, you can shape them well enough to mitigate the influences from any past bad kamma and, through your present skillful kamma, to provide conditions for pleasure and happiness now and into the future.

So the first level of protection lies in the realm of general theory. However, the dualistic knowledge offered by the Buddha doesn't stop there. It also goes into specific examples of what should and shouldn't be done, and from there into general principles to be used in judging for yourself what should and shouldn't be done in instances not covered by the examples.

The examples are offered as rules and precepts, such as the precepts against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. Many people don't like rules, seeing them as small-minded and confining, but it's hard to argue with some of the rules the Buddha offers for your protection. They give you clear warning signs for when your ignorance is blinding you to behavior that will, in the long term, cause harm. The rules give you objective standards for judging not only your own behavior, but also the behavior of people who offer themselves as teachers.

The monks, for example, have a rule that if a monk even suggests to a student—or anyone at all, for that matter—that she would benefit from having sex with him, he has to undergo a penance for six days. During the penance, he is stripped of his seniority and has to confess his offense to all his fellow monks daily. If he hides the offense, then when he's found out he has to undergo an added probation for as many days as he hid the offense. If he actually goes ahead and has sex with anyone, he's out. Period. Automatically stripped of his status as a monk, he cannot re-ordain for the rest of this lifetime.

The existence of these rules doesn't guarantee that people won't break them, but they do serve as red flags to indicate that the Buddha had no tolerance for this sort of behavior. Students aware of these rules would then know for sure when a monk—or any teacher—had stepped out of bounds. If knowledge of these rules were available in all Buddhist communities, it would prevent a lot of confusion and grief.

You sometimes hear the argument that awakened people are beyond observing the precepts because they have abandoned the fetter of "grasping at precepts and practices" (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*), but this argument is based on a misunderstanding of what "grasping" means here. Actually, as [AN 10:92](#) shows, people who have abandoned this fetter never intentionally break the precepts. Their precepts are "untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the observant, ungrasped at, leading to concentration." The fact that they're untorn, etc., means that they're observed consistently. "Ungrasped at" means that even though such people are virtuous, they don't fashion themselves

around their virtues ([MN 78](#)). In other words, they don't build an identity around being virtuous.

This means that awakened people are consistently virtuous, but—unlike ordinary people still grappling with the precepts—they've freed themselves from the need to construct an identity around virtue in order to maintain it. So although they don't have to keep reminding themselves of the precepts, their behavior still falls perfectly in line with what the precepts teach.

As for the general principles the Buddha taught for deciding what should and shouldn't be done, they start on a very basic level with the instructions he gave to his son, Rāhula, on how to purify his actions ([MN 61](#)). These boil down to the principle that you judge your actions both by the intentions motivating them and by the results they yield. If you can foresee that an action you want to do will cause harm, either to yourself or to others, you shouldn't do it. If you don't foresee harm, you can go ahead and do it but—in line with the power of actions to shape both the present and the future—you have to check for the results of the action both while you're doing it and after it's done. If, in the course of doing the action, you find that you're causing unexpected harm, you stop. If you find out only after the fact that it caused harm, you talk it over with someone more advanced on the path and resolve not to repeat the mistake. This way you gain practical experience, based on your own powers of observation, in mastering the dualistic principle of what should and shouldn't be done.

The duality of this principle extends to more advanced teachings as well. The four noble truths, for example, are basically dualistic, and not just because four is a dual duality. Suffering (the first noble truth) and the end of suffering (the third) are two very different things. You may have heard the Buddha quoted as saying, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering," which sounds like he's offering a non-dualistic perspective on suffering and its end. But that wasn't what he actually said. His actual words were much more straightforward and dualistic: "Both formerly and now, it's only suffering that I describe, and the cessation of suffering." ([SN 22:86](#))

The duties appropriate to the four noble truths show that this is a genuine duality: The origination of suffering (the second noble truth) should be abandoned. The path to the cessation of suffering (the fourth truth) should be developed. Abandoning and developing are two opposite things. And the path is composed of eight right factors clearly differentiated from eight corresponding wrong factors. All of this

continues the dualistic pattern of the Buddha's protective teaching: having a solid grounding for deciding what should and shouldn't be done.

This pattern extends even to the Buddha's subtlest teaching, dependent co-arising, his detailed explanation of all the many factors that go into causing suffering. This teaching is sometimes hailed as non-dualistic, and it is true that the Buddha's explanation of these factors avoids the duality of saying that everything is either a Oneness or a plurality ([SN 12:48](#)). So to that extent, they are non-dual.

But when the Buddha explained dependent co-arising in detail, he repeatedly presented it in terms of a different duality: how it should and shouldn't be approached (see, for starters, the many discourses in [SN 12](#)). If, when dealing with the factors as they actually present themselves, you approach them in ignorance, you cause suffering. If you approach them in terms of knowledge of the four noble truths and their duties, you bring suffering to an end.

So here again, even on the most refined levels of the Dhamma, there's a clear distinction between what should and shouldn't be done.

Which means that even though the Buddha taught metaphysical non-duality with regard to some issues, he didn't take a blanket non-dual approach to all issues, and especially not to moral ones. The distinction between actions that should and shouldn't be done is a duality that offers protection, inside and out, on every level of the practice, from the most basic to the most advanced.

If we look at the Buddha's teachings on this duality in terms of Western psychoanalysis, we can see that what he's teaching is a healthy super-ego, the functions of the mind that provide you with a strong sense of what should and shouldn't be done. However, unlike the Western super-ego that Freud studied, the Buddhist super-ego is not heedless of your happiness, and it's not forced on you against your will. Instead, its primary concern is focused directly on your true happiness, and the Buddha offers his shoulds as conditional. He's not demanding that you follow his advice, but from his vast experience he's advising you that *if you want true happiness, if you want to protect yourself, and if you want to end your bewilderment, this is how it has to be done*. The choice to take on these shoulds—or not—is yours.

The sad irony is that the basic duality of the Buddha's protective teachings has become so deeply obscured over the centuries. A teaching that the Buddha denounced—that the present moment is determined by your past kamma—has become widely accepted as the standard Buddhist

explanation of kamma. Non-duality has been proclaimed as superior and more advanced than duality in all areas, including the distinction between right and wrong, what should and shouldn't be done. The ego has been so demonized that many students are led to believe that all ego and super-ego functions have to be obliterated if they want to gain awakening.

The result is that many people who encounter these unsafe teachings when coming to Buddhism actually find themselves stripped of whatever protective sense of "should and shouldn't be done" they might already have. This has led, as we've all too often seen, to their exploitation by unscrupulous teachers.

It would clearly be for the good of the world if the Buddha's protective teachings were dusted off and returned to their rightful, central place in every school of practice that claims to take inspiration from him. This might not prevent the exploitation of students in all cases. After all, there will always be people, both students and teachers, who see rules as an incitement to rebel. But—unlike the blanket teachings of ego-destruction and the non-duality of right and wrong—the clear distinction between what should and shouldn't be done would provide no room at all for justifying such bewildered and unsafe behavior as "compassionate" or "advanced."

Dhamma Is What Dhamma Does

THE BUDDHA AS STRATEGIST

You may know the story. The Buddha was once staying in a *simsapā* forest with a group of monks. He picked up a few *simsapā* leaves—which are like miniature aspen leaves—and asked the monks which was greater: the number of leaves in his hand or the number of leaves in the forest. The monks replied that, of course, there were far more leaves in the forest than in his hand.

The Buddha went on to say that, in the same way, the things he had known through direct knowledge but had not taught were like the leaves in the forest. The things he *had* taught based on his direct knowledge were like the leaves in his hand. Why had he taught so little? Because, in his words, the things he had not taught “were not connected with the goal, do not relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding.”

And what had he taught? The four noble truths: “This is stress ... This is the origination of stress ... This is the cessation of stress ... This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.” And why had he taught that? Because these truths *were* connected with the goal, *did* relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and *did* lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding ([SN 56:31](#)).

This incident makes an important statement about how to read and understand the Buddha’s Dhamma. He wasn’t interested in stating truths simply because they were true. He taught truths that served a purpose: When his listeners acted on those truths, those actions would have a desired impact on their minds.

It’s good to take a close look at how he expresses the nature of that impact. He starts by using the word “goal.” In Pali, the word is *attha*, which means not only goal, but also “meaning,” “benefit,” “purpose,” “profit.” This word rarely appears in Western discussions of the Dhamma, but in Asia it’s frequently paired with the word “Dhamma”: Useful truths are said to be both *attha* and Dhamma. In fact, the whole point of the Dhamma is that it has an *attha*. The four noble truths are a special kind of Dhamma in that they cover everything needed to serve

that *attha*, beginning with the “rudiments of the holy life”—this is a short-hand reference to the virtues of the five precepts—as well as the *attha* itself: the attainment of total unbinding, an unconditioned dimension that’s the highest possible happiness ([SN 43](#); [Dhp 203](#)).

In some cases, the *attha* of a Dhamma teaching is its meaning as expressed in words that are easier to understand. But in the Buddha’s remarks in the *siṃsapā* forest, the word *attha* obviously means something more than words: a direct experience of the goal, the reality of the freedom and liberation that the teaching is supposed to lead to. These two aspects of *attha* are closely related. We could even say that you don’t fully know the meaning of the words of the Dhamma until you’ve directly experienced the goal to which they point and which is their whole purpose for being.

The Buddha was wise in emphasizing this purposeful aspect of the Dhamma, because the mind—as he accurately saw—is purposeful as well. It doesn’t simply gaze at views about the truth in rapt admiration. In its quest to eliminate pain or suffering, it constructs views about the truth and acts on them to serve its aims. To evaluate the worth of a truth, you have to look into the mind-state that inspires you to assemble it, the purposes it inspires you to aim at, and the actions it inspires you to take.

This was precisely the Buddha’s approach. He saw that if you adopt a particular view or line of questioning, it would bend the mind in the direction of the mind-state that created it. If you acted on the view, those actions would have a further impact on the mind, leading to experiences of pleasure or pain, depending on whether those actions were skillful or not.

This is why the Buddha regarded views about truth as a type of *kamma*, or action. In turn, he viewed those actions as part of a causal process, judging them by where that process ultimately led. If they led to an inferior goal, he would reject them ([DN 1](#)). As for the views he himself taught, he chose them because they would inspire the kind of actions that would lead to total freedom from suffering.

This active role of the Dhamma is explicitly clear in the case of the four noble truths: Each truth carries a duty. It’s a guide to action. You should *comprehend* stress, *abandon* its origination or cause within the mind, *realize* its cessation, all by *developing* the path to its cessation. The Buddha didn’t impose these four duties on anyone. He simply pointed out that if you want to put an end to suffering and stress, this is what you have to do.

At the same time, it's worth noting not only that the four noble truths contain the fourth noble truth—which is a guide to action—but also that they themselves are contained in the fourth truth: the factor of right view in the noble eightfold path. As a container for that path, the four truths explain why the path is a beneficial one to follow. As a factor in the path, they show that views are actions, to be adopted both because they're true and because they act as a guide to beneficial action, in the form of the other factors of the path, leading to a goal that lies beyond them. This is why, when the Buddha gave metaphors for the path—including right view—he chose modes of transport, like rafts and chariots: means to a destination. When you reach the destination, the mode of transport can be put aside ([MN 22](#); [MN 24](#); [SN 45:4](#)).

In fact, he made it a general rule: For him to say something, it had to be not only true but also beneficial in leading to skillful action. Further, he had to be sensitive to his audience, knowing when to say beneficial truths that were pleasing and when to say beneficial truths that were not. He gave the analogy of a baby child with a sharp object in its mouth: Sometimes you have to be willing to draw blood if that's what's required to get the object out before the child swallows it and suffers greater harm ([MN 58](#)).

So the Buddha had to be strategic in how he taught the Dhamma. Unlike other teachers of his time, he didn't have a canned Dhamma that he rattled off to all his listeners ([DN 2](#)). This may be why his followers presented their memory of his teachings in the form of dialogues, to show how the Buddha presented different aspects of the Dhamma to different listeners, in line with the situation and their specific needs: sometimes truths that pleased them, sometimes truths that didn't, but always truths that were beneficial.

It's important to note, though, that in the Buddha's analysis of the possible varieties of speech, the idea that a falsehood could be beneficial was never even entertained as a possibility. The concept of "useful fictions" was, as far as he was concerned, out of the question.

A STRATEGIC DISTINCTION

The Buddha's strategic approach to teaching is also shown by the distinction he made between teachings whose attha had to be drawn out into further explanations, and those whose attha was already drawn out and should not be drawn out any further ([AN 2:24](#)). This distinction was so important that he said you were slandering him if you got it mixed

up: trying to infer a further meaning of a teaching whose meaning was already drawn out, or claiming that there was no need for any further interpretation of a teaching that actually needed it.

Unfortunately, he didn't give examples for these two categories of teachings, but when we remember that the Dhamma is meant as a guide to action, one way of interpreting the distinction seems clear—and it's supported by watching the Buddha in action as he teaches.

Some teachings don't give clear instructions for action. Instead, they describe the reality of a situation. In this case, the meaning has to be drawn out: What are the practical implications of that situation? An example would be the Buddha's descriptions of how the universe evolves, which portray events in far-distant reaches of the past and the future, without giving explicit instructions as to how you should act. At the very end of the descriptions, though, the Buddha himself draws out the meaning: The changes in the universe come from the actions of living beings, so if you want to avoid the miseries that can be found in the universe, take care to act skillfully ([DN 26–27](#)).

As for teachings whose meaning shouldn't be drawn out any further, two prime examples are the Buddha's teachings on self and not-self. Nowhere in the Canon does the Buddha say either that there is a self or that there is no self. Questions of "Who am I?" "Do I exist?" "Do I not exist?" he says, are not worthy of attention. In fact, he goes on to say that views that attempt to answer these questions—such as "I have a self" or "I have no self"—are a fetter bound by which you're not freed from suffering and stress ([MN 2](#)). So, to stay on the path, you should try to avoid paying attention to such questions. And it's not the case that they'll get answered at awakening. As [SN 12:20](#) points out, once you've attained even the first level of awakening, these questions no longer hold any meaning or interest for you.

Still, for the purpose of arriving at awakening, the Buddha does analyze how the assumption of "self" comes about, pointing out how some assumptions of self are not skillful, while other assumptions of self, in certain circumstances, are. You can make use of the things that you identify as you or yours—such as perceptions and thought fabrications—as means to the goal ([AN 9:36](#)). In addition, assumptions that you have to depend on yourself, that you're capable of the practice, and that you will benefit from it all play a necessary role in pursuing the path ([Dhp 160](#); [AN 4:159](#); [AN 3:40](#)). The Buddha calls this approach "using the self as a governing principle." So even though he refuses to say that there is a self, he makes use of "self" as a strategy on the path.

At the same time, he points out how “not-self” is a useful perception at many stages in the path, and particularly in the last ones, as a tool for comprehending stress and abandoning its cause. Because ideas of self contain an element of clinging, which the first noble truth equates with suffering ([SN 56:11](#)), the perception of not-self is a useful tool for bringing that clinging to an end. This perception is even useful, at a very high level of the practice, for overcoming any attachment to the path or the goal, so that the mind—freed from all attachments, including any attachments to the perception “not-self”—can reach total liberation ([AN 10:93](#)). So here again, even though the Buddha refuses to say that there is no self, he uses “not-self” as a Dhamma teaching leading to a higher attha.

This point is illustrated most clearly in [MN 109](#). There, a monk—listening to the Buddha teaching that the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness are not-self—draws out what he thinks is a logical implication of the teaching:

“So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?”

In other words, the monk reasons that because the aggregates are all not-self, there must be no self, so no actions will be able to touch—i.e., give karmic results to—what is not-self. This line of reasoning would serve a very unskillful attha, giving license to all kinds of unskillful behavior. That’s why the Buddha, on reading the monk’s mind, rebukes him sharply, saying that he’s senseless, immersed in ignorance, and overcome with craving. The Buddha then goes on to show the proper strategic use of the teaching on not-self, questioning the other monks listening to the talk about their assumptions of self around the aggregates so that they’ll perceive the aggregates as not-self, to develop dispassion for them and to gain release: the attha both of the perception of not-self and of the Dhamma as a whole.

So even though the Buddha found useful roles at certain stages in the path both for the assumption of a self and for the perception of not-self, those teaching strategies have their meaning fully drawn out. In neither case should you infer from them that there is or is not a self, for those views, as the Buddha pointed out, would induce actions leading away from the goal.

TESTS FOR THE TRUE DHAMMA

The relationship between the Dhamma and its attha is so direct that the Buddha made it a criterion for testing what was true Dhamma and what was not: If you followed a Dhamma teaching and it led you to the attha he taught, an experience of unbinding, then you knew that it was the genuine article. He framed this test in different terms, from the most basic to the most refined, depending on his audience.

For the Kālāmas, a group of skeptical laypeople, he outlined a very basic test. If, when you act on a teaching, it leads to long-term welfare and happiness, then you should keep following that teaching ([AN 3:66](#)).

For his stepmother, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, he framed a more extensive test. True Dhamma can be recognized by what it leads to in three areas: In terms of the ultimate goal, it should lead to dispassion and being unfettered; in terms of the means to that goal, to shedding, contentment, and aroused persistence; in terms of the relationships it fosters toward others, it should lead to modesty, reclusiveness, and being unburdensome ([AN 8:53](#)).

For Ven. Upāli, one of his foremost monk students, the Buddha formulated a test echoing his comments to the monks in the simsapā forest: True Dhamma, when put into practice, leads to utter disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding ([AN 7:80](#)).

The Buddha saw the need for this sort of test in his own lifetime, as there are reported instances of monks distorting the teachings even to his face ([MN 22](#); [MN 38](#)). He dealt with them severely, to show how seriously he meant for his Dhamma not to be changed. He also stated that those who attributed sayings to him that he didn't say, or denied his saying things that he actually did say, were slandering him ([AN 2:23](#)).

He also foresaw that the tendency to distort the Dhamma would increase after his passing, saying that the true Dhamma would disappear in 500 years ([AN 8:51](#)). For those of us living more than 2,500 years after his passing, it's a forecast that brings us up short—Is there no true Dhamma left anymore?—but [SN 16:13](#) gives an analogy to explain what he meant: The true Dhamma “disappears” when counterfeit Dhamma appears, in the same way that genuine money disappears when counterfeit money begins to circulate in the market. In other words, genuine money is still there, but people begin to lose their confidence as to what's genuine and what's not. In the same way, true Dhamma can still exist, but it's surrounded by so much counterfeit Dhamma that even the concept of true Dhamma, as opposed to false, gets called into question.

When counterfeit Dhamma actually came into circulation, and what it taught, is a matter of historical conjecture. A prime candidate is the teaching on the non-arising of phenomena, which appeared about 500 years after the Buddha's passing and claims that nothing really arises or passes away, and that everything is a timeless oneness. If this were true, then the four noble truths would not be true, for they speak of suffering arising and passing away. But again, whether this is the teaching that the Buddha had in mind when he foresaw counterfeit Dhamma is just a matter of conjecture.

What's undeniable, though, is that the Buddha's definition of the disappearance of the true Dhamma describes the situation that prevails now, with so many contradictory versions of the Dhamma at large in the world. Some people even laugh at the idea that any version of the Dhamma has any right to claim to be right and others wrong. They make a comparison with maps: Just as every map distorts reality, so that no single map can claim to be a totally accurate description of the truth, in the same way, every version of the Dhamma distorts reality, and so no version can qualify as exclusively right.

But this is a misreading of the map analogy. Neither maps nor the Dhamma are meant to be contemplated in and of themselves. They serve a purpose, an attha, and their accuracy can be tested by seeing if they actually serve the purpose intended for them. The fact that a map distorts some aspects of reality is no problem as long as it provides accurate directions for arriving at the goal for which it was drawn. If you're drawing a treasure map, for instance, you'll have to leave out some information. In fact, if you clutter the map with too many extraneous details, it becomes confusing and counterproductive. All that matters is that the route to the treasure is portrayed clearly enough to be followed, and that the route actually leads to the treasure.

In the same way, the Dhamma is expressed in words, and the nature of words is that they provide only a sketch of the reality they describe. But even then, they can still serve a good attha if the lines of the sketch act as a reliable guide to take you to that attha. Just as a map shouldn't be cluttered with extraneous information, the Buddha found it advisable to avoid most of the philosophical debates about the nature of the world and the self extant in his day so that his Dhamma could focus on being accurate in the basics: what's needed to get to the treasure of unbinding.

We like to think that the contradictions among available Dhamma maps are immaterial, that they simply point out alternative routes to the same goal. But the fact of the matter is that they describe not only

different routes, but also different locations for the treasure. They even describe the treasure in different terms. So they can't all be right—as we noted in the case of the four noble truths and the teaching of the non-arising of phenomena—which means that we have to choose among them.

Given that the Dhamma is not always pleasing, we can't let our likes and dislikes determine our choice. In fact, even when a Dhamma seems reasonable and fits in with what we already believe, that doesn't mean that it's true ([AN 3:66](#)). Our only hope of finding the true Dhamma is to test it: to choose a Dhamma that seems promising and put it into practice, to see where it leads.

This test entails more than reading and reasoning about texts. It requires high levels of commitment and honesty, and keen powers of observation of your own actions and their results: character traits that the Buddha looked for in all his students (MN 80; [SN 3:24](#)). It's only through being true yourself that you can know if the Dhamma is true.

But then, the Dhamma promises a lot of truth in return: not just a theory about happiness, but a direct, unchanging experience of the highest happiness possible. This is its *attha*. The potential reality of that *attha* is what keeps the Dhamma a living tradition. Without that *attha*, it would be nothing more than an historical curiosity—some theories about the mind and the world that far-away people believed in the far-distant past. It's because the four noble truths are designed to be strategic, leading to a living experience that lies beyond the words, that even now, after all these centuries, we still care about the Buddha's handful of leaves.

Becoming a True Person

The world needs more true people—those who are accountable and compassionate in their actions. Human society, to be livable, has to be based on trust, and people true in this way are the only ones really worthy of trust. The Buddha offers a way to train people to be true, starting with their experience of pain.

Pain, he once noted, sparks two reactions: The first is bewilderment—we don't understand why it's happening—and the second is a search for a way out. In his words, "A person overcome with pain, exhausted in mind, comes to search outside, 'Who knows a way or two to stop this pain?'" ([AN 6:63](#)) We wrack our brains trying to figure out a way to escape from pain, and when we're at our wits' end, we look for help outside. This is the reaction of a newborn infant suffering from physical pain, crying for its mother, and it's a reaction that, in more sophisticated forms, stays with us until the problem of suffering, both physical and mental, has been fully solved.

Which means that, for most people, this reaction stays with us throughout life and into death. Our life in human society is shaped both by the fact that we feel pain and by our search, conscious or unconscious, for people who can tell us ways to stop that pain.

We're looking for truth, but not in the abstract. Our search is aimed at finding truths of three kinds: a true reality—the ending of pain; true information on how to reach that reality; and true people: those who have direct knowledge of how to end pain—in other words, they really know what they're talking about, and aren't just reporting hearsay—and who are compassionate enough to be truthful in sharing what they know.

Now, because our search comes from bewilderment, it can lead in many directions, with widely varying degrees of success. Time and again, we've been easily duped. Seeing the need for a reliable response to this search, the Buddha offered his teaching on suffering and the end of suffering. However, his response went beyond simply showing how to end pains that have already arisen. It encompassed knowledge of how to prevent them from arising in the first place. Instead of just putting out fires already started, he showed how to reach a dimension where the fires couldn't start.

By encompassing this dimension, he turned the ordinary search for an end to pain into what he called the noble search. The ignoble search, he said, looks for an end to pain in things that age, grow ill, and die. This kind of search is ignoble because its answer to the problem of suffering is simply to offer more suffering: more things that will change, leaving you where you were before, if not worse.

The noble search, on the other hand, looks for something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, and doesn't die, for only when your mind has found something beyond the reach of aging, illness, and death can you be totally beyond the problem of suffering. The Buddha claimed to have completed the noble search, and in completing it he had also found that the path to the end of suffering was something other people could accomplish as well. So he offered to teach them how.

In this way, he was offering all three kinds of truth to satisfy our search: the end of suffering—*nibbāna*—as a true reality, the Dhamma as true information on how to get there, and himself as a true person—someone who was speaking from direct, reliable experience and who had the compassion to report that experience accurately.

Yet he also saw that the nature of that path, and the process of getting others to follow it, required not only that he be a true person but that his listeners also become true people as well.

A great deal has been written on the topic of *nibbāna* as a true reality, and the Buddha's teachings about the path as true information, but very little on what might be called the social truth of the practice—what it means to be a true teacher and what is required to become a true student. However, this social dimension of truth is at least as important as the other two, for without it you'll never know how true those two really are. If you don't know how to judge a true teacher, you can easily be fed wrong information. If you don't know how to be a true student, you won't be in a position to judge how fair you've been in putting a teacher's instructions to the test.

The truth of the teacher begins with two aspects: telling the truth as you see it and guarding the truth ([MN 95](#); [MN 140](#))—i.e., being very clear about where you get your information. These two aspects are necessary in any teacher, but they're not enough to satisfy a potential student searching for a way out of pain. To be genuinely satisfying, the teacher should be committed even further to the truth: to have knowledge based on direct experience, and to have the qualities of heart and mind that can reliably test that knowledge to make sure that it's a trustworthy guide to others. When you're searching for a way out of

pain, you legitimately want more than the teacher's "personal truth," i.e., subjective opinions about what feels true. You want knowledge that you can apply effectively to your own experience of pain. To satisfy this requirement, the teacher needs to have developed enough mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment not only to find the truth of nibbāna, but also to test that experience to make sure it's the real thing.

In other words, the teacher has to be earnest and accountable. This quality of accountability is what turns the teacher's truth as a person from a mere personal truth into a truth with an objective, social dimension.

All of these ways in which the teacher should be truthful are directly related to compassion: In terms of telling and guarding the truth, the Buddha noted that the act of teaching has to be based on compassion for it to be pure ([AN 5:159](#)). As for the teacher's accountability and earnestness: Any teachers who've allowed themselves to be lazy or to drop back in the practice can hardly be described as compassionate to themselves or to those who depend on them.

This combination of truth and compassion underlies the first two tests that the Buddha recommends a student apply to any potential teacher of the path. To know if such a person is reliable, he recommends spending time with the person and taking note: "Are there in this venerable one any such qualities based on greed... aversion... delusion that, (1) with his mind overcome by these qualities, he might say, 'I know,' while not knowing, or say, 'I see,' while not seeing; or (2) that he might urge another to act in a way that was for his/her long-term harm & pain?" ([MN 95](#))

A third test relates to the quality of the Dhamma taught by the teacher: It should be the sort that's "deep... hard to realize... beyond the scope of conjecture... to be realized by the observant" ([MN 95](#)). In other words, you should look for signs that the teacher is not only speaking from direct experience, but also has a level of accountability suggesting a level of experience beyond the ordinary.

As for the truth of the student, the Buddha once noted that he looked for two qualities in a person he'd be willing to teach. On the one hand, the person should be observant; and on the other, be "not fraudulent, not deceitful, one of a straightforward nature" (MN 80). In other words, he wanted a student who would report truthfully and accurately what he or she had done, along with the consequences of his or her actions.

The Buddha's emphasis on telling the truth derives from two things: the nature of the path he taught to the end of suffering, and the nature of

the student's relationship to the teacher.

In terms of the path, the Buddha analyzed suffering into two kinds: the suffering or stress inherent in the fact of change, and the suffering that comes from the mind's own unskillful actions, harming itself through its craving and clinging. The first kind of suffering weighs on the mind because of the second kind. If you can get rid of craving and clinging by making your mental actions more skillful, to the point where they cause no harm either to yourself or to others, then no suffering weighs on the mind at all.

So the path will require looking at your actions, the intentions on which they're based, and the results they lead to, to see exactly where you're being unskillful. If you don't have a habit of being truthful in reporting your actions to others, it becomes very easy to lie about them to yourself. And if you lie to yourself about your actions—claiming either that they had no consequences, that the consequences don't matter, or that they didn't cause harm when they actually did—there's no way you'll be able to follow the path.

This is why the truthfulness the Buddha is looking for in a student is like the truthfulness the student should look for in a teacher: the truthfulness of being accountable. This is also why a basic prerequisite for following the path is that you be honest in observing what you've done and in reporting your mistakes to your teacher.

This is where the importance of your relationship to the teacher comes in. Only if you report your mistakes frankly to the teacher can he or she help you locate the source of your unskillfulness so that you can do something about it. And only if you respect the teacher enough to see the importance of being truthful in your interactions will you be likely to listen attentively to any criticisms the teacher has to offer. If you can't accept criticism, you won't be able to make the needed changes in the ways you act.

In light of the connection between truthfulness and compassion in the teacher, it's interesting to note that the Buddha looked for truthfulness in the beginning student, but not necessarily for compassion. He never explained why, but it's a point worth considering.

Part of the answer may be found in the Buddha's instructions to his son, Rāhula, when Rāhula was still a child. Essentially, he was teaching Rāhula how to accomplish two things at once: to overcome the hindrance of uncertainty and to replace it with the awakening-factor of discernment. As the Buddha mentions elsewhere ([SN 46:51](#)), the general outline in both cases was to pay proper attention to which

qualities in the mind were skillful and which ones were not. In teaching Rāhula in detail how to do that, he was also encouraging the two qualities he looked for in a student: being truthful and being observant.

The Buddha's first instruction was for Rāhula to develop a strong sense of the importance of telling the truth: If he felt no shame at telling a deliberate lie, he would lack the necessary quality of being a contemplative.

Then, before attempting any action in thought, word, or deed, Rāhula was to ask himself what consequences he expected from the action. If he foresaw any harm, either to himself or to others, he shouldn't follow through with the action. If he didn't expect any harm, he could act, but he had to look at the results coming up in the course of the action. If he observed any harm, he should stop. If not, he could continue. Then, when the action was completed, he should reflect on its long-term consequences. If it did cause harm, he should feel ashamed at having caused that harm, should resolve not to repeat it, and should talk his mistake over with someone more advanced on the path. If he detected no harm, he should take joy in the fact and keep on training ([MN 61](#)).

What the Buddha is doing here is teaching Rāhula to devote his powers of truthfulness and observation toward compassionate ends. By measuring his actions in terms of the harm done or not done, Rāhula would become more sensitive to the repercussions of his actions.

Now, the Buddha could have limited the notion of doing harm to mean nothing more than harming yourself. But in other teachings, he shows that you also get harmed when you harm others. He offers two reasons why.

One reason is the impersonal principle of kamma, or intentional action: If you hurt other beings, the results of that action will come back at you. Or as he once told a group of boys who were catching little fish:

*If you fear pain,
if you dislike pain,
don't anywhere do an evil deed
in open or in secret.
If you're doing or will do
an evil deed,
you won't escape pain
catching up
as you run away. — [Ud 5:4](#)*

The other reason why harming others is a way of harming yourself is that other people love themselves just as much as you love yourself. If your happiness depends on their pain and suffering, they won't view your happiness with admiration or affectionate eyes. In fact, they won't stand for it. They'll do what they can to end it ([Ud 5:1](#)).

This is why the Buddha said that when you break the precepts against killing, stealing, lying, etc., you're actually harming yourself. If you really want to harm others, you get *them* to break the precepts, for then that bad kamma will become theirs ([AN 4:99](#)).

So, in effect, when the Buddha was teaching Rāhula to do no harm, he was teaching him to look beyond himself to develop the desire to avoid harming anyone at all. But instead of basing his motivation on compassion, Rāhula was taught to base it on intelligent self-interest and a healthy sense of shame: the shame that's the opposite, not of pride, but of shamelessness. It's the shame of a good social conscience and high self-esteem.

The notion of shame comes up twice in the Buddha's instructions to Rāhula: shame over telling a deliberate lie, and shame over having caused harm. Now, shame is a social emotion. It's based on a desire to look good in the eyes of people you respect. In this case, Rāhula was encouraged to look good in the eyes of his noble teachers. Knowing that they were compassionate in their desires for him to be skillful and would judge his actions by their harmlessness, he was encouraged to adopt their attitude, not through innate compassion, but through a sense of indebtedness and gratitude to them.

Think back on the original question sparked by pain, and the social dynamic it creates. You want to find a way to stop pain and you look for help from others. When you find that help, the proper response is a sense of gratitude. The healthy sense of shame growing from that gratitude is the attitude the Buddha was encouraging Rāhula to foster.

It was from this attitude of shame that Rāhula was to develop compassionate aims, beginning with compassion for himself and spreading out into the world.

So, for the Buddha, genuine compassion has to be based on truthfulness. It's easy to see why. People who claim to act on compassionate motives but don't see the importance of being truthful lack a basic ingredient in social conscience: the respect and gratitude implicit in a felt obligation to tell the truth to everyone, regardless of how you feel about them. When people lack this ingredient in their conscience, it's easy for them to claim compassionate motives when

actually causing harm—and hard for them to take an interest in learning about that harm and changing their ways. Their compassion is compassion without accountability, a dangerous and deluded combination. Although their intentions may be good, they're not necessarily skillful. Their lack of skill can get in the way of following the path.

So if you want to know if the Buddha's teachings about the end of suffering are true information, and if the deathless happiness of nibbāna is a true reality, it's important to develop your own truthfulness in being an earnest and accountable person. That's when you'll know whether the Buddha's truths satisfy your own desire for truth. In the meantime, as long as you work on developing truthfulness, your sense of social conscience will become more reliably compassionate, bearing genuinely good fruits, both for yourself and for the people around you.

Happiness as a Skill

THE PRACTICE OF PUÑÑA

Puñña—usually translated as “merit”—is a hard concept for many Western Buddhists to wrap their hearts around. They find it cold and calculating: good-kamma points stored up for future consumption, Buddhist merit badges for looking good in the eyes of the world. It doesn't help that some of the earliest Westerners exposed to the concept of merit spread the idea that it was a Buddhist version of papal indulgences: an attempt to game the system of kamma by buying one's way out of hell and into heaven in the next life. The whole notion of wanting to earn merit for the future seems to fly in the face of one of the basic principles of Buddhist practice: to focus on the present and let go.

Part of the problem lies in the translation. When we look at how the Buddha himself uses the word, we can see that he aimed it primarily not at external signs, but at qualities of the heart.

To begin with, there are many passages where he contrasts *puñña* and *pāpa*, or evil, as opposites. For example:

Here
 he grieves
 he grieves
 hereafter.
In both worlds
 the evil-doer grieves.
 He grieves, he's afflicted,
 seeing the corruption
 of his deeds.

Here
 he rejoices
 he rejoices
 hereafter.
In both worlds
 the puñña-doer rejoices.
 He rejoices, is jubilant,
 seeing the purity
 of his deeds. — [Dhp 15-16](#)

This suggests that *puñña* might be better translated as “goodness.” This may not seem much better than “merit,” especially when we note that, again and again, it’s said to be something that’s “done,” “made,” and “accumulated”—another case of focusing on externals and acquisitions. But when we remember that all action, for the Buddha, begins inside you with the intention, and returns inside as pleasure or pain, this is a goodness that has to begin and end in the heart.

And it’s a goodness that creates happiness all along the way, both for yourself and for others. The Buddha begins Itivuttaka 22 by telling his disciples, “Monks, don’t be afraid of acts of goodness. This is a synonym for what is blissful, desirable, pleasing, endearing, charming—i.e., acts of goodness.” He analyzes these acts into three types—giving, self-control, and restraint—and then further identifies self-control with virtue, and restraint with a heart of goodwill. This yields the list of goodness-acts that has become standard throughout the Buddhist tradition: giving, virtue, and the development of goodwill. And although the Buddha discusses the long-term karmic rewards of each of these acts, his opening statement makes it clear that the happiness of an act of goodness lies not only in its future rewards, but also—and more importantly—in the act itself. This is goodness that, when you learn to appreciate it, generates immediate happiness and bliss.

But here we run up against another aspect of *puñña* that many Westerners find off-putting. The Buddha treats acts of goodness as skills to be analyzed and developed. He goes into detail on the results of various ways of practicing giving and virtue and of developing goodwill, grading them as to whether they produce greater or lesser amounts of goodness, and exhibit greater or lesser amounts of skill in producing reliable happiness.

For example, with giving: He’s clear that there should be no constraints on giving—when asked where a gift should be given, he answered, “Wherever the heart feels inspired”—but he adds that an act of giving, to produce the best results, must meet certain objective criteria in terms of the donor’s motivation for giving, the donor’s attitude while giving, the recipient, and the gift itself:

- In terms of the *motivation*, the Buddha recognizes many gradations, the lowest being the desire to store up wealth for a future life, the highest being simply the thought that the act of giving is an ornament and support for the heart here and now.

- In terms of the *attitude*, the Buddha recommends that you give attentively, with the conviction that something good will come of the

gift, with empathy for the person who's receiving the gift, and not with the sense that you're simply throwing it away. In other words, the way you talk to yourself about the meaning and importance of what you're doing while giving a gift plays a large role in how much happiness you derive from the act.

- As for the *recipient*, the Buddha says that it's best to give to those who are free of passion, aversion, and delusion, or to those who are practicing to arrive at that goal, because these are the people most likely to make best use of the gift. When you later reflect on the gift and its consequences, you'll be happy you gave.

- As for the *gift* itself, the Buddha recommends that you give in season—i.e., a gift appropriate to time and place—and that the gift not adversely affect you or anyone else. This means that you don't give so much that you harm yourself financially, you don't steal the gift to give it away, and you don't give a gift that will place undue burdens on the recipient.

And although the Buddha does mention that large gifts can create a great deal of puñña, he's quick to add that the goodness of even great gifts of generosity to highly attained individuals is no match at all for the goodness that comes from observing the five precepts: abstaining from killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants. The goodness of observing the precepts, in turn, is no match for the goodness of developing a heart of goodwill.

In other words, the kamma of virtue and vice, both inner and outer, is much stronger than the kamma of generosity, so there's no truth to the idea that the puñña of generosity can buy your way out of the results of a life of corruption or crime. A better way to compensate for any past misdeeds would be to recognize them as mistakes, to resolve not to repeat them, and to devote the heart to the practice of virtue and goodwill. These, the more powerful forms of puñña, are not for sale. In fact, they're open to all, rich or poor. There are always opportunities in any life to practice them, which means that the path to an abundant and lasting happiness presents itself to everyone at every moment.

For many people, though, all this talk of objective grades of happiness still seems too calculating. Goodness and happiness, in their eyes, shouldn't be measured or analyzed, and instead should be allowed to be subjective, spontaneous, and serendipitous. That's part of their joy.

This brings us back to the charge that puñña, however you translate it, brings the calculating mind into an area that should belong exclusively to the impulses of the heart. This perception—along with the fact that

people practicing for the Buddhist goal are said to be among the ideal recipients of gifts—has led some people to ask whose mind(s) thought up the calculations. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the idea of puñña is totally extrinsic to the Buddha's teachings. They claim that it began not with the Buddha, but with later generations of monks and nuns who wanted to take advantage of the good reputation of the monastic Saṅgha—and of the hopes and fears of lay people concerning the afterlife—to garner support for their monasteries. The concept of puñña was thus invented to attract donations to the monastic Saṅgha, while at the same time deflecting donors from the higher levels of practice. That's the accusation.

But when we look more carefully at the Buddha's teachings on puñña, we find that they're intrinsic to the most basic principles of the Dhamma, and particularly to the principles of discernment and right view. The practice of Dhamma as a whole, from the act of giving a gift to the attainment of unbinding (*nibbāna*), is the pursuit of happiness as an objective skill.

It's *objective* in that the laws of cause and effect governing pleasure and pain are the same for all conscious beings. No matter who you are, when you act on unskillful intentions, pain results. When you act on skillful intentions, pleasure results. Dhamma practice is also objective in that the ultimate happiness at the end of the path is of a nature—unconditioned by space, time, or culture—that no other happiness could possibly equal or exceed.

The practice of Dhamma is a *skill* in that awakening isn't a spiritual accident just waiting to happen. It's found by developing a clearly marked path of skills that, although they don't cause unbinding, can reliably take you there. Not only is the practice of puñña intrinsically related to the development of discernment, it also brings a dimension of the heart to the arising of insight, an area all too often treated as purely a matter of the intellect. This is in line with Pali linguistic usage, in which the words for "mind"—*citta* and *manas*—both cover what we in English call "heart" as well. When we think of insight as an affair of both heart and mind, we get closer to the Buddha's own sense of what he was teaching.

And in a reversal of the belief that puñña was invented to facilitate the life of the Saṅgha, we will find that the Saṅgha was actually designed, in part, to facilitate the practice of puñña. The rules governing the life of the monastics provide a social structure—an economy of gifts—that encourages this added dimension of the heart as a necessary

precondition for teaching and practicing the Dhamma. If you don't learn to appreciate the practice of goodness through having engaged in it, there are many higher aspects of Buddhist practice you won't understand at all.

FROM PUÑÑA TO INSIGHT

It may seem strange to yoke the practice of puñña to the arising of insight. After all, what does putting food in a monk's bowl have to do with seeing the true nature of how things are? That's how a lot of people look at the issue, but they're coming from a misunderstanding of the Buddha's teachings on insight and discernment. The discourses of the Pali Canon never equate discernment with seeing the true nature of how things *are*. Instead, they explain discernment as seeing the true pattern of how things *work*—the “things” here being intentional actions and the laws of cause and effect that determine whether an action will lead to pleasure or to pain.

As [MN 135](#) points out, discernment begins by asking questions of truly wise people about the power of action:

“What is skillful, venerable sir? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? What, when I do it, will be for my long-term harm & suffering? Or what, when I do it, will be for my long-term well-being & happiness?”

These questions not only treat action as the primary focus of discernment. They also assume that actions should lead to predictable results and that some actions, reliably and objectively, lead to more happiness than others. These assumptions underlie the idea that happiness can and should be approached as a skill. In fact, they underlie the whole notion of a path of practice that would qualify as a universal truth.

It's easy to see how acts of puñña—giving, virtue, and the development of goodwill—are the entry-level answers to the questions based on these assumptions. But the Buddha's answers to these questions don't stop there. *All* of his teachings on discernment are answers to these questions. For instance, in the list of the factors for awakening, the discernment factor—analysis of qualities—is said to be fostered by paying appropriate attention to the qualities of the mind that lead to skillful and unskillful actions. The four noble truths, the terms of

the discernment leading immediately to awakening, are also focused on action: which actions produce suffering; which actions form a path leading to its end. And although ultimately all actions will have to be abandoned for the sake of awakening, the actions of the path first have to be developed before the heart and mind can reach that point of total letting go.

This is true all the way to the verge of awakening. For instance, the perception of not-self, one of the strategies for letting go, is an action. As part of the path to the end of suffering, it's recommended because of the actions it inspires—actions that will yield long-term well-being and happiness.

“Suppose a person were to gather or burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs, branches, & leaves here in Jeta’s Grove. Would the thought occur to you, ‘It’s us that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes’?”

“No, lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self, nor do they pertain to our self.”

“In the same way, monks, the eye isn’t yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term well-being & happiness ... The ear... The nose... The tongue... The body... The intellect isn’t yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness ... Whatever arises in dependence on intellect-contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that, too, isn’t yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term well-being & happiness.” — [SN 35:101](#)

This long-term well-being and happiness, of course, is the realization of unbinding, which can be experienced only when you let go of the activity of these six senses.

THE SKILLS OF HAPPINESS

What all these passages show is that discernment consists of value judgments about actions—in particular, which actions are worth engaging in. Not only that: These passages also show that the entire project of the Buddha’s teaching is to approach well-being and happiness as a progressive skill. The Buddha, seeing that happiness does come in lesser and greater forms, searched for actions that reliably could lead to

higher and higher levels of happiness, and ultimately to the total, unchanging happiness of unbinding.

The practice of puñña, then, is in no way foreign to the general project of the Buddha's teachings. It gives essential guidance in the first steps in this project, showing that it's much better to follow the principles of action that can lead to a reliable happiness and well-being than to leave happiness to happenstance and chance. As you gain experience from acting on this principle in everyday levels of goodness, pursuing it to greater levels of refinement, it's easier to trust it as you venture into more unfamiliar levels of the practice as, in meditation, you focus directly on the mind.

At the same time, the sensitivity developed in the practice of puñña ensures that the practice of meditation, in developing both concentration and discernment, is not just a training of the intellect, but also a training of the heart. A common theme, repeated again and again in the suttas, is that the practice of goodness leads to a sense of joy free from regret, and that this joy leads naturally to a sense of refreshment, calm, and pleasure, allowing the heart to settle easily in concentration.

As for discernment, it's a type of sensitivity. If the heart and mind haven't been trained in the kind of sensitivity that comes from empathy and an appreciation of goodness, an important dimension of human experience is missing. That would lead to lopsided discernment that spotlights the intellect and leaves the heart in the dark. A mind without expansive goodwill, the Buddha said, is narrow and restricted—hardly one to gain all-around vision and understanding. This may be why he also said that a person who is stingy can't enter right concentration—to say nothing of reaching higher attainments on the path.

THE LESSONS OF PUÑÑA

The practice of puñña is never treated as a mere stepping stone to more advanced levels of the practice, something to be done and then disposed of as you move on quickly to bigger and better things. Instead, the continued practice of puñña provides an ongoing environment of well-being in which those more advanced levels can thrive. It's like a field in which good seeds can find the nourishment they need to grow into healthy and productive plants.

Because puñña is focused on fostering actions that lead to a genuine happiness, its practice also teaches many important lessons about the

nature of action and the nature of happiness, lessons that guide the higher levels of the practice. This is true of all three types of goodness.

The act of giving, for instance, teaches the value of delayed gratification: You can't gain happiness without first being willing to give something away. It also teaches you that there are gradations in pleasure: The pleasure of giving is more lasting and satisfying than the pleasure that comes from simply consuming what you've got. These lessons help promote a mature attitude toward the difficulties we all face in getting the mind to settle down, when it needs to let go of the cherished attachments that lie in the way of developing greater and greater levels of inner peace.

The practice of virtue teaches you to focus on your intentions—the precepts can be broken only if you break them intentionally—as well as giving training in mindfulness and alertness, qualities needed in meditation. To keep the precepts, you have to keep them in mind and be alert to what you're doing, to make sure that your actions are actually in line with the precepts to which you're committed.

The development of goodwill, which the Buddha equates with restraint, teaches you that restraint is not a type of confinement. Instead, it's an act of kindness to yourself and others. In fact, you best show your goodwill for others when you refrain from doing them harm. This realization makes you more inclined to practice the mental restraint needed for strong concentration.

As you develop these three types of goodness, they show you the power of choice. You can choose to act in ways that improve your environment and, over the long term, the state of your heart and mind. This is a good lesson in how your intentions shape what the Buddha calls becoming (*bhava*): your sense of who you are and the world in which you live.

The three types of goodness also show you how true happiness erases boundaries within that world: As you pursue true happiness, you also promote the happiness of others. You see that when happiness is skillful, there's no sharp line between yours and theirs. When you give, you benefit and so do the recipients of your gifts. When you follow the precepts, you gain in self-esteem, and you pose no danger to others. When you develop goodwill, your heart grows more expansive and you're more likely to treat others well.

Because these acts of goodness often begin with delayed gratification, they require that you train yourself to develop the right attitude while doing them. This means learning how to talk to yourself as you perform

acts of goodness, to keep your attitude healthy and your outlook bright. The Buddha has a technical term to describe this inner conversation—he calls it verbal fabrication, which he defines further as directed thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic and then you engage in an inner dialogue, asking questions and making comments around that topic to evaluate what's worth doing and what's not. As you get more skilled in directing your thoughts to goodness and evaluating which actions are truly good, you find that this verbal fabrication can make an act of goodness pleasurable in and of itself.

At the same time, it prepares you for meditation in two important ways. First, verbal fabrication is part of the first level of right concentration. When you've had training in talking to yourself in a skillful way through the practice of goodness, that skill transfers into the meditation as you learn to talk to yourself productively about the object of your concentration and your relationship to it. This enables you to settle down snugly, reaching a level of stability where you can drop the directed thought and evaluation to reach deeper levels of physical and mental peace.

Second, as the focus of your inner conversation moves away from the happy results you expect in the future and toward the happiness inherent in acts of goodness while you're doing them, you prepare yourself for an important meditative skill: the ability to focus on mental acts in and of themselves. It's easiest to look directly at your intentions when you're acting on intentions that you know, in your heart, are honorable and good. Even if negative mind-states barge into your awareness, they're less likely to knock you off balance because you can recollect your virtue and generosity—standard meditative practices that the Buddha recommended—remembering that you've got a strong good side, too.

As you take the Buddha's definition of *puñña* more and more literally—seeing happiness in the intention to do goodness—you become accustomed to looking for the feeling tone in intentions themselves. This focus prepares you for one of the Buddha's more radical insights—that suffering is not something passively endured, it's an action: the mental act of clinging, in and of itself. This focus also prepares you to see the role the mind plays in constructing *all* of its sensory experience, an insight that can lead to liberation.

The fact that you've been doing your best to construct your experience through acts of goodness means that when you do let go of mental constructions, it's not out of hatred or fear or self-recrimination. Instead, you can let go with a sense of appreciation for the fact that your mental

constructs have delivered you harmlessly and happily to that stage in the practice.

This is how liberating insight can grow from mastering the good act of giving alms.

INSIGHT FOSTERS GOODNESS

Just as the practice of goodness helps to perfect the higher levels of the practice, the higher levels, in turn, help to perfect the practice of goodness. This can be seen in the Buddha's descriptions of the most skillful levels of giving, virtue, and the development of goodwill, which come only with the preliminary levels of awakening.

The most skillful motivation for giving, for example, is what we noted above: You give with the thought, not that you will gain anything from the act, but that it's simply an ornament and support for the heart. This, the Buddha said, is the motivation of the non-returner, someone who has achieved the third of the four levels of awakening. Such a person is not destined to return to this world, and so has no need to look for a future reward. This type of motivation is said to be even higher than giving with the thought, "When this gift of mine is given, it makes the heart serene. Gratification & joy arise." To treat a gift as an ornament for the heart means that you're not hoping to feed off it in any way at all. It's a totally free gift, an act of beauty—something that only a person at least on the level of non-returning is in a position to do.

Similarly with virtue: A person practicing the most skillful level of virtue is said to have "virtues pleasing to the noble ones: untorn, unbroken, unspotted, unsplattered, liberating, praised by the observant, ungrasped at, leading to concentration." These are the virtues of a person who has achieved stream-entry, the first of the four levels of awakening, the first glimpse of the deathless. From this point on, you observe the precepts scrupulously because you've seen that your own unskillful behavior in the past is what prevented you from glimpsing the deathless prior to that.

At the same time, though, you're not overly anxious about having to follow the precepts. Actions in line with the precepts come naturally. This balanced attitude of scrupulous observance without anxiety is what makes your precepts conducive to concentration. Wise, observant people praise your virtue because you don't grasp at virtue to prove that you're superior to others. As one Pali expression has it, you're not "made of

your virtue”: In other words, you can live in line with the precepts without having to construct a sense of self around them.

As for goodwill, it’s fully perfected when it leads the mind to a firm state of concentration, clear enough that you can see the fabricated nature of the concentration and, becoming dispassionate toward it, can achieve full release.

DHAMMA IN THE CONTEXT OF GOODNESS

All these connections between the mastery of puñña and the attaining of awakening show that the practice of goodness is inseparable from the practice of the Dhamma. In fact, for the Dhamma to thrive, it requires an environment shaped by the practice of goodness, both on the internal level—when, in approaching happiness as a skill, you develop necessary Dhamma skills within the heart—and on the external level, in social arrangements that encourage the practice of goodness as the best environment in which the Dhamma can be taught and learned.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha instituted the monastic Saṅgha: It’s a social structure specifically designed to help facilitate the practice of generosity, virtue, and universal goodwill.

It promotes generosity in that the Buddha created a body of rules that, as long as his monks and nuns follow them, make them virtuous: worthy and inspiring recipients of other people’s gifts. At the same time, the rules require that they behave in ways that don’t exploit or coerce the generosity of their supporters. Because they are celibate, they need no support to raise families, which allows them to be unburdensome to their donors. Because they live off gifts freely given, they’re under no compulsion to teach—which means that those among them who *do* teach can give the Dhamma freely, as a gift. It’s only in an economy of gifts like this, where the Dhamma can be freely given, that the Dhamma is not turned into a commodity, subject to market forces that would distort it. What better way to teach generosity than to practice it? And what better way to practice it than to give the Dhamma as a free gift?

The monastic Saṅgha promotes the practice of virtue not only through the rules governing the behavior of the monks and nuns, allowing them to live a harmless life, but also through the implicit and explicit encouragement they give to lay people to be virtuous as well. The fact that there are people who find happiness through behaving virtuously acts as a valuable counterweight to the examples throughout

human history of people who get ahead by trampling on the well-being of others. The example of the Saṅgha shows that there are other, better ways of finding happiness than simply “getting ahead.”

Because the members of the monastic Saṅgha come from all social backgrounds, it also provides an example of harmonious relationships among people who ordinarily might never live together. At the same time, the members of the Saṅgha are encouraged to teach all people, regardless of background, who show an interest in the Dhamma. In this way, the Saṅgha helps to show that universal goodwill is not an empty fantasy. It can overcome barriers that ordinary society puts in its way.

The Buddha called the Saṅgha the “unexcelled field of goodness for the world.” He was speaking of the noble Saṅgha—all those, whether ordained or not, who have attained at least the first level of awakening—but the conventional monastic Saṅgha, over the centuries, has provided the structure by which that field is tended and maintained. If it weren’t for this arrangement by which the Dhamma can be freely taught to all comers, the Dhamma would have long ago been distorted by privatizing market forces to the point where it wouldn’t be Dhamma anymore.

TRUST IN GOODNESS

So it’s not the case that the practice of puñña was invented to feed the Saṅgha. Instead, the Saṅgha was designed, in part at least, to promote the practice of puñña, both by monastics and their supporters. It provides the environment in which goodness is most fruitfully developed into a skill for the sake of true happiness. Goodness, in turn, when developed as a skill, provides the context that the practice of the Dhamma as a whole needs in order to thrive.

Even though the Buddha went beyond all attachment to good and evil on attaining full awakening, he didn’t go beyond his appreciation for what the practice of goodness can do. He saw that it would provide the only environment in which his Dhamma could survive in a world on fire, as he saw it, with greed, aversion, and delusion.

It might seem a risky prospect—entrusting the Dhamma to the practice of goodness in such a world—but that’s what he did. So far, his act of trust has continued to bear fruit for more than 2,600 years. The fact that the Dhamma is still available for us to practice is due to the goodness of many, many generations of people. The best way to show our gratitude is to develop some goodness of our own, so that we can

fully benefit from the Dhamma and pass it on intact, as a genuine gift to those yet to come.

Wise Enough to Care

Pay attention when the Buddha is teaching children. He's not giving them pacifier Dhamma, to be discarded when they outgrow it. Instead, he's teaching them important principles in clear language that will serve them—and you—well throughout life.

Once, when he was on his alms round, he came across a group of boys catching little fish. He asked them, "Do you fear pain? Do you dislike pain?"

"Yes," they answered.

So he recited a spontaneous verse:

*If you fear pain,
if you dislike pain,
don't anywhere do an evil deed
in open or in secret.
If you're doing or will do
an evil deed,
you won't escape pain
catching up
as you run away. — [Ud 5:4](#)*

He was teaching them a quality called *ottappa*, or compunction: the fear of doing wrong and of suffering bad consequences as a result. In his verse, he's basing the sense of compunction on an impersonal principle: the way kamma acts. Just because the beings you're harming may be powerless to get back at you right now doesn't mean that the kammic results are powerless at all.

The Buddha used a similar argument when, on another day's alms round, he came across a group of boys beating a snake with a stick. He told them:

*Whoever hits with a stick
beings desiring ease,
when he himself is looking for ease,
will meet with no ease after death.
Whoever doesn't hit with a stick
beings desiring ease,*

*when he himself is looking for ease,
will meet with ease after death. — [Ud 2:3](#)*

But the Buddha also used more interpersonal arguments to teach compunction. Once, when teaching a king, he offered another reflection: Just as you will never find anyone you love more than yourself, other people love themselves just as fiercely. Then he concluded:

*So you shouldn't hurt others
if you love yourself. — [Ud 5:1](#)*

The reasoning here seems to be that if your happiness depends on harming others, it won't be safe. Given that it violates their self-love, they'll try to destroy it. If you really want lasting happiness, you can't cause other beings any harm.

Compunction is rarely discussed in modern Buddhist circles, even though it appears in many of the Buddha's lists of qualities to be developed along the path. He calls it a guardian of the world in that it keeps people from violating trust and behaving promiscuously. In a simile where the Buddha compares different qualities needed on the path to features of a frontier fortress, compunction is a high and wide road encircling the fortress, to ward off unskillful qualities that would damage the skillful qualities—such as mindfulness and right effort—that inhabit the fortress. It's also a treasure that thieves can't steal, fire can't burn, and floods can't wash away.

In many of these lists, compunction is paired with a healthy sense of shame. Together, they make up your sense of conscience. Healthy shame—the opposite, not of self-esteem, but of shamelessness—is a disinclination to do wrong, motivated by your desire not to look bad in the eyes of people you admire. Compunction is more impersonal. You sense that, given the way causality works over the long run, you're not immune to the consequences of your actions—and you care.

In this sense, compunction is the opposite of callousness—the attitude that you'll do as you please, and you don't give a damn about the consequences. It's also the opposite of apathy, the defeatist attitude of not caring about anything at all. When you feel compunction, you actively care about your long-term well-being and will try your best not to jeopardize it.

This active quality of caring may be one of the reasons why compunction is also paired with ardency in descriptions of meditators

wiping unskillful thoughts out of their minds.

“If, while he is walking, there arises in a monk a thought of sensuality, a thought of ill will, or a thought of harmfulness, and he does not quickly abandon, dispel, demolish, or wipe that thought out of existence, then a monk walking with such a lack of ardency & compunction is called continually and continuously lethargic and low in his persistence. [Similarly if he is standing, sitting, or lying down.]”
— [Iti 110](#)

But compunction is not just a quality for beginners in the Dhamma or in meditation. It’s also listed as one of the strengths of a “learner,” someone who has attained at least the first noble attainment, the first taste of the deathless. It’s a quality that will strengthen that person all along the path to total awakening.

It’s good to contemplate why.

One reason is that compunction contains, in embryonic form, both of the discernment factors of the noble eightfold path, which a learner has also developed: right view and right resolve. It’s related to right view in that it understands the importance of your actions in determining whether you will suffer or not. Pleasure and pain arise and fall away, not randomly, but because of things you have done and are doing.

Compunction is related to right resolve in that it wants to avoid suffering, so it resolves to avoid any action that would cause suffering. It’s a direct expression of one of the forms of right resolve: goodwill, the determination not to cause harm. As we’ve seen, compunction starts with the determination not to cause harm to yourself, and then—based on its understanding of kamma—it grows into a desire not to harm any being at all. That’s the foundation of universal goodwill.

Compunction’s dual relationship to discernment here—as an understanding based on a view of reality and as a form of resolve—highlights the dual aspect of discernment, an aspect that’s often overlooked. The right-view side of compunction is based on a conviction in the way things work: a conviction that, when you become a learner, is confirmed. Actions yield results in line with the quality of the intention that motivates them. This is a fact that has to be accepted.

But discernment doesn’t stop with acceptance. After all, what it accepts is that there are basically two types of action—skillful and unskillful, leading to well-being and leading to harm—and it’s possible to choose one over the other. Seeing the options opened by this possibility, the right-resolve side of compunction arrives at a value judgment:

Skillful is better than unskillful, so harmful actions should be avoided. The pleasure they may bring in the short term is not worth the long-term pain they will cause. This judgment applies not only to blatant actions, like beating snakes with sticks, but also to more subtle ones, such as clinging to views and ways of defining your self that will lead to suffering and stress. Even when the Buddha talks about the motivation for the final stages of insight practice—perceiving all phenomena as empty of self—he explains it in terms of the suffering that’s avoided when you do.

In other words, from the beginning of the practice to its final steps, it’s wise to care: about what you choose to do, and about the consequences of your choices. You realize that, with freedom of choice, you have power in your hands—the power to shape your own experience of pleasure and pain, along with the pleasures and pains of others—and you care about using this power well.

When you comprehend this point, it goes a long way to correcting a lot of common misconceptions about Buddhist insight: that it doesn’t pass judgment, that it ends with acceptance of the way things are.

The lessons of compunction also help you to understand the modern Dhamma principle of not being attached to the outcome of your actions. It doesn’t mean that you don’t care about the outcome. It simply means that you don’t insist that just because you choose to do something, its outcome will have to be right. If you see that an action actually caused harm, you’re willing to accept the mistake as a mistake so that you can learn from it, and you make up your mind not to repeat it. This is another point of wisdom that the Buddha taught to a child—his own son. It’s the direct opposite of not caring. You care so much about the consequences of your future choices that you try always to be mindful of what you’ve learned from your choices in the past.

To care in this way is an immediate way of developing wisdom on a day-to-day basis. It may sound simple in the beginning, but just because a principle sounds simple doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have deeper implications. It’s when you’re willing to listen to the Buddha’s simple messages—and to act on them—that you can develop an intuitive sense of how to understand truths that are harder to see.

An Arrow in the Heart

THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS ON GRIEF

*Gentle sages...
go to the unwavering state
where, having gone,
there's no grief. — [Dhp 225](#)*

The Buddha went to a cemetery one day and found a woman, Ubbirī, crying out to her dead daughter, Jīvā. He called to her, “84,000, all named Jīvā, have been burned in that charnel ground. For which one of them do you grieve?”

When Ubbirī later recounted the story in verse ([Thig 3:5](#)), she said that the Buddha's words totally removed the arrow of grief from her heart—although in saying so, she was probably taking poetic license. Actual experience shows that reflecting on the universality of loss—the loss of a loved one, the loss of love, the loss of any kind of happiness—can lead you to accept your own personal loss, in that it helps you realize that the universe isn't focusing unusual punishment on you; but still, acceptance isn't enough to totally overcome the pain of sorrow. And when we look elsewhere in the Pali Canon for passages on how to heal the wounds of grief, we find that they set out many steps in the mental training that leads from acceptance of loss all the way to total release from grief and its attendant pain.

In no single passage does the Buddha lay out all the steps, but a composite picture can be assembled from the main passages on the topic. And although there are several steps in the training, they're all founded on a principle taken from the four noble truths—that we suffer more from the way we talk to ourselves than we do from outside events. This may be a principle we don't want to hear when loss leaves us feeling helpless and bereft, but it's the only principle that will allow us to pull ourselves out of the downward path leading to grief and set our heart on the path leading away.

King Pasenadi, who liked to question the Buddha about basic points of Dhamma, happened to be in the Buddha's presence when one of his courtiers came and whispered into his ear that his favorite queen, Mallikā, had just died ([AN 5:49](#)). Overcome with shock and sorrow, the

king could do nothing but sit there, brooding, his shoulders drooping, at a loss for words.

The Buddha's immediate response was to teach him three things to do to manage his grief. The first was to reflect on the universality of loss. No one anywhere, no matter how powerful, can arrange for what is subject to change not to change, or for what is subject to death not to die. To the extent that there are beings—past, present, and future—change and death happen to all of them. This thought helps take some of the personal sting out of the loss, allowing you to acquiesce to what has happened and not to waste energy in trying to undo what can't be undone.

The second step the Buddha taught to the king was that as long as he saw that traditional funeral observances performed a useful function in giving skillful expression to his sense of loss and to his appreciation for the person now gone, he should arrange them. The Buddha never advocated that his listeners try to smother their grief with feigned indifference. As long as they felt a need to express their loss, they should try to do it in a skillful and healing way. Among the observances he mentioned as potentially useful were eulogies, donations, and the recital of wise sayings. If you actually want to help the person who has passed on, you do good and dedicate the merit to your loved one. To heal the wound in your heart, and to encourage goodness in the people still alive, you show your appreciation for your loved one's goodness. Weeping and wailing accomplish none of this. They destroy your health, cause distress to those who love you, and please those who hate you.

The Buddha mentions this last point as motivation for gathering energy for the third step, which is to remind yourself that there are still good things to accomplish in life, and that for the sake of your true well-being and that of others, you need to get back to the good work that the loss has interrupted.

The Buddha offers these steps to King Pasenadi simply as basic instructions in grief management. They're designed to assuage the pangs of grief only to the extent of ensuring that grief doesn't become self-indulgent and ruin your life. They can't entirely remove the arrow of grief from the heart. But the Buddha's more advanced instructions for going entirely beyond grief take the same three steps—accepting of the universality of loss, skillfully expressing appreciation for what has been lost, and directing your focus to the good things that still need to be done—and pursue them on a deeper level.

First, the universality of loss: The Buddha recommends that this reflection lead not only to acceptance of the fact of loss, but also to compassion for all those who have experienced it. How he meant for this reflection to function can best be grasped in light of the theories that artists and dramatists during his time had developed for understanding emotions. Although the Buddha never mentioned these theories explicitly in his teachings, the poems attributed to him show clear signs of having been composed in line with their standards. So there's every reason to assume that he was familiar with them—and that he borrowed them for his own purposes.

Indian dramatists had grappled with the issue of why it is that an audience can enjoy watching plays in which sympathetic characters undergo suffering, when it was obvious that there was nothing sadistic in the pleasure at all. The answer the dramatists arrived at was that the audience enjoyed “tasting” the emotions of the characters, without at the same time being swallowed up in them. According to their theory, the taste of the emotion was often different from the emotion itself, and even a painful emotion could have a poignantly pleasant taste.

They worked out a system of basic emotions and their corresponding tastes, and the taste of grief, they decided, was compassion. In other words, when actors portrayed grieving characters, the audience watching the portrayal tasted compassion. The act of compassion gave them a pleasant sense of intimacy with the character, fully acknowledging the character's pain, while at the same time providing a sense of distance that prevented the pain from being overwhelming. Dramas portraying sorrow were, for this reason, regarded as valuable tools in teaching the human values to society. They taught people to have compassion for one another, even for people with whom they had no personal ties.

The Buddha—in advocating a universal perspective on death, separation, and loss—took this principle and taught his listeners to apply it to their own suffering. When you think of how unavoidable and pervasive loss can be throughout the cosmos, it helps to broaden your heart and to enlarge your compassion for the suffering of others. At the same time, broadening your perspective on loss helps you get some aesthetic distance from your own. You pull out of your grief, not by denying it—for that would be inhumane—but by turning it into a more healing, expansive, and uplifting emotion, one that acknowledges suffering but, instead of being swallowed up by it, allows the mind to grow larger than its sufferings and to manage a more ennobling and nourishing response to them.

That response, though, doesn't simply stop with an aesthetic sense of expansion and distancing. As the Buddha teaches it, compassion also contains within it the desire to do something about the causes of grief. Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening: In the second watch of the night, he viewed the sufferings of all beings from a cosmic perspective, but he didn't stop there. The sense of distance from his own sufferings that he gained from this knowledge enabled him to see objectively the causes of suffering within himself. He then went on to apply that knowledge for the purpose of putting an end to suffering, first by ferreting out and removing the causes of suffering in his own heart, and then by teaching others how to remove the causes of suffering in theirs ([MN 36](#)).

In the same way, the sense of objective distancing that can come with compassion isn't an end in itself. It's meant to help you view your grief with a measure of objectivity that allows you to see into the internal causes of grief. It then motivates you to do something about them.

We need to get some distance from our grief to understand it because it has very deep roots that reach beyond the particularities of loss down into the mind's underlying attitude toward itself—an attitude you might rather not question. But it's true: We suffer not so much from the loss of things outside, but because of an unskillful tendency inside.

Ven. Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, once remarked to a group of fellow monks that, on reflection, he realized that there was nothing in the world the loss of which would cause him any grief ([SN 21:2](#)). Ven. Ananda, who was sitting in the group, immediately countered with the example of the Buddha: If the Buddha were to pass away, would Sāriputta still feel no sorrow? Sāriputta replied that he would reflect: "What a great being, of great might, of great prowess, has disappeared! For if the Blessed One were to remain for a long time, that would be for the benefit of many people, for the happiness of many people, out of sympathy for the world; for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of devas and human beings." Ananda then commented that this was a sign that Sāriputta had no *māna*, or conceit—meaning, in this case, not excessive pride, but the simple insertion of the thought, "I am," into his thoughts.

This was a very astute analysis on Ananda's part. We feel the sting of loss because we make it "our" loss. And, as the Buddha points out elsewhere ([SN 42:11](#)), we make it ours through the passion and desire we have felt for the people and things we've lost. We've been feeding on them emotionally, and now we've lost our food. This is why grief is so

intimately felt. We've been internalizing the other person or the situation that is now gone, so what we had made a part of ourselves has been ripped away. Grief is grief because it deprives us of an intimate portion of who we've assumed we are.

This means that to go totally beyond grief, we have to learn how to stop making things ours. The first step in that direction is to reflect on the universality of loss in a way that gives rise to another emotion, beyond acceptance and compassion: *sarīvega*.

Sarīvega is the terror or dismay that arises when you reflect at the meaninglessness of all the many sufferings that life everywhere entails. This is an emotion that motivates the heart to want to go beyond simply recovering from grief over a particular loss, and to aspire instead to freeing itself from the possibility of experiencing grief ever again. When you develop *sarīvega*, it lifts you from what the Buddha calls house-based distress ([MN 137](#))—sorrow over the loss of the people and sensory objects you love—to what he calls renunciation-based distress: the sense that there is a way out of experiencing this kind of loss, but that you haven't reached it yet. This realization is distressing because it alerts you to the amount of work that needs to be done, but it contains an element of hope that house-based distress doesn't: the conviction that it is possible to get beyond grief. Renunciation-based distress, for this reason, doesn't just indulge in sorrow. It uses sorrow as motivation to do what needs to be done to get out.

It was to induce this useful sense of distress that the Buddha, in one of his more famous teachings, asked a group of monks which was greater: the water in the four great oceans or the tears they had shed in the course all their many lifetimes over the loss of a mother ([SN 15:3](#)). The answer: the tears. The same answer applies to the tears shed over the loss of a father, a sister, a brother, a daughter, a son. The emotion that comes with this reflection is a mixture of acceptance and unwillingness: acceptance that this is the way things will continue to be if you don't find a way out, and an unwillingness to stay trapped in this immense and unending suffering.

The proper response to this reflection is to look for the way out and to develop conviction that the path of practice will take you there. It's from this perspective that the Buddha has you develop further the second step in going beyond grief: expressing appreciation. In this case, the appreciation goes in two directions.

The first is to realize that the best thing you can do for those who have helped you is to follow the path all the way to its end, and then to

dedicate the merit of your attainment to them. In this way, the good they have done for you will bear them great fruit ([MN 39](#)).

The second direction is to develop appreciation for all the efforts the Buddha went through in finding and teaching the path to the end of suffering. This appreciation is followed by a desire to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma—i.e., to follow the path as the Buddha taught it. Instead of trying to change it to suit your preferences, you try to change yourself to be worthy of the path. This reflection, in itself, helps to take you beyond yourself and to help heal the “you” defined around the object of your loss.

This leads to the third step in fully overcoming grief, which is to focus your attention on the good work that still needs to be done. The nature of that work is indicated by the Buddha’s reaction to the news of Ven. Sāriputta’s passing ([SN 47:13](#)). It’s somewhat ironic, in light of Ven. Ānanda’s conversation with Ven. Sāriputta, that Sāriputta actually passed away before the Buddha did. When Ānanda brought the Buddha the news, he added that when he himself had heard the news it was as if he had lost his bearings, and all the directions became dark—his attachment to Sāriputta was that strong. In short, his was the typical reaction of intense grief: There was no brightness left in the world because what he had relied on with so much trust was now lost.

So the Buddha asked him: When Sāriputta passed away, did he take virtue along with him? No. Concentration? No. Discernment? No. Release? No. Knowledge and vision of release? No. In other words, the good work of the world—the best work of the world, the path to total release from suffering—is still there to be done.

It’s when this work is accomplished that renunciation-based distress leads to renunciation-based joy: the realization that you’re freed from any need to be affected by any sort of change at all. The mind no longer creates the sense of “me” and “mine” that has to feed on things that change, because it has found a happiness that doesn’t change and hasn’t the slightest need to feed. In that sense, it no longer turns itself into a being, for beings are defined by their attachment to how they feed ([SN 23:2](#); [Khp 4](#)). When the mind no longer takes on the identity of a “being,” it’s released. In this way, you find that the Buddha’s words to King Pasenadi—“to the extent that there are beings”—turn out to have a limit. Going beyond that limit, the mind no longer stabs itself with the arrows of grief. From that point on, as long as it continues to live in the world, it will know loss but not suffer from it. When it has gone beyond the world, it will “dwell” in a dimension totally free of loss.

That's where the Buddha's three steps for grief management go beyond mere management to the point where they free you from having to experience grief or sorrow ever again.

*With arrow pulled out,
independent,
attaining peace of awareness,
all grief transcended,
free of grief,
you're unbound. — [Sn 3:8](#)*

Meditators at Work

When the Buddha taught meditation, he would often illustrate his lessons with similes that involved people at work or developing skills. A person engaged in mindfulness of breathing, for example, was like a carpenter turning a piece of wood on a lathe, sensitive to whether he was making a short or a long turn. A person trying to be mindful to discover what would bring the mind to concentration should be like a king's cook, trying to read the king's subtle signals as to what kinds of food he did or didn't like. A person entering and dwelling in the first jhāna—the first level of right concentration—was to get pleasure and rapture to suffuse the body, just as a bathman mixing water into a ball of bath-powder would try to get the water to moisten every particle of powder and yet not drip outside the ball.

The Buddha's similes for the later stages of jhāna do suggest less effort—a spring filling a lake with cool waters; lotuses immersed in a lake saturated with still, cool water from their roots to their tips; a man sitting wrapped in a white cloth—but that was simply to convey the point that once rapture and pleasure had been kneaded through the body in the first jhāna, the act of spreading them through the body—together with awareness—became much easier as concentration deepened. As [MN 111](#) makes clear, even a person who has entered the highest level of jhāna still needs to employ acts of intention, desire, decision, and persistence to stay there. And when the Buddha described using any of the levels of jhāna or formless attainments to develop discernment, he reverted to a more active simile: The meditator was now like an archer who has mastered the skills of shooting rapidly, shooting great distances, and piercing great masses with his arrows.

So, given all these similes of work and focused effort, it's odd that so many modern teachers insist that Buddhist meditation is not a matter of doing, but of simply allowing things to happen on their own. Mindfulness, we're told, is a purely receptive awareness, allowing things to arise and pass away without interference. Jhāna, we're told, isn't something you can *do*. You have to wait and let it happen of its own accord.

But if there were no present effort involved in getting mindfulness or jhāna to develop, then these qualities would be either determined by

physical laws, determined by your past kamma, the result of the grace of a divine creator, or simply serendipitous: spontaneous events with no discernible cause at all. Yet, as the Buddha made clear in [AN 3:62](#) and [DN 2](#), to believe that present experiences come about purely in any of these four ways would allow no room for a path of practice to the end of suffering to make any sense. There would be nothing you could do in the present moment to choose such a path or to follow it. It would simply happen on its own. If you believe in the possibility of choosing and following a path to the end of suffering, you have to believe that you can make a difference in the present with your present intentions. Otherwise, the path would be impossible.

As the Buddha pointed out, the purpose of meditating is to gain liberating insight into the mind's activity of fabricating its experience, and the best place to see this activity in action is by watching yourself fabricate qualities of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment right here and now. If, in the course of your meditation, you don't see yourself doing anything, that doesn't mean you're doing nothing. You're simply blind—or have blinded yourself—to what you're doing. And when you're blind, genuine insight won't have a chance to develop.

This insight into the mind's activity is where the practice of meditation intersects with the Buddha's teachings on kamma, or action. As he understood action, your present experience is shaped not only by your past actions, but also—and more fundamentally—by your present ones. And your most important present actions are taking place in the mind. The Buddha never taught his students to place their hopes and trust in their past actions, for that would be defeatist. The focus was always on learning to be skillful *right now*. This is why Buddhist meditation focuses on the mind's activities in the present moment.

But, by and large, modern teachers tend to regard the teaching on kamma as irrelevant to meditation. There may be many reasons for this, but three stand out:

- the belief that complete descriptions of mindfulness practice make no reference to interfering with the arising and passing away of feelings or mind-states, which means that mindfulness must be a non-interfering acceptance of whatever arises and passes away;
- the belief that, because the goal of meditation practice is unfabricated, trying to do anything to reach it will actually get in the way of arriving there; and
- the belief that meditation should lead to the realization that, on the level of ultimate truth, there's no one there to begin with, so to believe

that you're making choices as to what to do while meditating would get in the way of that realization.

These beliefs are common in modern meditation circles, but they're all based on misunderstandings. So let's examine them one by one, comparing them with the facts, to appreciate where they go wrong. That way, we can approach meditation with the conscious understanding that we *are* doing it, and that we can learn about the nature of action and choice by observing ourselves in the act of trying to do it well.

1. The Belief: Complete descriptions of mindfulness practice make no reference to interfering with the arising and passing away of feelings or mind-states.

The Fact: There are such descriptions in the Pali Canon, but their context shows that they're not complete.

The two longest discourses on mindfulness—the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta ([DN 22](#)) and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta ([MN 10](#))—limit their discussion of feelings to a list of various feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, and neither—stating simply that the meditator discerns them as they are present, but there is no mention of doing anything about them. Similarly with mind-states: The same discourses list skillful and unskillful mind-states, stating that the meditator discerns them as they are present, but nothing is said about developing those that are skillful or abandoning those that are not.

But even though the discourses containing these passages are long, they're not complete descriptions even of the standard *short* formula for establishing mindfulness. The discourses themselves make this point clear in the way they're organized.

They start with the standard short formula:

"There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings... mind... mental qualities in & of themselves—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world."

But then they pose and answer questions on only part of the formula: what it means to "remain focused" on each of the four frames of reference in and of itself. Among other things, they provide no discussion of how ardency functions in the practice, of what it means to subdue greed and distress with reference to the world, of how the various frames of

reference interact in practice, or of what the stages in the practice are. For this information, we have to look at other treatments of these topics found elsewhere in the Canon.

For example, when we look at [MN 118](#), the discourse on mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, we find that mindfulness of feelings and mind-states involves a great deal more than simply discerning their presence and absence. That discourse lists sixteen steps of breath meditation, divided into four “tetrads,” or sets of four steps each. Each tetrad, it says, develops the short version of the full formula for establishing mindfulness at each of the four frames of reference. The tetrad related to feelings reads,

“He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication [perceptions and feelings].’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.’”

Here it’s clear that, to develop even just the short version of the full formula for establishing mindfulness of feelings in and of themselves, you have to do a lot more than simply discern feelings as they come and go. Ardency—the effort to give rise to what’s skillful and abandon what’s not—plays a large role. You actively cultivate the feelings of the first jhāna, i.e., rapture and pleasure; you become sensitive to how they have an effect on the mind—that’s what being “sensitive to mental fabrication” means—and then you consciously train yourself to calm that effect. In keeping with the descriptions of jhāna practice, this would mean bringing the mind at least to the fourth jhāna, where pleasure and pain are replaced with the more calming feeling of equanimity.

Similarly with the tetrad related to mind-states:

“He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in gladdening the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out gladdening the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in concentrating the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out concentrating the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in releasing the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out releasing the mind.’”

Even though the first step requires simply that you be sensitive to what's going on in the mind, the steps don't stop there. If the mind is sluggish or constricted, you gladden it. If it's scattered, you steady it in firm concentration. If it's burdened with unskillful thoughts—or with factors present in the lower jhānas but absent in the higher ones—you release it. Here again, ardency is a dominant part of establishing mindfulness rightly and well.

This means that complete descriptions of mindfulness practice actually do describe actively interfering with the arising and passing away of feelings and mind-states: abandoning unskillful ones and cultivating skillful ones in their place. Now, there are cases where simply watching an unskillful mind-state with equanimity is enough to make it go away, but as [MN 101](#) makes clear, this doesn't always work. Sometimes when you stare at such a mind-state, it stares right back. In cases like that, you have to exert the activity of fabrication to get rid of it.

All of this is in line with the description of right mindfulness in [MN 117](#): You're mindful to abandon unskillful states and to develop skillful ones to replace them.

So it's not true that mindfulness is a non-interfering awareness of things as they arise and pass away. As the Canon defines mindfulness ([SN 48:10](#)), it's a factor of the active memory. What right mindfulness remembers is to do what you can to bring skillful mind-states about, and to protect them when they're present to keep them from passing away ([AN 4:194](#); [AN 4:245](#)). And the similes are right: This often involves work.

2. The Belief: Because the goal of meditation practice is unfabricated, trying to do anything to reach it will actually get in the way of arriving there.

The Fact: The Buddha discovered that causality works in such a way that the act of fabricating a path, even though it can't cause the unfabricated, leads to its threshold.

The Buddha was always careful to call the practices leading to unbinding a *path*. In other words, they don't cause the goal, but they can take you there. One of his most extended similes for the path is of a raft: To get to the far shore of a flooding river, you take twigs and branches on this shore—which stands for the ways in which you create a self-identity—and you bind them together into a raft, which stands for the noble eightfold path. Then, in dependence on the raft and making an effort

with your hands and feet—this stands for persistence—you make your way across the flood to the far shore of unbinding ([SN 35:197](#)).

In other words, the raft doesn't cause the further shore, and neither the twigs and branches nor the act of making effort with your hands and feet gets in the way of reaching the further shore. In fact, if you're not supported by a raft and don't make an effort, you'll be swept down the flood of sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance.

Now, it's possible to argue that this simile is inadequate. And, in one important way, it is: The far shore to any river is fabricated, whereas unbinding is not. However, the Buddha acknowledges that fact, even while keeping the simile of crossing the river. In [SN 1:1](#), a deva asks him how he crossed over the flood, and he responds that he did so by neither pushing forward nor staying in place. The deva is confused—the Buddha's riddle may have been intended to humble her pride—but the riddle is more than just a rhetorical trick. It indicates that there's a point in the practice where you have to abandon the dichotomy of staying where you are and making the effort to go someplace else. That's where the opening to unbinding comes. But the fact is, you can't reach that point without first having made the effort to get there.

A more modern simile is that of a complex non-linear system, such as the gravitational relationships among Saturn, its moons, and its rings. In simple, linear systems, A causes B, B causes C, and so on. Sometimes there may be a feedback loop or two, in which C turns around and influences A. But the causal principle is fairly straightforward. As long as you keep acting within such a system, you maintain the system and stay in it. The only way to get out would be if a force from outside the system came to knock it off kilter.

However, in a complex non-linear system, there are so many feedback loops that they can interact in unpredictable ways—not because the math gets too hard to calculate, but because the math itself starts playing tricks.

One of these tricks is that the laws governing the system can be manipulated, not to maintain the system, but to get out of it. Escape doesn't require something coming from outside the system. It can come through following the laws within the system itself.

This, for example, is why there are gaps in the rings of Saturn. Any ice ball in the ring that wanders into the gaps is soon ejected because the equation describing its trajectory—influenced by the gravity of Saturn combined with the gravity of one or more of its moons—contains a number (any number aside from zero) divided by zero. This makes the

ice ball's trajectory undefined, and that puts it out of the system. The ice ball escapes, not because it defies gravity, but because gravity has brought it into a spot where the laws of gravity allow it out.

The Buddha never discussed complex non-linear systems or used them as similes, but he did say that the results of action are so complex that they're inconceivable ([AN 4:77](#)). This means, of course, that his vision of action was not of a simple system. Actions and their results interact in many complex ways. And his most detailed description of the actions leading to suffering—dependent co-arising—contains many feedback loops.

But rather than get into all the details of how these factors interact, he focused on the practical opportunity they provide. Unlike ice balls, he didn't get out of the laws governing fabrication because he was compelled to. He intentionally made an effort to find the spots in the system of intentional action where the laws within the system allow for escape from intentional action: what he called the kamma that puts an end to kamma ([AN 4:237](#)). What he found was that the factors by which we define ourselves—the aggregates—could be manipulated to bring the mind to the point of neither moving nor staying in place, where it would no longer be defined. That would be its release.

So it's important that we not let simplistic ideas of causality prevent us from taking advantage of the Buddha's insight: It is possible to use the twigs and branches of our minds to reach an undefined, unfabricated goal—but we can't get to the moment of non-definition simply by embracing the twigs and branches or by doing nothing. We have to make an effort to find where that moment is.

3. The Belief: Meditation should lead to the realization that, on the level of ultimate truth, there's no one there to begin with, so to believe that you're making choices as to what to do while meditating would get in the way of that realization.

The Fact: The Buddha never taught that there's no one there.

One of the biggest misunderstandings in the Buddhist tradition—dating back millennia—is that the Buddha taught two levels of truth: conventional truth, in which beings and individuals exist; and ultimate truth, in which beings and individuals don't exist and never have.

This is a mistake on two counts. First, the post-Canonical position on conventional truths—which postdates the Buddha by many centuries—is that conventional truths are skillful means: statements that help some people get on the path even though, on the ultimate level, such statements are false. Because the Buddha talked about individuals existing and selves depending on themselves, this would mean that some of the Buddha’s teachings were useful fictions—beneficial even though they weren’t really true. This, however, violates the Buddha’s own observation on what he would and wouldn’t say. Only if something was true, beneficial, and timely would he say it. When he set out a table of types of speech, the possibility that something would be false but beneficial didn’t even make it on the table. This means that as far as he was concerned, such statements didn’t even exist ([MN 58](#)).

Second, the Buddha never said that beings don’t exist. When asked to define what a being is, he didn’t say that, on the ultimate level, there are no beings. Instead, he gave a straightforward answer: “Any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form... feeling... perception... fabrications...consciousness: When one is caught up [*satta*] there, tied up [*visatta*] there, one is said to be ‘a being [*satta*].” ([SN 23:2](#))

In other words, the Buddha defined beings as processes—and processes exist ([SN 22:94](#)). He also noted how those processes take rebirth: When a being has set one body aside and has yet to be born in another one, it’s sustained by craving ([SN 44:9](#)). And he noted that all beings have one thing in common: They depend on nutriment, which is the same as saying that they all suffer ([Khp 4](#)).

But as he pointed out, it’s not necessary to keep on identifying as a being. If you can develop dispassion for any craving for form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, then you’re freed from being a being ([SN 23:2](#)). And he discovered further that, in doing so, you don’t go out of existence. Instead, you’re now immeasurable—so immeasurable that labels of existing, not existing, both, or neither, don’t even apply ([SN 44:1](#)).

So the purpose of meditation is not to discover that you aren’t a being and never have been. Instead, it’s to show you how you’ve been defining yourself as a being through your attachments, and how you can find freedom through putting those attachments—your identity as a being—aside ([SN 22:36](#)).

Now, as the simile of the raft suggests, and [SN 51:15](#) and [AN 9:36](#) state clearly, this will involve using the raw materials of your identity—your desires and attachments, along with their objects, such as form,

feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness—to bring about the end of desire and attachment, so that you’re no longer limited to identifying yourself as a being. But that simply shows the Buddha’s skill as a strategist, seeing how to cross over the river by going from one attachment to more subtle attachments, and then finally putting all attachments aside. In the words of Ven. Ānanda, “It’s amazing, lord. It’s astounding. For truly, the Blessed One has declared to us the way to cross over the flood by going from one support to the next” ([MN 106](#)).

What this means in practical terms is that it is possible to make choices and to act in the present—to *do* the meditation—without blocking the insight to which the meditation leads: how to free yourself from having to identify as a being.

So when we look at the Buddha’s instructions on mindfulness in their entirety, we can see that there’s no reason to regard meditation as an exercise in making no choices and doing nothing at all. And when we understand the relationship of the path to the goal and the lessons learned on reaching the goal, there’s no reason—up until the very last steps of the path—to insist that an attitude of *doing* mindfulness or jhāna will get in the way of the goal. In fact, as the Buddha’s similes suggest, these forms of meditation are very much things you do.

This means that there’s every reason to take the Buddha’s active similes for meditation seriously, and to take seriously his statement that the noble eightfold path—including right mindfulness and right concentration—is a type of kamma: the kamma leading to the ending of kamma ([AN 4:237](#)). This kamma is not a matter of doing nothing or of denying what you’re doing. Instead, it involves mastering skills—the skills of meditation—and being clear about what you’re doing while you’re doing it. Only then will you understand action, and only then can you go beyond it.

The goal can’t be reached in any other way.

Unhindered at Death

When you meditate, you're getting practice in how to die well: This is a common theme in the teachings of the Thai Forest masters, and it's thoroughly in line with what the Buddha taught. He once went to visit monks in a sick ward and told them to approach the time of death mindful and alert ([SN 36:7](#)). Alertness he defined as being aware of your actions while doing them. Mindfulness he defined as practicing the four establishings of mindfulness—focused on body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves—which were his instructions in how to get the mind into right concentration.

The reason you need to be mindful and alert at the time of death is because you'll be making many choices then, choices that will determine if and where you'll be reborn, all while events are happening in a rush. The image the Buddha gave in [SN 44:9](#) was of a fire leaping from one house to the next. In terms of the physics of his day, fire had to cling to some form of sustenance in order to continue burning. As it left one house and set fire to a neighboring one, the fire was said to cling to the sustenance provided by the wind in between the houses. In the same way, when a being—defined as bundles of attachments—leaves this body and goes to another, it's sustained by the cravings to which it clings.

The image gives a good idea of why it's necessary to be mindful and alert in the midst of that conflagration. Craving devoid of mindfulness and alertness is blind. It rushes at things without thinking of the consequences, and so can drag you anywhere—to places of great pleasure or great anguish—just as a fire goes in whichever direction the wind blows. If you're forgetful and oblivious, then craving—even though you might think it would take you only where you'd really want to go—can easily get distracted by errant obsessions that lead you astray. For many people, dying is like turning on the computer to buy something useful, only to find themselves falling through a wormhole to an undesirable universe, lured in by a news item that sparked their lust or their ire.

This is precisely where meditation gives you practice in dying well, in that it trains you in how to overcome distraction, and in particular the five distractions that the texts identify as enemies of mindfulness and concentration, called the five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, sloth & drowsiness, restlessness & anxiety, and doubt.

- Sensual desire is any desire focused on attractive objects of the five senses, along with a fascination in fantasizing about the sensual pleasures they offer.
- Ill will is the desire to see other beings suffer or get their just desserts.
- Sloth & drowsiness is laziness and sleepiness in all their forms.
- Restlessness & anxiety is remorse over past actions along with fear of future dangers.
- Doubt covers any uncertainty as to whether there really is a path of action that can lead to true happiness, or—if there is—whether you're capable of following it.

The Canon describes these hindrances as mental states that corrupt the mind and weaken discernment. They're usually mentioned in the context of concentration practice: You need to abandon them, at least temporarily, if you want to get the mind centered. But they play another role as well. When the Canon details the mental states that have to be cleared out of the mind at the approach of death, even though it doesn't mention the hindrances as a list, it does mention them individually. This means that when you try to meditate but are overcome by the hindrances, you're not only having a bad meditation session. You're setting yourself up for a bad death. But if you *can* rid the mind of hindrances, you're solidifying your concentration now, while at the same time getting one step closer to mastering the currents of the mind that will flow out when the body is no longer a place where you can stay.

The Buddha's instructions for dealing with the hindrances at the approach of death make most sense when viewed in the context of his teaching about how those currents of the mind influence death and rebirth. This teaching, in turn, is based on his explanation of kamma and rebirth: that skillful actions tend to lead to good results in this life and the next, while unskillful actions tend to lead to bad results in this life and the next. This means that **doubt** around accepting the truth of these teachings is the first hindrance you have to deal with.

[AN 4:184](#) lists doubt about the True Dhamma as one of the major causes for fear and terror at the time of death. Now, there are many people who've never even heard of the True Dhamma, but even they will fear death if they're unsure about what will happen at death and if they have no firm basis for knowing that their actions can have a positive impact on what they'll experience before, during, and after their dying moment.

The only true cure for this type of doubt is to have practiced the Dhamma to the point of attaining the first level of awakening, called the arising of the Dhamma eye. That's when your conviction in the Dhamma has genuinely been confirmed: There is a dimension of experience that isn't touched by death, and it can be attained through human efforts. But to practice to gain the Dhamma eye, you first have to have accepted the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth as working hypotheses on which you base your practice.

When trying to persuade his listeners to take on these hypotheses, the Buddha was very clear on the fact that he couldn't provide any empirical proof for them, but he did offer pragmatic proofs. One is that you're more likely to behave skillfully if you accept the fact that skillful actions give positive results. Another is that these teachings open the possibility for higher attainments—such as the deathless—based on skillful actions, which would be closed off if you didn't accept them.

He also presented these hypotheses as wise wagers: If there is rebirth, and if it is influenced by your actions, you will have kept yourself safe if you've acted on these teachings. If there is no rebirth, or if there is rebirth but it's not affected by your actions, you will at least have behaved honorably in a way that frees you from fear, hostility, and ill will in the present life.

To strengthen your conviction that his teachings on skillful action are true, the Buddha advised that you carefully observe skillful and unskillful mental states as they arise in the mind and influence your actions, noting the results that come from acting on them. In particular, he recommended developing thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—the four *brahma-vihāras*—to observe how they have a good impact on your actions and on your life as a whole. As we will see below, the Buddha also recommended these four *brahma-vihāras* as antidotes to two other hindrances: anxiety over your past mistreatment of others, and any ill will you might have toward people who have been or are mistreating you.

When you've followed these instructions heedfully, the Buddha notes that there's no reason to fear what will happen after death ([AN 4:116](#)). This doesn't totally overcome doubt about the True Dhamma, but it can give a measure of reassurance. If you pursue the *brahma-vihāras* to the point of giving rise to strong concentration, that concentration can then become the basis for the development of insight leading to dispassion—and dispassion is what can lead to the arising of the Dhamma eye. That will put an end to doubt about the True Dhamma once and for all.

Drowsiness is another hindrance that has to be dealt with before dealing with the others. If you're falling asleep, there's no way you can recognize the other hindrances as they arise, nor can you do anything to counteract them. Strangely, this is the one hindrance not explicitly mentioned in the Canon as a potential obstacle at death. But because drowsiness is the main obstacle to mindfulness and alertness, there seems to be every reason to regard it as an implicit obstacle to the very skills that the Buddha told the monks in the sick ward to cultivate.

As he explained mindfulness to them, they should give particular attention to mindfulness of feelings, at the same time cultivating three other mental states that are the opposite of sloth & drowsiness: being heedful, ardent, and resolute. They should then use these mental qualities to examine how pleasure, pain, and neutral feelings of neither pleasure nor pain arise dependent on conditions.

In [MN 118](#), where the Buddha explains feelings as a frame of reference for mindfulness practice in the context of breath meditation, he describes four stages in the examination. The first two involve learning to give rise (1) to a sense of refreshment and (2) to feelings of pleasure as you breathe in and out. These two steps obviously refer to cultivating pleasant feelings in dependence on the body through the practice of right concentration. It is possible, even when you're ill, to find some parts of the body that are not in pain, and to cultivate the potential for pleasant feelings in those parts. These feelings provide you with a solid sense of grounding as you encounter any pains that may arise elsewhere in the body at the approach of death. The third step involves becoming sensitive to how perceptions interact with feelings to shape the state of your mind, and the fourth step involves developing perceptions and feelings that will have a calming effect on the mind.

In his instructions to the monks in the sick ward, he provides some detail in this last step: See any feelings that arise as separate from but dependent on the body; realize that both body and feelings are inconstant; and, as a result, develop dispassion for them. It's in this way that the mind can be freed from any obsessions around feelings of any sort—particularly the pains that can accompany the dissolution of the body—so that the mind can experience them disjoined from them. In other words, it experiences them clearly, but with a sense of being separate from them. They make no inroads on the mind. When the mind is disjoined from feelings, craving has nowhere to gain a foothold.

These instructions are obviously aimed at approaching death with the greatest skill, so that you won't be subject to rebirth at all. And they

obviously assume that the mind is free from sloth & drowsiness so that it can observe clearly what's going on inside it. This is why it's good to master ahead of time the Buddha's techniques for dealing with drowsiness. His primary recommendation, if you find that you're getting sleepy as you meditate, is to change your meditation theme to one that's more rousing. If gentle breathing is putting you to sleep, breathe more forcefully. Or change your meditation topic altogether to one that involves more active thinking, such as the contemplation of the parts of the body, to develop some dispassion toward it—and toward the idea of taking on a new body after death.

It's also good to gain experience in dealing skillfully with pain so that you can learn to see the body, the pain, and the awareness of the body and pain as three separate but interrelated things. Many of the Forest ajaans recommend questioning your perceptions around the pain—this would fall in line with the third and fourth steps in the breath meditation instructions given above—to see which perceptions create a connection between the mind and feelings, and which perceptions allow you to see how separate body, feelings, and mind actually are.

When you can separate pain from the mind in this way, you'll have less of a need for narcotic painkillers as death approaches, and you'll be in a better position to approach death mindful and alert.

As for the remaining hindrances, two—restlessness & anxiety and ill will—are treated as out-and-out obstacles. Sensual desire, though, is treated in a more complex fashion, both as an obstacle but also as a lure for overcoming other obstacles.

Of all the hindrances discussed in relationship to imminent death, **restlessness & anxiety** seems to be the Buddha's primary focus. In his various instructions for how to give advice to a person who's dying, this is the hindrance he always treats first. This may be because the dying person is assumed already to have at least some conviction in the Dhamma. Or it may be that, no matter what one's beliefs, this hindrance can cause the most anguish both prior to and after death.

When the Buddha visits individual monks who are sick, his first question—after asking after their physical comfort—is to ask if they have any anxiety, anguish, or remorse ([SN 35:74–75](#)). When Nakulamātar, one of the Buddha's closest disciples, comforts her husband, who is severely ill ([AN 6:16](#)), she starts by saying, "Don't be worried as you die, householder. Death is painful for one who is worried. The Blessed

One has criticized being worried at the time of death.” When the Buddha gives advice to his cousin, Mahānāma, on how to counsel a dying person ([SN 55:54](#)), he tells him first to comfort the person as to his/her virtue, and then to ask if the person has any worries.

The suttas list a wide range of things that people might be worried about at the time of death. Nakulamātar focuses on her husband’s potential worries about her: that she won’t be able to support herself and the family, that she will take another husband, and that she will fall away from the Dhamma. In every case, she assures him that his worries are unfounded. She’s skilled at carding wool and spinning cotton, so she can easily support herself and their children; she will remain faithful to him even after his death just as she has been faithful throughout their life together; and she will feel an even greater desire to see the Buddha after he, her husband, is gone. As it turns out, her husband doesn’t die, and he goes, leaning on a stick, to see the Buddha, who tells him, “It’s your gain, your great gain, householder, that you have Nakulamātar—sympathetic & wishing for your welfare—as your counselor and instructor.”

As for Mahānāma, he’s also told to focus on any worries that a dying person might have about his/her family, but in this case he’s told to tell the person that the time when worry might be potentially helpful has past: “You, my dear friend, are subject to death. If you feel concern for your spouse and children, you’re still going to die. If you don’t feel concern for your spouse and children, you’re still going to die. It would be good if you abandoned concern for your spouse and children.” Instead, the dying person should focus on the business at hand: trying to face the challenges of death mindful and alert.

Other potential worries at the time of death are those focused more on what will happen after death. The monks visited by the Buddha are worried that they will die without having attained a noble attainment that could guarantee the safety of their future course. He teaches them to regard all possible objects of craving and clinging as not-self, and as a result, they reach one or another of the levels of awakening.

On a more mundane level, there are also worries around potential kammic punishments for past unskillful actions—which have a way of looming large in the mind as death approaches. The Buddha advises, in cases like that, that you recognize that no amount of remorse can go back and undo a past misdeed. Instead, you should recognize it as a mistake, not to be repeated, and then develop thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity for all beings ([SN 42:8](#)). This practice accomplishes several things at once. By taking this

expanded framework, you help to keep the mind from obsessing about the past deed, and to see it in the context of all the deeds, skillful and unskillful, committed by beings throughout the universe in their quest for happiness. By developing goodwill for all other beings as well as for yourself, you strengthen your intention never to repeat your past mistakes. This helps to keep the mind from heading down a downward slope.

Universal goodwill is also recommended for counteracting **ill will** at the time of death. A soldier once visited the Buddha, telling him that his teachers in the military arts had told him that if he died in battle, he would go to the heaven reserved for those slain in battle: Was that true? The Buddha, in line with the etiquette of the time, tried to avoid answering the question, but the soldier pressed him three times, so the Buddha finally answered: If a soldier dies in battle while harboring the thought, “May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist,” he will fall into the hell of those slain in battle. If he holds to the wrong view that he’s destined for heaven from dying in battle, there are two possible rebirths for one of wrong view: hell or the animal womb ([SN 42:3](#)).

The antidote: goodwill for all, no matter how badly anyone has treated you. In [MN 21](#), the Buddha gives an extreme example: You’re being pinned down by bandits who have overpowered you and are cutting you savagely into pieces with a two-handled saw. Even in that case, the Buddha said, you should try to develop thoughts of goodwill, beginning with the bandits and then extending out to the entire cosmos. You don’t want to be reborn with thoughts of revenge, for that would get you involved in a kammic back and forth that could pull you nowhere but down. Goodwill, in this case, might not be able to undo the pain of a violent death, but it would liberate you from an enormous amount of suffering on into the future.

Throughout the Canon, the Buddha treats the last remaining hindrance, **sensual desire**, as a major obstacle to getting and staying on the path. This type of desire also accounts for two of the major reasons for fearing death: attachment to sensual pleasures and attachment to the body. This is why the Canon contains so many passages dealing with the drawbacks of sensuality: A desire for sensual pleasures forces people to work hard to gain wealth, and even when their efforts succeed—which is by no means a sure thing—they suffer in trying to protect their wealth from thieves and hateful heirs. Sensuality also leads to conflicts, ranging

from family spats to total war ([MN 14](#)). [MN 53](#) provides a long list of images to illustrate the futility and dangers of sensuality. Among them: It's like a bead of honey on the blade of a knife, like borrowed goods that the owners can take back at any time, and like a dog gnawing on a bone that provides no nourishment at all. As Ajaan Lee explains this image, the dog gets nothing but the taste of its own saliva.

The Canon also contains many passages dealing with the drawbacks of having a body: When you look at its individual parts, for instance, you can't find anything that's clean. The fact that you have a body leaves you open to all sorts of illnesses ([AN 10:60](#)). These contemplations help to keep you from resenting whichever parts of your own body have subjected you to illness—it's the nature of all bodies and all body parts to be prone to illness—and to prevent you from aspiring to taking on another body after death in hopes of continuing to enjoy the sensual pleasures to which having that body would give you access.

Given the general tenor of the Buddha's teachings on sensuality, it's somewhat ironic, then, that he also sees a use for sensual desire at the approach of death. He instructs Mahānāma that, after he has cleared away any worries in the mind of the dying person, he should ask the person if he/she is worried about leaving human sensual pleasures behind. If the answer is yes, he should tell the person that heavenly sensual pleasures are even more splendid and refined than human pleasures: One should set one's mind on those. These instructions begin with the lowest level of the sensual heavens, and then keep advising the dying person to aim at progressively higher levels of heaven, where the pleasures grow progressively more splendid and refined, until he at last has the person aim at the highest heavens, the Brahmā worlds.

If Mahānāma can get the person this far, he should then tell the person, "Friend, even the Brahmā world is inconstant, impermanent, included in self-identity. It would be good if, having raised your mind above the Brahmā world, you brought it to the cessation of self-identity." If the person can follow these instructions, then, the Buddha says, "There is no difference—in terms of release—between the release of that lay follower whose mind is released and the release of a monk whose mind is released." In other words, it is possible for the person to reach full awakening at death.

This, of course, assumes that the person has already had some background in training the mind. This is a point that has to be kept in mind with regard to all of these hindrances: It's best not to wait until the moment of death to try to master the skills that will be needed at that

time. The Buddha's teachings on causality show that every moment is a combination of influences from past actions—these provide the field of possibilities available at that moment—and from one's present actions: These determine which of those possibilities will get developed. This is true of every moment in life, and also at the moment of death.

This is why mindfulness of death is one of the standard topics of reflection. You recollect that death could come at any moment, so you focus right here and now on developing the mental skills that will be helpful at that time. That way, whenever death comes, you'll have good influences coming from the past and a set of skills that you can depend on in the present moment, so that at the very least you can direct your cravings to a good rebirth, and at best you can abandon craving altogether.

It's important to note that mindfulness of death does not take death as its primary focus. You don't focus your thoughts on death, death, death. Instead, you simply keep an awareness of death in the back of your mind so that you can focus on the work that really needs to be done: cleansing the mind, in the present moment, of any of the hindrances that could create obstacles when death comes.

The question sometimes arises: Because the purpose of recollecting death is to focus attention on cleansing the mind here and now, and because the practice of concentration shares the same focus anyhow, why drag death into the picture? Can't we get the same results simply by focusing on the present moment? The answer is that recollection of death brings a helpful sense of urgency to what you're doing right here. A meditation session that may seem perfectly fine when it allows you to enjoy the present moment will seem woefully inadequate when you think of how well it's preparing you to die. It's like the difference between learning a foreign language just for the fun of it, and learning the same language when you know that you could, at any time, be deported to a country where it's the only language spoken, and you'd have to depend on it for your survival.

In the same way, when you keep death in the back of your mind, you'll be less likely to content yourself with pleasure in the here and now, and instead will do what you can to overcome the hindrances even in their subtlest forms, so that when the moment of death becomes here and now, you'll be thoroughly prepared.

Clinging & the End of Clinging

When the Buddha formulated his first noble truth—the truth of suffering and stress—he didn't say something useless like, "Life is suffering," or obvious like, "There is suffering." Instead, he said something much more useful, insightful, and to the point: "Suffering is the five clinging-aggregates." And as he explained elsewhere, the problem isn't the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. It's the clinging.

So when he said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering, he was really saying that all he taught was clinging and the end of clinging. If we want to understand his teachings and get the most out of them, we have to comprehend what clinging is, why it's suffering, and how he recommended bringing it to an end.

CLINGING

Clinging is something we do. This means that suffering is something we do: It's an active, rather than a passive, verb. It's also something with which we identify strongly. Our sense of self is composed of aggregates—which are also things we do—and identifying with that sense of self is one of the major forms of clinging. At the same time, the Pali word for clinging—*upādāna*—has a second meaning: to feed. The first noble truth is saying that we suffer from our feeding habits.

So it's no wonder that many people resist the Buddha's analysis of suffering. It's as if he's placing the blame for their suffering on them, and denying their right to find sustenance from the world. They'd rather hear that the world is making them suffer. They'd prefer a noble truth that let them continue feeding as they like and placed the blame for their suffering outside.

But the Buddha wasn't focused on placing blame. Instead, he was interested in empowerment: If you had to wait—or fight—for outside conditions to be just right in order for you to stop suffering, the end of suffering would be forever beyond reach. But because suffering is something you do, you can change what you do and stop suffering. With empowerment comes responsibility: If you're suffering from your feeding habits, it's up to you to find a new way to feed, one that

strengthens you to the point where you have no more hunger of any kind.

That's a tall order. As the Buddha's analysis shows, we suffer precisely because of our strongest attachments. The end of suffering requires that we sacrifice many of the things to which we're most firmly attached: not only things that we identify as *ours*, but also many things we identify as *us*. But then, that's why this truth of suffering is a noble truth. Suffering itself isn't noble, but when you realize that you suffer because you cling, and you're willing to use the Buddha's analysis to rise above your clings, it's a noble act.

So this noble truth carries a noble duty: Instead of trying to run away from suffering, you have to comprehend it as clinging. Full comprehension means that you contemplate your clings to the point of ending all passion, aversion, and delusion around them. And because clinging itself is a form of desire and passion, once clinging is fully comprehended, it ends.

A first step in comprehending clinging is to identify the forms it takes. The Buddha lists four:

- Sensuality-clinging: passion and desire to find pleasure in fantasizing and planning sensual pleasures.
- View-clinging: passion and desire for views about how the world is structured and how it works.
- Habit-and-practice-clinging: passion and desire for ideas that tell you how you should act in the world.
- Doctrine-of-self-clinging: passion and desire for ways of defining who or what you are.

This list may sound arbitrary and abstract until you realize that the Buddha is talking about some very basic functions of the mind. Sensuality-clinging is all about what you *want* in terms of sensuality. View-clinging is all about your ideas about *what the world is* and *how it works*. Habit-and-practice clinging covers your ideas of how you have to act in the world to get what you want. It's all about your ideas of what you *should do*. And doctrine-of-self-clinging is all about your sense of yourself as (1) an *agent*, negotiating the way the world works and doing what needs to be done to find pleasure to feed (2) the *consumer* who will enjoy those pleasures once they're attained. These two functions of the self are your basic set of strategies for finding happiness.

The first three types of clinging define the arena in which your self acts and searches for happiness. The balance of power among the three

will vary from person to person, and—even within a particular person—from moment to moment. If you want to reject all constraints on trying to fulfill your sensual fantasies, you might be inclined to accept a materialist deterministic worldview where sensual pursuits are not subject to moral judgments, and where the *shoulds* of the world counsel the pursuit of pleasure wherever you find it. This would be a case of sensuality-clinging dictating your view of the world. If you want to believe that your dignity as a human being lies in your ability to choose your actions, you'll be inclined to adopt a non-deterministic worldview where choice is real. This would be a case where habit-and-practice-clinging dictates your view of the world and what your attitude toward sensuality should be.

And of course, there are not a few cases where people change their worldview to fit in with their desires of the moment. There are also cases where their wants run up against the *shoulds* and *what is* of a worldview to which they're committed for other reasons. Modern psychology has detailed the suffering that comes from precisely this sort of conflict, one that's not limited only to those suffering from severe mental illness. It's a common feature of the human condition.

However, even though the first three types of clinging define the arena in which the self functions, the Buddha identified doctrine-of-self-clinging as the most basic type of clinging of all. As he stated, only in a teaching where this type of clinging is comprehended can people reach awakening. That's because your sense of who you are explains why you're invested in seeing the world a certain way and in believing that certain things should be done in order to attain what you want. Without your desire to gain pleasure for yourself, views of the world or of how you should act wouldn't have much hold on the mind.

This may be why, of all the different forms of clinging, this is the one where the Buddha focused the most attention on explaining how clinging gets fixated on the five aggregates. According to him, you can identify the self either as identical with any of the aggregates, as possessing any of the aggregates, as containing any of the aggregates, or as existing within any of the aggregates. These four possibilities multiplied by five aggregates give twenty possible self-identity views to which you might cling ([SN 22:1](#)).

Aside from doctrine-of-self-clinging, there's only one other instance where the Buddha specifies the relationship between clinging and the aggregates, and that's right concentration, which functions on the path as an example of habit-and-practice-clinging. He notes that any of the four

jhānas that comprise right concentration are composed of the five aggregates, whereas any of the formless attainments based on the fourth jhāna are composed of the four mental aggregates (feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness). When we come to the central role that right concentration plays on the path to the end of clinging, we'll see why the Buddha gives even this much attention to the issue. Otherwise, he leaves it up to his listeners to figure out how any particular type of clinging translates into clinging-aggregates.

So it's obvious that doctrine-of-self-clinging is the most important type of clinging to comprehend. Its centrality may explain why some schools of Buddhism pay little attention to the other forms of clinging, and focus all their efforts on uprooting a sense of self.

They're right on one point, which is that the two roles of the self explain why clinging is suffering. The self-as-consumer, even though it enjoys feeding, is constantly hungry. As the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins, that wouldn't be enough to satisfy one person's sensual desires. This means that the self-as-agent has to be constantly at work—negotiating among wants and shoulds, trying to gain a measure of control over the way things are—all in order to assuage the hunger of the consumer, with never a moment's rest.

However, you can't uproot your sense of self without also uprooting your other forms of clinging as well. Given that the self is what negotiates the world and tries to figure out how to act to gain pleasure, its identity is strongly linked to its range of strategies and skills for finding what it wants. These, in turn, rely on how it sees *what is* and *what should be done*. You see this connection most clearly when you move into a different culture or when your own society undergoes radical change. The world is no longer what it used to be, the skills that used to get results come up empty-handed, and your very identity gets called into question. To survive, you have to construct a new self around new skills for negotiating the new arena in which you act.

So—given that the roots of the self are entangled in its wants, its worldviews, and its ideas of what should be done—if you want to uproot your sense (or senses) of self, you also have to uproot the other three types of clinging: your attitude toward sensuality and your sense of how you should act, given your views on how the world works.

THE END OF CLINGING

Because desire is the motive force for all conditioned things, the first order of business in putting an end to suffering is to see the end of clinging as a desirable goal. And because sensuality-clinging plays no role on the path to the end of clinging, you have to see the pleasure of sensuality as an inferior goal, and freedom from sensuality as potentially desirable.

This goes against some firmly ingrained habits. After all, it was because of sensuality that we took birth here in the human realm. Even the Buddha himself said that when he realized he would have to abandon sensuality to progress on the path, his heart didn't leap up at the prospect. Only when he admitted the drawbacks of sensuality, and saw renunciation as freedom and rest, did he actually get to work on abandoning his fascination with sensuality.

The way he did this is suggested by the way he taught other people to do it. There were many cases where he wanted to teach the four noble truths to his listeners, but because they didn't yet see the rewards of renunciation, they wouldn't fully benefit from hearing those truths. So—unlike university professors who plunge their students into the four noble truths on day one of Buddhism 101—he first prepared his listeners' minds with what he called a graduated talk ([MN 56](#)). First he described the joys of giving, then the joys of being virtuous, and then the pleasurable rewards that come from both generosity and virtue in the sensual heavens—rewards that far outweigh the rewards in this life.

Once his listeners were attracted to the idea that the best way to attain sensual bliss was through generosity and virtue, he turned the tables on them by pointing out the drawbacks even of heavenly sensual pleasures: As you enjoy those pleasures, you get addicted and heedless, abandoning the good practices that got you to heaven to begin with. It's as if *samsāra* were a sick joke. You work hard, developing good qualities of mind to gain long-lasting sensual pleasures, but then the act of enjoying those pleasures has a corrosive effect on the good qualities that produced them. The mind deteriorates as it grows accustomed to having its wants all met, that deterioration eventually causes it to fall, and you're back where you started—if not worse.

When this realization inspires a sense of dismay, you begin to appreciate the idea that the only true happiness would lie in getting out of this trap. That's when you're ready for the four noble truths.

Now, notice what the Buddha is doing in the course of giving this talk. To pry you away from your attachment to sensuality, he's providing you with a way of viewing the world in which a certain course of action—

renunciation of sensuality—is an obvious *should* because it leads to your long-term welfare and happiness, with “you” defined in terms of multiple lifetimes. In other words, he’s recommending new objects of view-clinging and doctrine-of-self-clinging that will help get you started on the habits and practices of the path.

As the talk explains, we live in a world where good actions are rewarded, both in this lifetime and in future ones. We ourselves are beings who will survive death—as we have already survived death many times—to enjoy the results of our actions. The talk itself explains the rewards and limitations of our actions in leading to sensual pleasure now and into the distant future, while the four noble truths explain a path of action that leads away from the incessant round of lifetimes of sensual pleasure alternating with pain and toward a happiness totally unconditioned.

The noble truths also propose an interim pleasure—the pleasure, rapture, and equanimity of right concentration, the last factor in the fourth noble truth—that will form an alternative object of desire to replace your desires for sensuality. This non-sensual pleasure will be your food along the way, so that you’re not tempted to go back to sensuality even as you understand its drawbacks ([MN 14](#)). In effect, he’s offering a skillful type of habit-and-practice clinging to replace sensuality-clinging as your source of inner food.

This means that the path to the end of clinging uses interim versions of three kinds of clinging: view-clinging, habit-and-practice-clinging, and doctrine-of-self-clinging. You hold on to the raft composed of these three forms of clinging until you get to the further shore. Only then do you let them go.

Of the three, habit-and-practice-clinging is the most pivotal. After all, the path to the end of clinging is a path of action—what the Buddha called the kamma that puts an end to kamma—which is why his teachings go into great detail on the habits and practices of virtue, concentration, and discernment that should be developed to form the path. However, to believe that such a path could actually work, you need a view about the world in which actions can be freely chosen and have the power to transcend the round of death and rebirth. This is why right views about kamma and rebirth also form part of the path.

At the same time, you need to have a sense that you, as an agent, are capable of following the path, and that you, as a consumer, will benefit from doing so. This is why, as part of his strategy for motivating you to engage in the path factor of right effort, the Buddha provided many

teachings to encourage a healthy sense of self, saying that the self is its own mainstay, that it's responsible for its actions, that it's capable of mastering the path, and that it will benefit from doing so.

But it's worth noting that even though the early teachings are very detailed in their instructions as to what should and shouldn't be done, the worldviews and self-views they provide in support of these instructions are only sketches. Many issues were at play in the worldviews actively discussed during the Buddha's time, but he focused only on views related to the nature of action, its powers, and the patterns of causality by which it brings about results. Kamma and rebirth, for instance, were hotly debated by his contemporaries, so he had to take a position on those issues to justify the path of practice he taught. The size and age of the cosmos were also hot topics, but because they had no bearing on the power of action, the Buddha put those topics aside.

Similarly with issues of the self: Other philosophical schools debated the question of how best to define the self, but the Buddha noted that to define yourself was to limit yourself, so he refused to answer questions about what the self was—or even whether it existed. As he said, questions of that sort weren't worthy of attention ([MN 2](#)). All he was concerned about was your *perception* of self: responsible for your actions, competent to follow the path, and able to benefit from doing so. That's all.

This means that attempts in later centuries to turn the Buddha's sketches of a worldview and a self-view into complete maps of a cosmos and detailed diagrams of what-you-are were beside the point. It also means that modern-day demands that Buddhist teachings be fit into modern or post-modern ideas of how the world works and what a person is are also misguided. The Buddha meant for his world-sketches and self-sketches to be precise and uncluttered, pared down to the absolute essentials. They stuck to the basics needed for practice and provided no more handles for clinging than were need for holding on to the raft.

In fact, the question of action was so central to the path to the end of clinging that one of the crucial steps in the path was to learn how to see how your sense of the world and yourself were nothing more than actions themselves. They come about from things you *do*.

One of the most basic ways in which the Buddha introduced this lesson concerned three reflections he recommended for motivating you to stick with the practice at times when you're feeling discouraged, your mind is overcome by unskillful thoughts, and you're tempted to give up. The first reflection he called the self as a governing principle; the second,

the world as a governing principle; and the third, the Dhamma as a governing principle ([AN 3:40](#)).

To take the self as a governing principle is to remind yourself that you took on the practice because you were beset by aging, illness, and death, and you wanted to find an end to this mass of suffering and stress. The implication here is that you loved yourself when you started practicing. Do you not love yourself now? As you reflect in this way, you feel motivated to get back on the path.

This reflection helps you to see how your sense of self changes—and how you have the power to choose which sense of self you want to identify with: the self that loves itself, or the self that wants to give up on the possibility of putting an end to suffering. The choice is yours.

Similarly with the world as a governing principle: You remind yourself that there are beings in the world who can read minds. What if they're reading your mind now? What will they think? As you reflect in this way, you rededicate yourself to making an effort in the practice.

Here again, the Buddha is asking you to change your view of the world, from one in which unskillful thoughts make sense, to one in which unskillful thoughts are an embarrassment and in which there are beings who are concerned for your welfare. Reflecting on this, you see that your view of the world is the result of your own actions, and you can choose to focus on aspects of the world that encourage you to straighten out your mind and stick with the path.

To take the Dhamma as a governing principle is to reflect on the excellence of the Dhamma and the fact that there are those who, through the practice of the Dhamma, are directly experiencing the Dhamma of the goal. How can you let yourself be lazy and heedless when this opportunity is at hand? Here again, as you think in this way, you feel motivated to get back to the practice that leads to that Dhamma.

Of these three reflections, the Dhamma as a governing principle is central. It's because of the excellence of the Dhamma that the other two reflections make sense and can actually motivate you to practice. The excellence of the Dhamma is what makes you want it, and your desire for that excellence is the reason why sticking with the practice is a way of showing love for your best-intentioned self. It's also why the concern of other beings for you to stick with the practice is a concern that should be honored.

Now, all of these reflections are related to the three types of clinging used on the path. Self as a governing principle is obviously related to

doctrine-of-self-clinging, world as a governing principle is related to view-clinging. The relationship between the Dhamma as a governing principle to habit-and-practice-clinging is not quite so obvious, but it's there. The Dhamma referred to in the reflection is the Dhamma of awakening, but the purpose of the reflection is the same as that of the other reflections: to get you to do what needs to be done—to develop the habits and practices of the path—that will take you to that excellent Dhamma.

This is just one of the ways in which views of the world and the self are shown to be actions, and in which habit-and-practice-clinging acts as the central form of clinging used on the path.

Another example of how the Buddha has you use clinging on the path is related to his five-step program for dealing with unskillful thoughts that will pull you away from the practice. When a sensual desire or a wrong view about action threatens to pull you out of concentration, he recommends that you look at the thought in question as an action, a type of clinging, and then follow four steps: observing (1) the origination of the clinging—what causes it to arise; (2) its falling away; (3) its allure; and (4) its drawbacks. When you see that the allure is far outweighed by the drawbacks, you develop dispassion for it, which is step (5): escape.

The crucial step here is to develop an acute sensitivity to the drawbacks. This is where the Buddha recommends analyzing the thought in question as an action, and applying three perceptions to it: It's inconstant and stressful, so why perceive it as you or belonging to you? You should actually perceive it as not-self.

What's interesting here is that the motivation for applying this last perception is that *you* will benefit from it. In the passages where the Buddha has you reflect on the rewards of applying the perception of not-self even toward the last stages of the practice, the reflections are phrased in terms of "I" and "mine": "My my-making will be stopped. I'll be endowed with uncommon knowledge." ([AN 6:104](#)) Or when he told the monks to abandon attachment to what was not theirs, he phrased the motivation as: "Whatever's not yours: Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term happiness and benefit." ([SN 35:101](#)) So in these cases, even with the perception of not-self, the Buddha is using a sense of "you" as motivation to keep you focused on following the habits and practices of the path.

Of course, given that all clinging is suffering, even skillful forms of clinging ultimately have to be transcended if we want suffering to end. To do that, we have to develop a level of right view that, once the path is

fully developed, allows us to abandon the path as well. Here again, the Buddha recommends taking his five-step program and applying it to the skillful qualities developed on advanced stages of the path. He lays out the steps in several ways, but two are worthy of note.

The first starts by focusing directly on habit-and-practice-clinging. He has you apply the perceptions of drawbacks to the practice of concentration and discernment themselves. [AN 9:36](#) shows how this is done. First you analyze your state of concentration into the five aggregates that comprise it. Then you apply the three perceptions, or variations of them, to those aggregates. As you develop dispassion even for the subtle pleasure and equanimity of concentration on the grounds that they're fabricated, you incline the mind to the unfabricated. Then, as fabrications fall away and you discern the deathless, you have to be careful not to cling even to that act of discernment. As you develop dispassion for it, your dispassion becomes all-around, there's nothing left to cling to, and you can reach total unbinding.

The second approach starts by focusing on view-clinging, but quickly changes focus to habit-and-practice-clinging as well. The Buddha recommends viewing the world as nothing more than the six senses—the five physical senses plus the mind—and the activities based on them. Then he has you see the six senses and their objects as old kamma, and everything you do based on them as new kamma ([SN 35:145](#)). This is where the focus shifts to habits and practices. To develop dispassion for both types of kamma, he recommends observing the world so-defined as simply originating and passing away. When you focus on these things originating from moment to moment, the concept of "non-existence" with regard to the world doesn't occur to you. When you focus on their passing away, the concept of "existence" with regard to the world doesn't occur to you. This means that there's nothing left to cling to in terms of the world ([SN 12:15](#)).

At the same time, all you see is stress arising and stress passing away. You realize that no matter where you focus your attention, there's going to be nothing but stress. This induces a sense of dispassion for all action: You can't go anywhere else, and you can't stay where you are, without entailing more stress. The Buddha described this paradoxical moment with a simile: It's like crossing a river without moving forward or staying in place ([SN 1:1](#)). The constraints of space fall away, and there's nothing you can do. There's nothing left to cling to in terms of habits and practices.

When there's no world in which to function, and nothing left to choose in terms of actions, the sense of self loses its reason for being—there's nothing to control, nothing to negotiate—and so it falls away, too. This is how the deepest form of clinging gets abandoned.

And that's when there's an opening to absolute release, totally hunger-free.

It's in this way that our feeding habits come to an end: not because we force ourselves not to eat, but because we've found a state where there's no need to feed.

Our situation as we ordinarily go through life is like being trapped in a birdcage. As long as we cling to the bars of the cage, we can't get out. But one wall of the cage contains a door. If you hold on to the bars of the door—the types of clinging used on the path—then when the door swings open, you're out of the cage. You're free. And as the Buddha said, from that point on, like birds flying through space, you leave no trace.

The Buddha's Rx

ATTACKING SUFFERING AT ITS CAUSE

The Buddha compared himself to a doctor, treating the mental sufferings and stresses—the *dukkha*—of living beings. Buddhist traditions over the centuries have expanded on this simile, noting that the Buddha's teachings are like medicine. In particular, many have noted that his most central teaching—the four noble truths—is like a doctor's approach to curing an illness.

- The first noble truth, the truth of suffering, identifies the symptoms of the illness. The basic definition of the truth lists many things associated with suffering—such as birth, aging, and death—and then points out the common symptom in all forms of suffering that weigh on the mind: clinging to any of five activities called *khandhas*, or aggregates of physical form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and sensory consciousness.

- The second noble truth, the truth of the origination of suffering, pinpoints the cause of the illness: any of three types of craving that lead to becoming—craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming.

- The third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering, states that the illness can be brought to an end by doing away with the cause. To be specific, the three types of craving come to an end when you develop dispassion for them and abandon them. That's how the symptoms of suffering can cease.

- The fourth noble truth, the truth of the path of practice leading to the end of suffering, prescribes the course of treatment that cures the illness. This treatment is the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The Buddha's explanation of the cessation of suffering in the third noble truth, noting that suffering has to be ended by attacking its cause, is where his approach most closely parallels that of a good doctor who treats an illness by treating the underlying cause rather than just the symptoms. In fact, this point is key to understanding the guidance offered by the four noble truths. It highlights where the work has to be done if it's going to be effective.

Yet there's no single place in the Pali Canon—the earliest extant record of his teachings—where the Buddha lays out a full depiction of exactly how the fourth truth—the noble eightfold path—targets the second, the three types of craving. Still, there are fragments of an explanation scattered throughout the discourses of the Canon. By pulling those fragments together, we can gain a coherent picture of how the Buddha's course of treatment works, and why it's well suited to attack the disease of suffering right at its root.

TO FOCUS ON THE CAUSE

The first step in understanding how and why the path works is to look at the cause of suffering in detail. Beginning with the broadest terms, the Buddha states that suffering comes from within the mind itself, and in particular is caused by desire ([SN 42:11](#)). He admits that there are many phenomena existing outside that can cause pain through the six senses—the five physical senses, plus the intellect as the sixth—but he observes that these things cause mental suffering only if they affect things for which the mind feels desire.

Now, as the Buddha states elsewhere, all phenomena—events, objects, actions—known through the senses are rooted in desire ([AN 10:58](#)). This presents two challenges, the first of many that emerge as we unpack the cause of suffering. The first challenge is that if we try to abandon all desire in the quest to put an end to suffering, it stands to reason that we'll also end up putting an end to the experience of all sensory phenomena.

That may sound bad, but it's not. The Buddha notes that unbinding (*nibbāna*), the freeing of the mind from all suffering, is the end of all phenomena ([AN 10:58](#)), but it's not a blanking out. Instead, he describes it as a kind of consciousness, outside of space and time, known independently of the senses ([DN 11](#); [MN 49](#)), and as the highest happiness ([Dhp 203](#)). Still, there were many people in his time, as there are now, who have trouble imagining such a happiness, and a large part of the Buddha's challenge as a teacher was to help his listeners expand their own imaginations to encompass such a happiness as a desirable possibility and, in fact, the only genuine form of health ([MN 75](#)).

The second challenge is more strategic. If there is a path of action leading to the end of suffering, it, too, is composed of phenomena, so it, too, has to be rooted in desire. To put an end to all suffering, we will have to employ certain desires to put an end to others, but then we'll have to

abandon those “path-desires” when they’ve done their work ([SN 51:15](#)). Meanwhile, because the path is rooted in desire, there will also have to be some suffering or stress involved in following the path, in the same way that some beneficial medical treatments involve pain. To go totally beyond stress, the ultimate act of discernment will have to sense the subtle stress of the path factors and foster dispassion for them ([AN 9:36](#)). The cure is complete when there is no more stress, either from the original disease or from its treatment.

As a first step in this strategy, the Buddha divides desire into two sorts. On the one hand, there are the desires he identifies as part of the path: basically, the desire to abandon unskillful mental qualities and to develop skillful ones in their place.

On the other hand, there are the desires he identifies as the cause—or in his terms, the “origination” (*samudaya*)—of suffering. These are the three types of craving mentioned above: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming.

Craving for sensuality, the Buddha says, is aimed less at sensual pleasures themselves, and more at the mind’s fascination with thinking about and planning them ([AN 6:63](#)). A large part of sensual pleasure lies in the fantasies we use to embroider it.

Craving for becoming: Becoming (*bhava*) is the act of taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. The “world,” here, can be either an interior thought-world or any of the outside worlds into which beings are born to pursue their desires. These becomings can exist on any one of three levels: the level of sensuality, the level of form, and the level of formlessness ([AN 3:77](#)). A becoming on the level of sensuality, for instance, would include the pleasures or pains of the five physical senses. A becoming on the level of form would include the experience of the form of the body as felt from within. A becoming on the formless level would include such formless dimensions as infinite space or infinite consciousness.

In the Buddha’s analysis, becomings involving outside worlds come from becomings within the mind. In every case, they begin with desire—for a certain pleasure, for example, or to take on a particular role in a world. A sense of the world then coalesces around the object of that desire. This world will include everything relevant to attaining the desire, plus anything that might get in its way. At the same time, a threefold sense of self develops around the desire as well: the self as the producer, who will or won’t be able to attain the desired object or role; the self as the consumer, who hopes to enjoy the fulfillment of the

desire; and the self as commentator, who self-reflectively evaluates and comments on the actions of the other two ([AN 3:40](#); [AN 4:159](#)).

For instance, if you want some ice cream, the relevant world would include the nearest place where ice cream can be found, plus anything that would allow you to get there and obtain the ice cream. Your sense of self as the producer in that particular becoming would include your body, as either capable or incapable of getting the ice cream. If you can make ice cream, that skill would be relevant to that particular sense of self, too. If you have to buy the ice cream, the amount of money in your pocket or your bank account would be more relevant. Your sense of self as the consumer, of course, is the “you” who hopes to enjoy the ice cream once it’s obtained, while your sense of self as commentator judges whether the other two do their job to your satisfaction.

The mind goes through many of these becomings in the course of a day, often with a different sense of the world and sense of self in each case. This is why your sense of self and of the world can change so quickly.

Craving for non-becoming is the desire to see a particular becoming come to an end. This type of craving can be motivated by any number of reasons. For example, in some cases, you might want to see a becoming end because the root desire that generated it has been thwarted (as when you fall in love with someone who calls off the relationship to marry someone else). In other cases, it’s because your sense of the world or of your self in that becoming has involved some unanticipated suffering (as when you marry the person you love, but the marriage turns out to be a disaster). Or it may be because another becoming has arisen in the mind around a desire that conflicts with the first becoming (as when you’re stuck in a bad marriage and fall in love with someone else). In all cases, the craving for non-becoming finds delight in its desire to escape from the becoming in which you find yourself.

When the Buddha introduces these three forms of craving, he points out that they have one feature in common: They all lead to becoming ([SN 56:11](#)). What he doesn’t point out at first—but what he does indicate in other parts of the Canon—is that each presents strategic challenges if you want to abandon it.

The challenge posed by craving for sensuality lies in the fact that we ordinarily see sensual pleasure as our only alternative to pain ([SN 36:6](#)). This means that any effort to abandon sensuality will require a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, we have to learn how to see the drawbacks of sensuality; on the other, we need to provide the mind with

an alternative, non-sensual pleasure with which to nourish itself. Otherwise, as the Buddha notes, even when you see the drawbacks of sensuality, if you don't have access to a higher form of pleasure, the mind will go back to its original craving for sensuality—or to one that's even worse ([MN 14](#)).

At the same time, because craving for sensuality leads to becoming, it actually entails craving for becoming. This means that you can't abandon it without attacking craving for becoming at the same time.

The challenge posed by craving for becoming lies in the fact that we use our various senses of self and of the world as tools for finding happiness, so we have difficulty imagining how we could achieve anything desirable without them. To pursue a path of practice that will end this type of becoming, you have to see that you'll benefit from taking it on. This point may seem paradoxical—after all, when there's no more becoming, there will be no sense of "you"—but strategically it's necessary. People accustomed to thinking in the terms that constitute becoming have to be given reasons that make sense within those terms before they'll adopt any path of practice. As long as you're still attached to your sense of self, you want to know that you'll benefit from following the path.

However, the fact that craving for non-becoming also leads to becoming ([MN 49](#)) presents a further strategic challenge, one that's particularly tricky. Even though the Buddha encourages you to end craving for becoming, you can't simply replace it with craving for non-becoming. If you do, you'll cling to the desire to end becoming, and that act of clinging will lead to more becoming.

The way out of this dilemma is to look at the processes leading up to becoming as events in and of themselves, and to develop dispassion for them before any sense of "self" or "world" develops around them. The Buddha calls this approach "seeing what has come to be (*bhūta*) as what has come to be" ([Iti 49](#)). In [SN 12:31](#), he corroborates Ven. Sāriputta's explanation of what this means: You see what has come to be as having come from a cause. If you develop dispassion for the cause, the cause will cease, and whatever has come into being based on that cause will cease as well.

In practice, this means that you can't focus directly on becoming, and you can't even think in terms of "self" or "world." Instead, you have to focus on the process of events that would lead up to those concepts, simply as events in a causal chain, with no thought of where they're happening or who they're happening to. They're just events as events. As

these causes for new becomings disband through dispassion, no new becomings can form. At the same time, any becomings already existing will be allowed to cease. This is the only way in which becoming can be totally brought to an end.

So any path that will lead to the end of becoming has to focus on discerning chains of events in the mind before those events can coalesce into becomings, and, at the same time inducing dispassion for them.

The question is, how do the factors of the noble eightfold path address the challenges presented by these three forms of craving?

DEALING WITH SENSUALITY

They tackle craving for sensuality first, explaining the drawbacks of sensuality and providing an alternative pleasure to pry the mind away from its obsession with sensual pleasure.

Right view is the primary factor focusing on the drawbacks. It's important to note that right view operates on three progressive levels—mundane, transcendent, and beyond transcendent—and that *mundane right view* plays the leading role in bringing to light the drawbacks of sensuality.

It does this by focusing on the role of kamma—intentional action—in determining how beings fare in the various worlds existing in the universe. Actions based on unskillful intentions lead to suffering and unfortunate rebirths in unpleasant worlds; actions based on skillful intentions, to happiness and fortunate rebirths in pleasant worlds. The Pali discourses explain how, in the context of kamma, craving for sensuality often leads to unskillful mental states, and so to unskillful behavior ([MN 13](#); [MN 54](#)). These unskillful states include not only greed and lust, but also ill will and cruelty when your desires are thwarted. The behavior engendered by these states leads to suffering either in this lifetime, in lives to come, or in both. For example, craving for sensuality leads to quarrels and wars, which are painful both in and of themselves and in their long-term consequences.

Even when sensual desires lead to skillful behavior—as when you practice generosity or observe the precepts in order to enjoy the results of those actions in the sensual heavens—those heavenly sensual pleasures will end before you've had your fill of them. In the vast majority of cases, when they end, you will have exhausted your good kamma and will fall to the pains of the lower realms (SN 56:113).

This is why the Canon prescribes so many contemplations focused on the drawbacks of sensual objects—the human body in particular ([MN 10](#); [AN 10:60](#)). These contemplations help you see that the pleasures offered by these objects are miniscule when compared to the harm that comes from allowing yourself to develop craving for them.

The path factor providing the second prong of the attack on craving for sensuality—a non-sensual, alternative pleasure to sensuality—is *right concentration*. This factor consists of four levels of absorption (*jhāna*) that can be accessed when the mind puts aside sensual thoughts and other unskillful mental qualities, and centers on an object it finds pleasurable ([SN 45:8](#)). The object for concentration most often mentioned in the discourses is the breath. When centered on the breath, the mind trains itself to be aware of the entire form of the body as felt from within, and directs the breath in a way that allows a sense of pleasure and rapture to suffuse the body to the point of saturation. That's the first *jhāna*. The remaining *jhānas* grow more refined until, with the fourth, the breath becomes very still, the mind equanimous, mindful, and alert, and a bright awareness fills the body as a whole ([MN 118](#); [MN 119](#)).

For the mind to enter these states of absorption in a solid and reliable way requires several preliminary steps. This is where the remaining factors of the path come in.

To begin with, right concentration requires a foundation of mental well-being and calm that comes from knowing that you haven't behaved in unskillful ways that would be reason for regret or shame. So, based on the understanding provided by right view, *right resolve* focuses on making a firm resolution not to give rise to unskillful mental states such as sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness.

The path factors related to virtue—*right speech*, *right action*, and *right livelihood*—build on that resolution by exercising restraint over your actions so that:

- you don't intentionally speak in unskillful ways—lying, speaking divisively, speaking harshly, or engaging in idle chatter;
- you don't intentionally act in unskillful ways—killing, stealing, or engaging in illicit sex; and
- you don't intentionally engage in forms of livelihood that would harm yourself or others.

The blamelessness that comes from following these path factors induces a sense of joy conducive to concentration. As you follow these

factors skillfully, you also develop some of the mental skills required for making concentration right. To begin with, in highlighting the issue of intention, these factors turn your attention inside, so that you become more observant of the mind. At the same time, they require that you be mindful, in the Buddha's original sense of the word, which is to keep something in mind. Here you keep in mind the principles of virtue. At the same time, you have to be alert to what you're doing, to make sure that your actions stay within the bounds of those principles. These two qualities, mindfulness and alertness, are basic to the practice of right concentration.

Building on the joy developed by the path factors related to virtue, the next factor—*right effort*—brings the mind into concentration by turning your attention fully inside. Its purpose is to take the general principles of right resolve—to avoid unskillful mental states—and to apply them to individual events arising and passing away in the mind. An important part of right effort is to generate desire to do this, so that you aren't simply forcing the mind into a mold, but are actively getting it to see the value of taking on this training. This induces a sense of rapture and joy conducive to concentration.

The practice of right concentration proper begins with the establishings of *right mindfulness*, which the discourses call the "themes of concentration" ([MN 44](#)). The formula for right mindfulness states that you "remain focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." The formula is then repeated for three other frames of reference: feelings in and of themselves, mind-states in and of themselves, and mental qualities in and of themselves.

The focus in every case is on events as they are directly experienced, devoid of any reference to the world outside. This is a first step in getting the mind to observe events "as they have come to be," before they are viewed in reference to any level of becoming involving the outside world. However, the instructions for right mindfulness still make reference to "I" and "me": "I will train myself to breath in sensitive to the whole body"; "Mindfulness as a factor of awakening has arisen within me" ([MN 10](#)). This shows that the instructions still assume a subtle level of becoming in the world inside the body and mind.

When mindfulness is firmly established, it gets the mind into the first jhāna ([MN 125](#)), and so connects directly with *right concentration*. Although the standard description of the path lists, under the heading of right concentration, only the four jhānas—which are on the level of form

—other descriptions of right concentration include four additional formless states that are based on the equanimity of the fourth jhāna ([MN 140](#); [MN 52](#)).

The Buddha's strategy here is obvious: He's redirecting your desires, getting you to practice craving-substitution by cultivating cravings for becoming on the levels of form and formlessness as alternatives to craving for becoming on the level of sensuality. The subtle but pervasive pleasures to be found in these states of concentration make it easier for the mind to lose interest in sensual pleasures and fantasies.

However, they're not enough to bring craving for sensuality to a halt. If your practice were to stop here, then after death you might be headed, at best, to one of the heavens on the level of form or formlessness, only to fall from that heaven when your concentration began to unravel. The Canon contains stories of devas on these levels returning to the sensual levels out of sheer wantonness ([DN 1](#)). That's because of the willful nature of craving for pleasure. As the Buddha notes, craving can focus "now here, now there" ([SN 56:11](#)), depending on whatever happens to strike your fancy.

It's also because craving for sensuality includes within it the terms of becoming: a sense of "you" obtaining or experiencing a pleasure in a particular world of experience. If you don't develop at least some dispassion toward the terms of becoming, you won't be able to get past sensuality.

This point is illustrated in a famous scene in the Canon where a libertine tries to seduce a nun ([Thig 14](#)). He makes only veiled allusions to the pleasures of sex, and instead dwells on the type of person she will become, and the world in which she will live, if she agrees to his proposition.

*"Like a doll made of gold, you will go about,
like a goddess in the gardens of heaven...
Dwelling in the calm of a palace,
have women wait on you...
I will make you many & varied ornaments
of gold, jewels, & pearls.
Climb onto a costly bed,
scented with sandalwood carvings,
with a well-washed coverlet, beautiful,
spread with a woolen quilt, brand new."*

She doesn't fall for his words, but the fact that the terms of becoming are integral to his sensual fantasy—and the larger fact that this is a common feature of all such fantasies—underscores an important point: Sensuality is firmly imbedded in becoming.

So the only way to completely end *any* of the three forms of craving is to focus on the limitations of becoming itself, regardless of its level. For that, the Buddha prescribes the stronger medicine of transcendent right view.

DEALING WITH BECOMING & NON-BECOMING

Transcendent right view looks at experience in terms of the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to each truth: Suffering is to be comprehended, its origination abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path leading to its cessation developed. This level of right view functions in two ways.

- First, it points out the drawbacks of all types of becoming, in that they are based on clinging, and clinging is identical with suffering ([SN 56:11](#)). In doing so, it contrasts these drawbacks with the happiness to be found when clinging is abandoned.

- Second, in inducing dispassion for becoming, right view has to avoid the danger of giving rise to craving for non-becoming and the states of becoming that would follow inevitably on that type of craving.

The four noble truths—and their expanded explanation, dependent co-arising—accomplish both tasks by focusing on the causal chain of events leading up to becoming ([SN 12:2](#)). Unlike mundane right view, which speaks in terms appropriate to becoming—of beings acting in ways that lead to their taking on identities in pleasant or unpleasant worlds—the four truths dispense with those terms entirely. Instead, they speak simply of actions and their results. These are terms appropriate for seeing the events leading up to becoming simply as events as they have come to be, in a causally-originated series, before notions of “self,” “beings,” or “world” get applied to them.

To comprehend, in line with the duty of the first noble truth, the events in these series that entail suffering; and to abandon, in line with the duty of the second noble truth, any craving for the events leading up to them, you have to develop dispassion for all of them. The Buddha lays out a five-step program for doing this ([SN 22:5](#); SN 22:26; SN 35:13–14). (1) See their origination. (2) Observe their passing away. These two

steps allow you to discern their fabricated nature as steps in a process. (3) Look for their allure—why the mind is attracted to them. (4) Look for the drawbacks of clinging to them. When you see that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure, (5) dispassion arises, providing the escape from them.

The crucial step in this approach is the fourth. The Buddha prescribes many perceptions to apply to these fabricated events to help you see that they're not worth the effort of fabricating states of becoming around them. These perceptions fall into three main groups:

- focusing on the inconstancy of fabrications,
- focusing on the stress of whatever is inconstant, and
- focusing on the fact that if something is inconstant and stressful, it's not-self.

In other words, any state of becoming that you construct out of such raw materials won't lie under your control and so inevitably will lead to disappointment. The effort required to construct a sense of self around such things is simply not worth it.

Just as the terms of analysis get changed as you move from mundane to transcendent right view, so do the terms in two other path factors.

Right resolve becomes focused directly on the fabrications that get the mind into right concentration: your internal conversation composed of acts of directed thought and evaluation ([MN 117](#)).

Right mindfulness moves to a level called "the development of the establishing of mindfulness" ([SN 47:40](#)), in which you're mindful to focus on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to any of the four frames of reference, without trying to place them in a context defining where those events are happening or who is doing the analysis. In other words, you focus on events simply as events in a process, as they are caused and pass away, without trying to frame them in the terms of a becoming.

Putting these two path factors together with transcendent right view means that the analysis of things "as they have come to be" is now focused on observing the practice of concentration itself. This is the best place to focus on craving for becoming because, of the various types of becoming, concentration is the most transparent, in that it allows you to clearly see the steps that go into its formation. It's the ideal state of mind for applying the Buddha's five-step program to the aggregates ([SN 22:5](#)).

First you use that program to develop dispassion for any distractions that would pull you out of concentration. Then you apply the same program to states of concentration themselves, to see that even these refined becomings on the form and formless levels are made out of fabricated events ([AN 9:36](#); [MN 52](#)). This means that they can never provide a happiness that's totally stable and secure. When this insight hits home, the mind realizes that it can't find security in the concentration it's experiencing, but neither can it fabricate an alternative that would provide that security, either. As a result, it develops dispassion for all fabrications and all types of craving, and inclines to the deathlessness of what is unfabricated: the third noble truth.

At that point, if the mind drops all clinging, it gains total awakening. If, however, it develops a sense of passion around the discernment that brought about the experience of the deathless, it attains the penultimate level of awakening, called non-return. It drops once and for all any interest in craving for sensuality, but still clings to a subtle craving for becoming or non-becoming.

This is where you have to use the third level of right view, *beyond the transcendent*, in which right view turns the terms of analysis on right view itself, enabling the mind to go beyond any attachment to views.

In other words, you don't go beyond views by deciding to be agnostic. After all, that, too, would count as a view ([DN 1](#); [SN 22:81](#)). And you don't go beyond views by being fluid in your views, for that would simply lead to inconsistent behavior and serial clinging. Instead, you go beyond views, including right view, by seeing them in terms of how they are formed as processes. This enables you to see how they're constructed from events "as they have come to be," and realize that—no matter how right or true they may be—anything constructed in this way is worthy of dispassion ([AN 10:93](#)). Because right view is the only view that allows for itself to be viewed in this way, it's the only view that can accomplish the work of putting an end to all craving: the desires listed in the second noble truth, along with those listed under the path itself.

THINGS AS THEY HAVE COME TO BE

The knowledge that forms the last step to awakening is, in some discourses, termed *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana* ([SN 56:11](#)). Because *bhūta* can mean "truth" in addition to "what has come to be," this compound is often translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they truly are." However, when we see the way the term *bhūta* is used in

describing the strategy that reaches awakening by avoiding the twin pitfalls of craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming, a more accurate translation would seem to be “knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be.” This translation has the advantage of being strategically more precise, emphasizing that the knowledge in question is not simply a matter of viewing reality as a whole in a particular way, but more a way of focusing on mental processes in and of themselves, as they are happening, so as to induce dispassion for them and so to gain release from them.

The liberation that results is total. When every possible object of desire has been abandoned through dispassion, all phenomena—all activities around the six senses—disband. Some passages describe unbinding as the ending of phenomena ([AN 10:58](#)); others, as the point where they are done away with ([Sn 5:6](#)). All that remains is a consciousness without surface ([DN 11](#); [MN 49](#))—although because it’s outside of space and time, the word “remains” doesn’t do it full justice. This experience of the unfabricated, the highest happiness, leaves nothing to be desired. This is how craving is ended: not because it has been suppressed, but because there’s no longer any need for it.

After the experience of awakening, arahants return to the six senses, but experience them disjoined from them ([MN 140](#))—not in an alienated way, but simply with no need to feed on them. Arahants can still act, and can still desire that their actions lead to good results for beings of the world, but they no longer cling to their desires, so they no longer experience mental suffering. When life ends, their freedom has no constraints at all. This, in the Buddha’s words, is the attainment of true health ([MN 75](#)).

DHAMMA MEDICINE

This is how the Buddha’s prescription of the noble eightfold path deals effectively with the strategic challenges presented by the cravings that cause mental suffering:

- Right view does the work of pinpointing the crucial symptom of suffering, identifying the underlying cause of the symptom, and then figuring out the strategies needed to develop the dispassion that puts an end to the cause. Without right view, you wouldn’t know where to attack the problem of suffering, you wouldn’t know the strategic challenges presented by craving and the processes of becoming, and you wouldn’t know how to overcome them.

- Right effort generates the desire needed to follow through with the course of treatment indicated by right view.
- Right mindfulness and right concentration together provide the solid state of mind where the treatment can be accomplished. Without the pleasure of right concentration, you wouldn't be able to pull yourself away from sensual cravings long enough to follow the complete course of treatment. Without the stillness and alertness of right concentration, you wouldn't be able to see the factors that ordinarily lead to becoming "as they have come to be."
- The four other path factors—right resolve, right speech, right action, and right livelihood—play supporting roles in allowing for right mindfulness and right concentration to be established in a reliable way.

The Buddha's teachings are like a chest full of medicines. When we gain an overall view of how the noble eightfold path works, we can see how it's uniquely suited as a course of treatment for using those medicines to attack suffering at its underlying cause. This gives us confidence that the path is well suited to curing the basic problem in our hearts and minds. At the same time, we learn which medicines to take, and in what order, so that we can more quickly enjoy the absolute inner health for which the Buddha prescribed them.

The Logic of Not-self

In his second recorded discourse ([Mv 1:6.38–47](#)), the Buddha taught that the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness—are not-self. This was a statement he was to repeat many times in the 45 years that he taught. Obviously, he had his reasons for making it. The question is, what kind of reasons were they?

One common modern explanation is that he wanted, in an indirect way, to take a position on the question of whether there is a self, along with such related questions as: What are you? Do you even exist?

According to this explanation, the Buddha treated the issue of the existence or non-existence of the self as a problem of deductive logic—arguing from definitions and general principles to their logical conclusion. But the Buddha’s own analysis of how we create and use our sense(s) of self shows that in teaching not-self he was employing a logic of a more pragmatic, and much more effective, sort.

The deductive proof of not-self usually goes something like this:

Major premise: To be a self, something must be permanent.

Minor premise: “What you are” is nothing but the five aggregates, none of which are permanent.

Conclusion: Therefore, you have no self.

This conclusion is sometimes followed with a corollary: If you persist in holding to a self, it’s because you refuse to listen to logic.

The whole proof, though, is very weak, both on its own merits and in terms of how it’s supposed to function in the Buddha’s teachings. When we check the Pali Canon—the earliest extant record of what the Buddha taught—we find that he never used this proof. But before we look into the arguments he *did* use to explain not-self, it’s worth exploring the weaknesses of the deductive proof, to show why the not-self teaching, if it’s going to be convincing, needs a stronger foundation than the proof can provide.

To begin with, on its own merits, the proof starts with a general principle that’s totally arbitrary. Many people, from before the Buddha’s time up to the present, have defined the self as impermanent, so the argument would have no impact on them at all. The Buddha himself noted that doctrines of this sort were taught at his time ([DN 1](#); [DN 15](#)),

so if he had wanted to assume that “self” had to mean “permanent self,” he would have had to offer his reasons for assuming so. But he never did.

Secondly, in terms of how the proof is supposed to function in the Buddha’s teachings, it’s hard to see what would be accomplished by insisting that the self has to be permanent or that “what you are” is a bundle of the five aggregates. The actual function of the not-self teaching can be seen from its context. The second recorded discourse ends with the note that the listeners gained full awakening because their minds were freed from clinging. And in the first recorded discourse (Mv 1:6.17–31)—in which the Buddha taught the four noble truths to the same group of listeners—we learn in the first noble truth that suffering boils down to clinging to the aggregates, and that it can be ended when, through dispassion, the causes of clinging are completely abandoned.

This is precisely where the deductive proof would actually get in the way of carrying out the Buddha’s instructions. The not-self teaching is meant to lead to awakening by inducing dispassion for any act of clinging to the five aggregates. But to identify “what you are” as the aggregates would simply give you more reason to cling to them. Even though they’re impermanent, you would have nothing and be nothing without them, so you might as well hold on to what you’ve got. In fact, a heightened awareness of how insubstantial and precarious “what you are” is would easily give you all the more reason to hold on tight and to protect what you are at all costs, even if it meant having to dance with what is constantly morphing in your grasp.

So, when people continue to hold on to their sense of self in the face of the deductive proof, it’s not because they’re being illogical. They simply have their pragmatic reasons for holding on. They’re making a value judgment: Given what they see as the available options, the pleasures offered by the five aggregates are worth the effort of clinging to them, despite their limitations.

In fact, this value judgment is what the Buddha’s actual not-self rationale is designed to attack, by pointing out that there is another option, and that it offers pragmatic reasons for why letting go of any sense of self in the aggregates would actually offer more long-term pleasure and happiness than is possible by holding on.

The Buddha approaches the issue of self first by avoiding any position on the question of what the self might be and whether it exists. As he told a group of monks, questions such as “What am I?” “Do I exist?” “Do I not exist?” aren’t worth paying any attention to because they lead to a “thicket of views” that can get you so entangled that you can’t get out

([MN 2](#)). And as he told Ven. Ananda ([SN 44:10](#)), to take a position on the question of the existence of the self actually gets in the way of following the path to overcome clinging. If you say there is a self, you side with the eternalists, those who teach that the self lasts throughout time. What this seems to mean is that regardless of how you define yourself, you're like the eternalists in that you tend to cling to whatever you identify as "you." If you say there is no self, you fall in with the annihilationists, who taught that after death you no longer remain to receive the results of your actions—a teaching that discourages the effort needed to practice the path to the end of clinging.

So, the Buddha found that to avoid falling in with the eternalists or annihilationists, he had to be a strategist. Rather than focus on the existence or non-existence of the self, he focused on the real problem: the actions by which a sense of self is formed and becomes an object of clinging—what he called "I-making" and "my-making" ([MN 72](#)). Rather than try to define you as the five aggregates, he zeroed in on the process by which you use the five aggregates to define yourself, his purpose being to show you how to deconstruct the process.

He noted that people have formulated many different senses of self—finite, infinite, permanent, impermanent, cosmic, individual—but in every instance the sense of self is an assumption *about* aggregates, and it's fabricated *out of* aggregates ([SN 22:81](#)). As with every other fabrication, it's put together for the sake of a desired end ([SN 22:79](#)). In other words, it's a strategy for pleasure and happiness. We identify with our body, for example, both as a producer and as a consumer of pleasures. We can use it to find food; when it eats, we partake of the pleasant feelings it can create. The same principle holds for the remaining aggregates. Our thoughts and perceptions help us navigate through the world; and satisfying thoughts and perceptions give us happiness in and of themselves.

The Buddha doesn't deny that the aggregates provide these pleasures ([SN 22:60](#)). He simply points out that they also inevitably entail pain. Because every assumption of a self, no matter how the self is defined, is made of aggregates, every act of assuming a self entails some suffering. And because the aggregates are inconstant, simply arising and passing away, even more changeable and unstable than a self annihilated only at death, you can't just assume a self once and for all and be done with the process. You have to keep on assuming selves without respite.

Again, this would simply have to be accepted if there were no other options for happiness. But as the Buddha pointed out in his first

teaching, the four noble truths, there *is* another option: the third noble truth, the happiness of nibbāna. In fact, the logic of not-self is so dependent on this option that it wouldn't work outside of the context of the four noble truths.

Because nibbāna can be experienced only when fabrication ends, we can attain it only when we've learned how to overcome our addiction to the desire and passion that fuel fabrication. The first step in the cure is to see all these processes in action. This is why we meditate, constructing mindfulness and states of concentration out of the aggregates ([AN 9:36](#)). This sensitizes us to what the aggregates are—activities ([SN 22:79](#))—and to how they work. In particular, we realize the active role we play in shaping them, not only in meditation but also in daily life.

Paradoxically, the mastery of concentration involves developing a healthy sense of self as a meditator, both because you have to be responsible for doing the meditation and because you have to anticipate that you'll benefit from it. But the paradox is something of a set-up. Once you've grown attached to the pleasure of concentration and have used it to dis-identify with unskillful mental states and unskillful senses of self, the Buddha has you turn your heightened sensitivities on the concentration itself ([AN 9:36](#)).

This is where he supplements the four noble truths with three further steps: seeing the allure of the aggregates—why you fall for them—seeing their drawbacks and, when seeing that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure, finally gaining escape from them through dispassion ([SN 22:57](#)).

The step of focusing on the drawbacks is where the perception of not-self comes into play, together with the perceptions of inconstancy and stress. The Buddha has you focus on the inconstancy of the aggregates, watching them arising and passing away, to observe two things: (1) They aren't totally under your control. If they really were you or yours, you could have a body, feelings, etc., exactly as you wanted them—but you can't ([SN 56:11](#)). (2) If they were your self, you'd arise with them, so it'd be impossible to watch them arise. Similarly, you'd pass away with them, making it impossible to see them pass away ([MN 148](#)). So, for these two reasons, these building blocks for your sense of self can't possibly be what you are.

But rather than getting you sidetracked into the question of what is actually watching them, the Buddha has you then go on to focus on the stressfulness of the aggregates, until it hits home that even though you play a role in shaping them, they turn around to bite you ([SN 22:79](#)). When compared to the possibility of an unchanging, effortless,

deathless, happiness, they're simply not worth the effort that goes into shaping them and identifying with them as "me" or "mine."

In this way, the Buddha gives you reasons to reverse your earlier value judgment, for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness ([MN 22](#); [SN 35:101](#)). Acts of clinging to the aggregates, using them to create a self for the sake of finding happiness, may work in the short term, but in the long term they actually get in the way of the highest happiness possible. Even clinging to the deathless—something that happens at the lower levels of awakening ([AN 9:36](#))—would get in the way of fully awakening to the reality of the third noble truth, which is why the Buddha doesn't simply say that the aggregates are not-self. *All* phenomena, fabricated and not, are to be seen as not-self ([MN 35](#)) for the sake of the truest happiness. Because acts of clinging defeat their purpose, no matter where they're focused, they're not worth the effort that goes into them. That effort makes no sense.

That's the logic of not-self. It's not a deduction from definitions or general principles, negating only the idea of a permanent self. Instead, it's a pragmatic reasoning—based on taking the third noble truth seriously—that shows how I-making and my-making are, ultimately, counterproductive in the pursuit of happiness, no matter how the "I" and "my" are defined. Because the desire for happiness was the whole reason for engaging in those processes to begin with, this pragmatic reasoning puts an end to any desire and passion for them. And because desire and passion were the motive force behind the processes, the processes can be allowed to cease.

But when you've brought the strategies of "self" to an end, you don't have to keep engaging in the strategy of not-self. When that strategy has done its job, the job is done. You've found a happiness that doesn't need strategies to maintain it, so all strategies—which are fabrications anyhow—can finally be put aside.

When even the path is relinquished, there comes an experience of a dimension totally beyond the six senses and outside of the dimensions of space and time. The Buddha calls this "consciousness without surface": The image is of a light beam that doesn't land on any surface at all ([DN 11](#); [MN 49](#); [SN 12:64](#)). Some people have suggested that the concept of this consciousness isn't in line with the teaching on not-self, in that it sounds like a crypto-eternal self, but as the Buddha points out, when all experience of the six senses ceases, there is no thought, "I am" ([DN 15](#)). So, concepts of self and not-self don't apply. And, as we've already noted, it's precisely because the unchanging happiness of this consciousness *is*

possible that the logic of not-self works in the first place. So, instead of conflicting with the teaching on not-self, the concept of this consciousness is a necessary precondition for it.

After the mind returns to the experience of the six senses, it makes use of fabrications to navigate through the world, and even employs concepts of self and not-self where appropriate. But its relationship to those concepts has totally changed. No longer trying to feed on them, it experiences them “disjoined” from them, free from any suffering or stress around them ([MN 140](#)). The Buddha says that awakened people still use the concept of not-self as a pleasant abiding ([SN 22:122](#)), but even so, they know when to pick it up and when to put it down. As for the logic of not-self, they’ve used it for its intended purpose, so they don’t need to submit to it ever again.

The Dhamma Eye

TEXT & CONTEXT

Maps of the path of Buddhist practice often highlight four major noble attainments that occur in stages. These attainments are called *noble* because they relate directly to the goal of the noble search: a happiness free from aging, illness, and death, from defilement and from sorrow.

The first of the noble attainments—portrayed metaphorically as stream-entry in some contexts, as the arising of the Dhamma eye in others—is a momentous event for anyone who experiences it. The Pali Canon describes it as immediately blissful—giving access to a personal experience of tranquility and unbinding (*nibbāna*) ([MN 48](#))—and having a radical long-term impact in at least three ways.

To begin with, it marks a new stage in your relationship to the Dhamma. In line with the image of the Dhamma eye, you have actually seen the Dhamma and are said to be *consummate in view*. One passage in the Canon illustrates this point with the simile of a well: Standing at the edge of the well, you see for sure that there is water in the well, even though you don't yet touch the water with your body ([SN 12:68](#))—the implication being that touching it with your body would stand for full awakening. But even just seeing the Dhamma makes a strong impact. Your confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha has been confirmed. You have no more perplexity or doubts about the Dhamma, and are said to be independent of others with regard to the Buddha's message. In other words, you know for sure what the Buddha was talking about, that it was true, that those members of the Saṅgha who have practiced rightly have seen the same Dhamma, and you are mature enough to direct your own practice from that point on.

Second, this attainment has an indelible impact on your behavior, in that you have completed your training in virtue, although you still have further work to do in developing concentration and discernment. In the words of the Canon, your virtues are now pleasing to the noble ones: unbroken, untorn, and conducive to concentration. The noble ones are also pleased because your virtues are *not grasped at* and you yourself are *not made of virtue*, meaning that you don't take hold of your virtues to create a sense of conceit or self around them. You embody the virtues of

the five precepts not out of pride but out of a natural reaction to what you have seen in seeing the Dhamma: If you are careless in your actions, you will cause harm for yourself and for others. So, out of a pure desire to be harmless, you're careful in all you do.

Finally, the first noble attainment has a decisive impact on your future course through the cycles of death and rebirth. Prior to stream-entry, you face the possibility of an unlimited number of rebirths, and you could be reborn in any of the levels of the cosmos, from the highest to the lowest. After stream-entry, though, you are freed from three of the ten fetters that bind you to those cycles: self-identification views, uncertainty, and grasping at habits and practices. As a result, you face a maximum of only seven more lifetimes, none of them below the human level. You are also now bound for awakening for sure, which appears to be the reason why the attainment is called stream-entry: Just as a person who has entered the flow of a stream will inevitably reach the ocean, a person who has achieved stream-entry will inevitably reach unbinding.

Each of these last two points is illustrated with a simile. The first simile is a variant on the stream image. Instead of flowing along with a stream, you are trying to cross over a stream to the safety on the further shore. In this image, the first noble attainment is where you "gain a footing" ([MN 56](#)). In other words, you haven't yet reached the further shore, but you have reached the point near that shore where the stream is so shallow that your feet can be firmly planted on the streambed. From this point on, you won't be swept away by the current.

The second simile highlights the fact that the amount of suffering you potentially face in the cycle of death and rebirth is now drastically reduced. Prior to stream-entry, that suffering can be compared to all the dirt in the world. After stream-entry, it's like the dirt under a fingernail ([SN 13:1](#)).

For an experience to yield such radical results, it must be extraordinary. The Canon gives some idea of what the stream-entry experience involves in its explanations of what the stream is and what the Dhamma eye sees.

The explanation of the stream is the shorter of the two. The stream is simply the noble eightfold path ([SN 55:5](#)). Because the stream-enterer still has further work to do in developing concentration and discernment—which are covered by five of the factors of the path—this equation of the path with the stream seems to mark the point where all eight factors of the path come together, even though not all of them are fully mastered.

As for the Dhamma eye, every instance of its arising described in the Canon is expressed in the same terms: “Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.” The fact that the experience is always expressed in the same terms is striking, because the Canon tells of its happening to a wide variety of people listening to the Buddha’s teachings—everyone from the five brethren, long-term ascetics who had attended to the Buddha-to-be during his austerities, to the would-be assassin who, in the Buddha’s later years, had been hired by Devadatta to kill the Buddha, along with the would-be assassins hired to then kill the first would-be assassin, and the would-be assassins hired to kill *them*. So obviously there’s something universal about what this formula expresses.

To understand what it means, it’s good to look at the context: both the events that induce the Dhamma eye to arise, and the impact that the arising of the Dhamma eye has on the mind.

It can arise in a variety of situations—such as when one is meditating on one’s own—but the Canon tends to focus on instances where a person gains the Dhamma eye while listening to a Dhamma talk. Usually, the topic of the talk is the four noble truths: the truths of stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path of practice leading to its cessation. In some cases, where the Buddha deems that the listener isn’t immediately ready to hear and accept the four noble truths, he prefaces that teaching with what is termed a gradual or step-by-step talk, in which the Buddha describes generosity, virtue, and the rewards of generosity and virtue in heaven. Then he reverses course to describe the drawbacks of even heavenly sensuality. When the listener is ready to regard renunciation of sensuality positively as a state of rest, the Buddha finally presents the four truths.

The two major exceptions to this pattern are contained in the famous story where Sāriputta—who, at that point, is a wanderer in another sect—gains the Dhamma eye when hearing the following verse from Ven. Assaji, and then again when Moggallāna in turn gains the Dhamma eye after hearing the verse from Sāriputta:

*“Whatever phenomena arise from cause:
their cause
& their cessation.
Such is the teaching of the Tathāgata,
the Great Contemplative.” — [Mv 1:23.5](#)*

What this short teaching has in common with the four noble truths is the notion of causation—“origination” means cause—and its relationship to cessation.

The formula for the Dhamma eye is sometimes followed by a description of its impact. In the case of Sāriputta and Moggallāna, this takes the form of a poem that the narrator of their story addresses rhetorically to them:

*Just this Dhamma,
just this much,
and you experienced
the sorrowless state—
unseen, neglected,
for many ten-thousands of eons. — [Mv 1:23.5](#)*

In this case, the emphasis is on the attaining of a sorrowless state—one of the attributes of the goal of the noble search.

In other cases, the impact of the arising of the Dhamma eye is described by a standard passage focusing on the overcoming of doubt, as in the case of Upāli the householder:

“Then—having seen the Dhamma, having reached the Dhamma, known the Dhamma, gained a footing in the Dhamma, having crossed over & beyond doubt, having had no more questioning—Upāli the householder gained fearlessness and was independent of others with regard to the Teacher’s message.” — [MN 56](#)

In short, these passages show that the Dhamma eye arises after learning about cause, effect, and cessation. It then leads to the overcoming of doubt and to a sorrowless state. When we understand the context of the Dhamma eye’s arising in these terms, we can evaluate the different interpretations offered for what the Dhamma-eye formula actually means.

ARISING VS. ORIGINATION

One interpretation that’s currently widespread states that the Dhamma eye is simply the acceptance of the principle of impermanence or inconstancy: All things that arise must pass away. But there are many reasons, both contextual and textual, for not accepting this interpretation.

To begin with the contextual issues: What sort of experience would legitimately and naturally lead to that acceptance? You'd have to make a survey of all phenomena in the universe for the conclusion to legitimately apply to all phenomena. Anything short of that would simply be, in the words of [MN 95](#), "an agreement through pondering views," i.e., a conclusion based on ideas and observations that fit in with one another, but haven't been universally tested. As the Buddha repeatedly said, the fact that a theory is coherent and consistent with a few facts is no guarantee that it's true. So it's hard to see that such a conclusion would, for him, count as an overcoming of doubt.

There's also the question of why agreeing to the principle that everything that arises passes away would invariably lead to a tranquil, sorrowless state. I know of many people who, believing that meditation aims at a vision of the impermanence of all things, induce themselves to confirm that principle in their practice and then find the experience disturbing and disorienting.

So, in light of these contextual issues, it's hard to accept that this is what the Dhamma eye sees.

As for the textual issues, it's important to note that the formula for the Dhamma eye doesn't make reference to "all that arises." Instead, it speaks of "all that is subject to origination." The difference is crucial. "Arising" is simply an issue of appearing. "Origination," however, is an issue of causality: The Dhamma eye speaks of all that arises because of a cause.

But not just any cause: "Origination" is most often used throughout the Pali Canon to refer to processes where the cause is in one's own mind. Given that the Dhamma eye most frequently follows on hearing the four noble truths, and given that the word "origination" in the context of those truths refers to the causes of stress within the mind—three types of craving—it follows naturally that anyone listening to these truths would naturally look for the causes of stress in his or her own mind.

So the formula for the Dhamma eye refers to what is seen when a listener does just that. You look for the craving mentioned in the second noble truth, and in bringing right view—and all the other factors of the path, hence the "stream"—to bear on it, you can put an end to it. At the same time, [MN 9](#) and [AN 10:92](#) indicate that in doing so, you not only see the end of stress, but you also see how all the factors of dependent co-arising prior to craving—through feeling, sensory contact, the six sense media, name and form, sensory consciousness, fabrication, all the way back to ignorance—unravel as well. Stress, you come to realize, is

not the only thing internally originated. So is what the Buddha calls the *all*: the experience of the sense media (the five senses plus the mind as the sixth). This is probably one of the most radical aspects of gaining the Dhamma eye: seeing the extent to which sensory contact is dependent on events in the mind. This is the *all* that ceases when its internal causal conditions cease. And the cessation of this all is nothing other than an experience of the deathless ([Ud 8:1](#); [SN 35:117](#)).

So in answering the textual questions around the Dhamma-eye formula, we also answer the contextual questions raised earlier. The experience leading to the Dhamma eye is one in which you pursue within the mind the question of where stress originates, and in doing so, you unravel not only the immediate cause of stress—craving—but also the internal origination of your experience of the six sense media. In seeing the cessation that results—the cessation of the all—you naturally come to realize that whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. That’s because you also see what lies outside the category of “whatever is subject to origination”: what is not subject to origination or cessation, the sorrowless state in which there is no arising or passing away ([Ud 8:1](#)). It’s only in seeing what is not subject to origination that the category “all that is subject to origination” naturally and legitimately occurs to the mind.

This is why, when Sāriputta—after experiencing the Dhamma eye—was asked by Moggallāna if he had attained the deathless, he replied, “Yes, I have.”

Now, this deathless is not a blanking out. Instead, it is a type of consciousness that’s not known through the all ([MN 49](#)) and is not dependently co-arisen. The Buddha calls it “consciousness without surface,” and in [SN 12:63](#) he gives an image that helps to explain this term: Ordinary consciousness, affected by clinging, is like a beam of sunlight that can be detected because it lands on a surface; this non-clinging consciousness is like a beam of sunlight that doesn’t land on any surface at all.

CUTTING THREE FETTERS

As we have already noted, all the factors of the noble eightfold path are present in the steps leading up to the experience of this consciousness, but the concentration and discernment factors are not yet fully developed. For this reason, the stream-enterer simply sees the Dhamma of the deathless but without fully touching it.

Still, seeing just this much is enough to cut through the first three fetters. This is a point that has to be emphasized: The fetters are not cut by a decision or an act of will, which could easily be reversed. They're cut once and for all by seeing the deathless—and it's easy to understand why.

To begin with, now that you've seen that the deathless is a reality and that the path is what led you there, you have no more doubt or uncertainty about the truth of the Buddha's teaching. It really does lead to a sorrowless state totally free from stress. The experience of the deathless thus cuts through the fetter of uncertainty.

Second, you've seen that the experience came about through the skillfulness of your own actions, and that what had prevented you from seeing it earlier were your own unskillful actions. For this reason, you would never intentionally break the five precepts ever again. At the same time, though, you see that the experience of the deathless required more than just following the rules of the precepts. It also entailed a radical act of internal discernment and of letting go that didn't follow any rules. These realizations, combined, cut through the fetter of grasping at habits and practices: From now on, you are virtuous but not "made" of virtue.

Third, when all that is subject to origination falls away, the five aggregates—the form of the body, along with the mental actions of feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, and acts of sensory consciousness—fall away as well. And yet there is a consciousness of the deathless that remains. It's for this reason that you would never again hold to a view in which you would define yourself around any of the aggregates. This is what cuts through the fetter of self-identification.

This last fetter relates to another common misinterpretation of the stream-entry experience. There are those who say that because stream-entry cuts through this fetter, stream-entry is the point in the practice where you realize that there is no self. But here again, there are textual and contextual reasons for calling this interpretation into question.

To start with the contextual reasons: It's hard to see what kind of experience would legitimately lead to the conclusion that there is no self—just as it's hard to see what kind of experience would legitimately lead to the conclusion that there *is* a self. Now, it is possible, in the course of meditation, to experience a total blanking out, but the Buddha identified this as a state of non-perception, which—if you maintain it—leads to rebirth in the dimension of non-percipient beings who are not sensitive to anything at all ([DN 1](#); [DN 15](#); [AN 9:24](#)). This dimension is not a noble attainment, and nothing is known or remembered while in it. So there's no legitimate reason to conclude from such an experience that

there is no self. It's simply proof that it's possible to deliberately bring yourself to a state in which you don't perceive anything at all.

As for the textual reasons, the first is that the Buddha consistently avoided giving an answer to the question of whether there is or isn't a self—saying that either answer would side with an extreme wrong view ([SN 44:10](#)). He also stated that the questions of what you are and whether you exist or not are not worthy of attention, in that they pull you off the path into a jungle of views, including the views that “I have a self” and “I have no self,” with all the entanglements that those views entail ([MN 2](#)).

Second, after the Buddha brought all five brethren to an experience of the Dhamma eye, he then gave them a Dhamma talk in which he taught that the five aggregates should be regarded as not-self. If, in experiencing the Dhamma eye, they had already come to the conclusion that there is no self, there would have been no reason for him to address this topic. They would have already seen it for themselves.

The reason he *did* have to address the topic is because cutting the fetter of self-identification views does not entirely remove from the mind all traces of stress related to the act of clinging to a sense of self. The views covered by self-identification all come down to the sense that “I am this,” where “this” can be either an aggregate, the owner of an aggregate, something within an aggregate, or something containing an aggregate within it (such as a cosmic sense of self) ([SN 22:2](#)). However, even after abandoning the sense that “I am this,” you don't necessarily abandon the conceit “I am”—a fetter that is cut only with the fourth and final noble attainment. As [SN 22:89](#) explains, even after self-identification views are removed, there is still a lingering sense of “I am” with regard to the aggregates, just as when a cloth has been thoroughly washed, there is still a lingering scent of the cleaning agent used in cleaning the cloth.

So it was to get rid of the lingering sense of “I am” around the aggregates that the Buddha taught the five brethren that all five aggregates should be regarded as not-self. When they abandoned that last, lingering clinging, they were able to gain the ultimate noble attainment, total release from clinging, fully touching unbinding for themselves.

LISTENING TO THE DHAMMA

When we understand that the arising of the Dhamma eye has to occur in conjunction with the first experience of the deathless, it helps us to answer many of the textual and contextual questions surrounding the descriptions of the Dhamma eye in the Canon. It explains what the terms of the Dhamma eye actually mean, and also why the arising of the Dhamma eye has such a radical impact both on one's present state of mind and on one's future course, cutting through the three fetters and placing a limit on one's suffering in saṃsāra.

However, this way of understanding the Dhamma eye does raise an important contextual question of its own: How can just listening to a Dhamma talk give rise to such an experience, especially in cases like those of the would-be assassins, who had no background in Dhamma practice at all?

The short answer to this question is that people who gain stream-entry while listening to a Dhamma talk aren't "just listening." They have to be more actively engaged in seeing how the talk applies to events in their own minds. This point is made, in general terms, in the list of four factors required for stream-entry: associating with people of integrity, listening to the True Dhamma, applying appropriate attention, and practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma ([SN 55:5](#)).

Appropriate attention, here, means seeing how the lessons of the talk apply to the four noble truths as they appear in your own mind—for example, seeing what the talk has to say about any stress you detect, about any factors that give rise to stress, or any factors that, if they're developed, could lead to its cessation. Practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma means applying the duties of the four noble truths appropriately to such events as they appear in the mind—comprehending stress, abandoning its origination, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation—all for the sake of dispassion and release.

This list of factors doesn't say that they all have to occur while listening to a talk—for example, you could apply the duties of the four noble truths while meditating on your own after listening to the talk. It also doesn't describe how the factors can come into play while listening to a talk. However, the Canon does address this latter issue both in its descriptions of what ideally happens when you're fully engaged in listening to a Dhamma talk, and in its descriptions of the Buddha's special skills as a teacher.

Two discourses in particular—[AN 5:26](#) and [AN 5:151](#)—give an idea of how you actively follow along when a talk is being given. [AN 5:151](#)

discusses what you bring to the talk. You approach it with an attitude of respect: not despising the teacher, not despising the talk, and not despising your own ability to understand and follow it. You gather your mind into singleness, focused totally on listening to the talk, at the same time bringing appropriate attention to bear.

“Singleness (*ekagga*),” here, is the defining feature of concentration; appropriate attention is related directly to right view. This means the two most difficult factors of the path, right view and right concentration, can be present while you’re listening to the talk. By implication, all the other factors of the noble eightfold path can be present as well.

It’s sometimes thought that right concentration puts you into a state of one-pointedness where you can’t hear or think, but the fact that you can listen and apply appropriate attention when the mind is in a state of singleness shows that this is not the case. Both activities can occur in conjunction with a rightly concentrated mind, which is why it’s possible, while listening to a Dhamma talk, for the path to come together in a way that allows the Dhamma eye to arise.

[AN 5:26](#) discusses how the preliminary singleness of mind that you bring to the talk actually develops into right concentration: As you gain a sense of the Dhamma and of what it’s aiming at, you develop a feeling of joy. This feeling of joy leads successively to rapture, calm, pleasure, and then concentration. This state of concentration then provides an opening for total release to occur, meaning that at the very least, it provides a basis for the Dhamma eye to arise.

As for the case of the would-be assassins (Cv 7:3.6–8), this is where the Buddha’s status as a person of integrity and his skills as a teacher come into play. In addressing each group of assassins, he started by extending goodwill to them all, which influenced them to abandon their plans. Then he gave them a step-by-step talk. This talk is described at many spots in the Canon, but nowhere is there any record of exactly how the Buddha addressed each topic in any of the individual talks. This suggests that he tailored each talk to his listeners’ needs. In the case of the assassins, it’s easy to imagine that he would have used some strong imagery to emphasize the dangers that are avoided by following the precepts. This would have alerted the assassins to the huge mistake they had just been saved from committing.

The Buddha could have also emphasized the drawbacks of even the most refined sensual pleasures in heaven in terms of the dangers of staying on in *samsāra*, the round of death and rebirth. [SN 15:13](#) contains a striking instance where the Buddha informs a group of monks

that the amount of blood they have shed from having their heads cut off as they have wandered through saṃsāra is greater than the water of the oceans. It's easy to imagine that the Buddha would have used similar imagery to gain the would-be assassins' undivided attention, so that they really would be ready not only to listen to the four noble truths, but also to look into their own minds while listening.

This is where the Buddha would have exercised what he called the miracle of instruction ([DN 11](#)), where the speaker—reading the minds of his audience—tells them, as soon as a particular state arises in their minds, whether to abandon it or to develop it. This would have aroused the respect of the assassins, at the same time helping them to apply appropriate attention to the events actually happening in their minds. As he explained these events in language they could understand, this would have led to the joy that would form the basis for right concentration. In this way, all of the factors for stream-entry would have been present within them.

So it's not at all impossible that, even in their case, the Buddha was able to bring them to the realizations that allowed them to gain the Dhamma eye.

Unfortunately, at present, there are very few people who can practice the miracle of instruction, so our opportunities for gaining the same sort of help that the Buddha gave to the would-be assassins are few and far between. Still, even though you may not encounter anyone who can read your mind, it's nevertheless still possible to learn how to read your own mind. And, in reading your mind, it's still possible to bring the mind to singleness and to apply appropriate attention and to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma with regard to whatever originates within you. That way, you can put yourself in a position where joy leads to concentration, and where concentration can provide a context where the Dhamma eye can arise. Then you can know for yourself what the Dhamma eye sees and the Dhamma-eye formula actually means.

So, the path is still wide open. The conditions for gaining the Dhamma eye are still at hand. It's simply a matter of making the most of them while you can.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor. Pāli form: *Ācariya*.

Arahant: A “worthy one” or “pure one;” a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: *Arhat*.

Attha: Goal; purpose; meaning; benefit.

Bhava: Becoming—an identity in a particular world of experience. These identities and worlds can exist either on a micro scale, in the mind, or on a macro scale, in the world outside, and can occur on any one of three levels: the level of sensuality, the level of form, or the level of formlessness.

Brahmā: A deva inhabiting the realms of form or formlessness.

Brahma-vihāra: Sublime attitude of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity.

Deva: Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the terrestrial and celestial realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) nibbāna (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). When capitalized in this book, Dhamma means teaching. Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Dukkha: Suffering; stress; pain.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration, devoid of sensuality or unskillful thoughts, focused on a single physical sensation or mental notion which is then expanded to fill the whole range of one’s awareness. Jhāna is synonymous with right concentration, the eighth factor in the noble eightfold path. Sanskrit form: *Dhyāna*.

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *Karma*.

Nibbāna: Literally, the “unbinding” of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. “Total nibbāna” in some contexts denotes the experience of Awakening; in others, the final passing away of an arahant. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant complete Canon of the Buddha’s teachings.

Puñña: Goodness; merit.

Samsāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, entailing repeated birth and death.

Saṃvega: A sense of overwhelming terror or dismay over the pointlessness of life as it is normally lived.

Saṅgha: On the conventional (*sammati*) level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the noble or ideal (*ariya*) level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry.

Satipaṭṭhāna: Establishing of mindfulness; foundation of mindfulness. The meditative practice of focusing on a particular frame of reference—the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind-states in and of themselves, or mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress in reference to the world. This practice then forms the basis for *jhāna*.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra*.

Tathāgata: Literally, “one who has become authentic (*tatha-āgata*),” or “one who is really gone (*tatha-gata*),” an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In the Pali Canon, this usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Anguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>Cv</i>	<i>Cullavagga</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>Khp</i>	<i>Khuddakapāṭha</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
<i>Mv</i>	<i>Mahāvagga</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>Thag</i>	<i>Theragāthā</i>
<i>Thig</i>	<i>Therīgāthā</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>

References to DN, Iti, and MN are to discourse (sutta); references to Dhp, to verse. References to Mv and Cv are to chapter, section, and sub-section. References to other texts are to section (nipāta, samyutta, or vagga) and discourse.

Table of Contents

Titlepage	1
Copyright	2
Acknowledgements	3
Safety in a Duality	4
Dhamma Is What Dhamma Does	10
A Strategic Distinction	12
Tests for the True Dhamma	14
Becoming a True Person	18
Happiness as a Skill	25
From Puñña to Insight	29
The Skills of Happiness	30
The Lessons of Puñña	31
Insight Fosters Goodness	34
Dhamma in the Context of Goodness	35
Trust in Goodness	36
Wise Enough to Care	38
An Arrow in the Heart	42
Meditators at Work	49
Unhindered at Death	58
Clinging & the End of Clinging	67
Clinging	67
The End of Clinging	70
The Buddha's Rx	78
To Focus on the Cause	79
Dealing with Sensuality	83
Dealing with Becoming & Non-becoming	87

Things as They Have Come to Be	89
Dhamma Medicine	90
The Logic of Not-self	92
The Dhamma Eye	98
Arising vs. Origination	101
Cutting Three Fetters	103
Listening to the Dhamma	105
Glossary	109
Abbreviations	111