

THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS



AN INTRODUCTION

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Is there such a thing as a deathless happiness that can bring suffering and stress to a total end?

If there is, can this happiness be found through human effort?

If so, can it be found in a harmless and blameless way?

These are the questions that, 2,600 years ago, led a young man in northern India to leave his family, go into the wilderness, and search for the answer within himself. Eventually he awakened to the fact that the answer to all three questions was Yes: Yes, there is a deathless happiness that brings suffering to a total end. Yes, it can be found through human effort. And Yes, that effort is harmless and without blame. In awakening to these facts, he became the Buddha: the Awakened One. Devoting the rest of his life to teaching others how to find the same happiness for themselves, he established an apprenticeship of practice and thought that has branched into the many forms of Buddhism we know today.

The way the young *bodhisatta*, or Buddha-to-be, went about finding an answer to these questions played a major role in shaping the path of practice that he taught to others. So to understand his teachings, it's good to see how he came to learn them in his own quest. What follows is a brief account of his life, interspersed with the lessons that he later drew from his own experience and taught to others.

Born into a princely family—the Sakyan branch of the Gotama clan of the noble warrior caste—the bodhisatta had a very luxurious upbringing. His father built him three mansions to live in—one each for the rainy season, the cold season, and the hot season—and even the servants in the mansions were fed the best of foods, to say nothing of the bodhisatta's own fare.

Yet at one point, the bodhisatta realized that all the things in which he searched for happiness were subject to aging, illness, and death. Even though he was young, healthy, and alive, he, too, would not escape growing old, falling ill, and dying. Pondering these facts, he lost his intoxication with his youth, health, and life. He saw the world as a

dwindling puddle, swarming with fish fighting one another over their last gulp of water. This filled him with a sense of *saṃvega*, or dismay at the pointlessness of life as it's normally lived. He decided that the only noble, honorable purpose in life would be to search for something free from aging, illness, and death: the deathless—in other words, a happiness that wouldn't end, a happiness that didn't require struggling with others, a happiness that caused no one any harm. He also realized that the search for this happiness would be impossible if he stayed entangled in the responsibilities of the household life. So—in a tradition with long roots in Indian culture—he shaved off his hair and beard, put on the brown robes of a wandering religious mendicant (someone who lives off the alms offered by others), left his family, and went into the wilderness.

He approached the path to the deathless as a skill to be mastered. His efforts to find and master that skill took six years, involving several false starts. One of the keys to his success was that he was able to recognize the false starts as false, and to correct course, repeatedly. In each case, this meant gauging the results he was getting from his actions, seeing that they fell short of his goal, and then—instead of either resigning himself to his situation or blaming outside factors for it—trying to imagine a new course of action. Then he put that, too, to the test.

Another key to his success was that he kept to a high standard: He wouldn't let himself get discouraged, and he wouldn't rest content, until he had found a happiness truly deathless.

After studying with two masters who taught refined meditative states—absorption in nothingness and a state of neither perception nor non-perception—he realized that even these refined states were not deathless. So he went off on his own and practiced self-inflicted torment for six years, virtually starving himself in hopes that intense pain would purify his mind. He reached the point where, if he rubbed his stomach, he could feel his spine; whenever he relieved himself, he would fall over in a faint. But he never allowed his physical pains and weakness to overcome his mind. Ultimately, though, he realized that this path, too, didn't lead to the noble goal he sought.

He recalled a time from his childhood when, sitting alone under a tree, he had entered an absorbed and pleasant state of concentration, called *jhāna*, focused on his breath. He wondered: Might that be the way to the

deathless? Deciding to give it a try, he abandoned his program of self-starvation so as to regain the bodily strength he would need to attain that concentration. He also realized that he would have to train his mind to banish unskillful thoughts—those that would form obstacles to the practice of jhāna—and to allow only thoughts that were conducive to settling the mind. After mastering these skills, he found that they did form the heart of the path to the deathless he sought.

This way of approaching and finding the path to the deathless taught him many lessons not only about the skills of the path, but also about the qualities of the character that those skills required. And it taught him many lessons about what the mind can do.

- The mind can train itself to abandon unskillful qualities—such defilements as greed, aversion, and delusion; sensuality, ill-will, and harmfulness—and to develop skillful qualities, free of these defilements, in their place.

- This training requires you to look carefully at your own actions, in thought, word, and deed. Before acting, ask yourself: What results do I expect from this action? If you expect harm for yourself or others, don't do it. If you don't expect harm, go ahead and do it. While doing it, check to see if it's causing any immediate harmful results. If it is, stop. If not, continue. After it's done, check to see the long-term results of the action. If you see that it was harmful in spite of your intentions, resolve not to repeat the mistake. If you see no harmful results, take joy in your progress and resolve to keep progressing.

- The primary motivation for taking on this training is **heedfulness**: the realization that your actions make a difference between suffering and happiness, harm and no-harm, and that you have to watch over them carefully. Heedfulness, in turn, has to be paired with an attitude that is **not easily contented** with the results you're getting from your actions. If you can see that higher levels of happiness are possible, then even though they may require more effort, you're willing to make that effort until you've reached the highest possible levels of skill.

- To succeed at this skill requires two further qualities: **truthfulness** about your actions and their results, and strong **powers of observation**. If you're not truthful to others in telling them about your actions, you'll be

unlikely to observe them truly yourself. So these two qualities form an indivisible pair. Without them, there is no reliable way to test what human effort—your human effort—can actually attain.

On the night of his awakening, the bodhisatta sat under a tree—which later became known as the *Bodhi* (awakening) tree—and focused on his breathing. He was able to attain not only the level of *jhāna* he had attained as a child, but also three higher levels of absorption. On reaching the fourth level of *jhāna*, in which his breathing was naturally still, and his mind was radiant and equanimous, he applied that level of concentration to gain three knowledges:

- knowledge of his own past lives;
- knowledge of how all beings die and are reborn in line with their *kamma* (a word meaning “action,” better known now in its Sanskrit form, *karma*); and
- knowledge of how to end the mental qualities that he called *āsava*s, or effluents: tendencies that “bubble up” in the mind and lead to further rebirth.

When these effluents, which tie the mind not only to rebirth but also to space and time, were gone from his mind, the bodhisatta—now the Buddha—experienced the deathless, which he later called *nibbāna* (better known now in its Sanskrit form, *nirvāṇa*): unbinding. This was his awakening.

For seven weeks, he stayed in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree, experiencing the bliss of release. Only then did he decide to teach. As he said at a later time, what he learned in the course of his awakening was like the leaves in a forest; what he taught, like a handful of leaves. He chose to teach just what would be useful for others to put into practice to find the deathless themselves.

This involved putting aside questions that were irrelevant to attaining the deathless, or that—if you accepted their terms—actually got in the way. Among the questions that the Buddha deliberately put aside are these: Is the universe finite or infinite? Is it eternal or not? Is everything One? Or is it a plurality of things? What is a person? Do we have a self or do we not?

In place of these questions, the Buddha advised focusing only on questions dealing with the power of human action, and how actions can be brought to the level of skill necessary for awakening. These were the lessons of his **Dhamma**: the teachings that formed his handful of leaves.

Many of these lessons were shaped by his final approach to awakening, and by aspects of the awakening itself.

MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

The meditation technique that the bodhisatta used to attain jhāna on the night of his awakening, keeping his breath in mind, was the technique that he taught most often, and in most detail, to others. He divided his instructions into four sets, called *tetrads* because they consist of four steps each. Each tetrad deals with a different aspect of getting the mind to settle down with the breath, but those aspects are closely related to one another.

1) The first tetrad focuses on the breath itself: (a) discerning long breathing, (b) discerning short breathing, (c) training yourself to breathe conscious of the entire body, and (d) calming the in-and-out breaths to the point where, without forcing them, they eventually fall still on their own.

2) The second tetrad focuses on feeling tones in the body and mind. You train yourself (a) to breathe with a sense of rapture or refreshment, (b) to breathe with a sense of pleasure or ease, (c) to breathe while at the same time being aware of how feeling-tones and perceptions—the labels the mind places on things—have an effect on the mind, and (d) to focus on developing feelings and perceptions which calm that effect and eventually grow calm themselves.

3) The third tetrad focuses on mind states. You train yourself (a) to breathe sensitive to the state of your mind and then, depending on the state, (b) to breathe gladdening the mind when it's constricted, (c) steadying the mind when it's unstable or scattered, and (d) releasing the mind when it's burdened or trapped in an unskillful state.

4) The fourth tetrad focuses on steps in releasing the mind from problems: either distractions from concentration, or problems within the concentration itself. The steps are these: (a) focusing on the inconstancy

and undependability of whatever is troubling the mind, (b) focusing on the resulting sense of dispassion you feel toward it, (c) focusing on watching it cease because of your dispassion, and then (d) focusing on relinquishing the entire issue.

As the Buddha said, these 16 steps foster two qualities necessary in gaining jhāna—tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*)—and they can take the mind all the way to awakening.

KAMMA & REBIRTH

Two of the topics most fiercely debated among Indian thinkers in the Buddha's time concerned kamma (action) and rebirth. Do people have freedom of choice in their actions? Do their actions actually influence their experience of pleasure or pain? Are they reborn after death? If so, where? Do their actions in this lifetime have any effect on where they're reborn?

The first two knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening provided the Buddha with answers to these questions. When these answers were combined with the insights he gained from his third knowledge—the ending of the effluents, which put an end to kamma and rebirth—he ended up teaching kamma and rebirth in ways that they had never been taught before.

First, **kamma**: The essence of action is the intention that drives it. Intentions can be either unskillful—leading to pain; or skillful—leading to pleasure. As the Buddha discovered, unskillful intentions are rooted in greed, aversion, or delusion; skillful intentions are rooted in states of mind free from greed, aversion, and delusion. Skillful intentions are a special class of good intentions, in that well-meaning intentions inspired by delusion can lead to pain. In other words, not all good intentions are skillful, but all skillful intentions are good. A good intention has to be free from delusion in order to be truly skillful.

The effects of action can be experienced both now, in the immediate present, and into the future. As a result, your present experience is composed of three things: the results of past intentions with long-term effects, present intentions, and the immediate results of present

intentions. Past intentions provide the raw material from which present intentions shape your actual experience of the present moment.

Because you are acting on intentions all the time, and because many different past actions can be at work in providing the raw material for each present moment, the workings of kamma can be quite complex. The Buddha's image is of a field with many seeds. Some of the seeds are ripe and ready to sprout if given a little moisture; some will sprout only later no matter how much you water them now; and some will get crowded out by other seeds and die without sprouting. Present intentions provide the water that enables the ripening seeds, whether good or bad, to sprout.

In this way, past kamma places some limitations on what you might experience in the present—if the seed for a particular type of experience is not ready to ripen, no amount of water will make it sprout—but there is the possibility of free choice in the present moment as to which seeds to water. This means that past actions don't entirely shape the present. Without some measure of freedom of choice to shape the present, the idea of a path of practice would make no sense, because you wouldn't be free to decide whether to follow it or not.

In fact, the choices you make in the present determine whether you will suffer in the present from the ripening seeds of past kamma. Unskillful choices in the present can make you suffer even from the pleasures made possible by past skillful actions. Skillful choices in the present can protect you from suffering even from the pains made possible by past unskillful actions.

As for **rebirth**: The Buddha, when discussing the topic of rebirth, tended to describe it as a form of **becoming** (*bhava*), a word that means the act of taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. He chose this word apparently because, in his description, becoming is a process that happens both on the large-scale level—when the process of consciousness moves to a new world and new identity at the death of the body—and the small-scale level, when a thought-world appears in the mind, centered on a particular desire, and you inhabit that world in your imagination.

Small-scale becomings fuel the process on both scales. They begin to move out of your imagination into the world when you fasten on a desire to the point of acting on it. Say that you have a desire for chocolate ice

cream. Your world then becomes defined by the desire: It consists of anything that either helps you obtain the ice cream or gets in the way. Anything or any people irrelevant to the desire fall into the background of your world at that time.

As for your identity in this world, it has two sides: the “you” that will find pleasure in feeding on the ice cream—this is your self as *consumer*—and the “you” that either has the abilities to obtain the ice cream or not: your self as *producer*.

When you abandon the desire for ice cream—either because you’ve obtained it and eaten it, you’ve given up on trying to get it, or you’ve simply lost interest in it—you usually find yourself moving on to a different desire, around which you develop a different sense of the world and a different sense of who you are: a new becoming.

If, as often happens, you have several competing desires at any one time, they will lead you to experience competing inner worlds and competing senses of who you are. This is why you can feel divided against yourself and unsure of your place in the world. This is one of the most common ways in which becoming leads to suffering.

The process of replacing one becoming with another can continue without end, which is how small-scale becomings carry on repeatedly.

When you act on the desires that shape small-scale becomings, you shape large-scale becomings, both in this lifetime and carrying over into future lifetimes. This is how the process of rebirth after the death of the body is directed by events in the mind.

Unlike the thinkers of his day, the Buddha focused not on *what* gets reborn, but on *how* the process happens. That’s because discussions of what gets reborn go nowhere, but the ability to understand the steps in the process can help you negotiate it skillfully, either to take on a new becoming in a good world, or to go beyond the process of becoming entirely.

The process depends on craving. Consciousness, which is also a process, does not need a body to continue functioning. It can cling to craving, and craving will take it to a new becoming. This is how consciousness survives the death of the body. If the craving is relatively skillful, it will lead to a good destination; if not, it will lead to a bad one.

The Buddha's first knowledge showed him that the cosmos contains many possible worlds in which to be reborn. These worlds fall into three main levels. The first level contains the sensual worlds, which range from hells of intense suffering, up through the world of ghosts, the animal world, the human world, and on to many heavenly worlds of intense sensual pleasure. The second level contains higher heavens in which the inhabitants feed on the more refined pleasures of pure "form," such as the sense of inhabiting the inner sense of a pleasurable refined body. The third level contains even higher levels of pure formlessness, in which the inhabitants experience such dimensions as infinite space, infinite consciousness, or nothingness.

The Buddha also saw that all these levels are impermanent and unstable. The inhabitants of hell, for instance, will eventually leave hell and be reborn elsewhere; even the inhabitants of the highest heavens will eventually fall back to lower worlds. These levels are impermanent because, to stay there, all the beings within them have to feed. In some cases the food is purely physical; in others, it can be the emotional/physical food of trying to take satisfaction in pleasures, wealth, power, status, or relationships. But regardless of the type of food, no source of food is eternal.

The Buddha's first knowledge also showed him that there is no guarantee of upward movement from life to life through the cosmos. Beings rise and fall, and rise and fall, again and again. This is why he called the process of going from lifetime to lifetime **saṃsāra**: wandering-on.

His second knowledge showed him that the course of beings as they wander on is shaped by their actions: Just as past kamma provides the raw material for the present moment in this life, it also provides the raw material for your next becoming after death. Skillful kamma makes good destinations possible; unskillful kamma opens the way to bad destinations. Because beings in good destinations can get so enthralled by their pleasures that they become heedless and complacent, they often forget to keep creating further skillful kamma. This is why they can fall when the results of their past skillful kamma run out.

Because consciousness and craving can continue feeding off each other indefinitely, the process of repeated becoming is endless unless you master

the skill that brings it to an end. Because this process of wandering-on simply rises and falls, again and again, it is pointless and meaningless. Because it requires constant feeding, it is not only precarious but also stressful and painful, in that it is driven by hunger and uncertainty over your next source of food. It also places a burden on others who provide your food or who want to lay claim to the same sources of food that you do.

Realizing these facts, the Buddha saw that the happiness he sought could not be found anywhere in the cosmos of becoming, even the highest levels. However, the meaninglessness of *saṃsāra* gave him the freedom to give his own meaning to his life. For both of these reasons, he saw that the only way to find happiness and meaning would be to discover the way to bring becoming to an end. That was why, on the evening of his awakening, he turned his mind to the third knowledge: the way to end the effluents that “flow out” of the mind and flood it with craving and becoming. The solution to the problem, he saw, was not *out there* in the cosmos, but *in here*, in the mind.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The insight that put an end to craving was to look at present experience and divide it into four categories: *dukkha* (suffering, stress), the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering. Each of these categories entailed a duty, in the sense that the Buddha saw that if anyone wanted to put an end to suffering, this was what he or she had to do: comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path to its cessation. When he had completed all four of these duties, the Buddha experienced unbinding. And that was his awakening.

When he began teaching, he termed these four categories the four noble truths—*noble* in the sense that they ennobled the mind and led to the noble goal for which he had been searching. These truths take a problem-solving approach to the issue of suffering, and are similar to the way a skilled doctor cures a disease: Identify the symptoms, track down

the cause of the symptoms, affirm that the disease can be cured by getting rid of the cause, and prescribe a course of treatment to get rid of the cause.

These truths form the framework for all of the Buddha's other teachings, so it's good to know them in some detail.

The first noble truth. Contrary to popular belief, the Buddha did not teach that life is suffering. Instead, he listed many aspects of life that are obviously painful—such as aging, illness, and death—and pointed out that the suffering in each case comes from clinging to five activities that he called *khandhas*. The word *khandha* means “heap” or “pile” in Pāli, the language of the earliest Buddhist texts. But it's normally translated as “**aggregate**” to convey the point that these activities tend to be random and disorganized. Even though we try to force some order on them, in order to satisfy our desires, they ultimately resist coming under our total control.

Each of these activities is associated with the act of feeding, both physically and emotionally. This is in line with the Buddha's insight that feeding—although it may seem pleasant—is actually stressful, and that the need to keep feeding endlessly entails suffering. The activities are these:

- *A sense of form:* both the form of the body that needs to be nourished (and that will be used to look for food), as well as the physical objects that will be used as food. (The Buddha regarded the form of the body as a type of activity in that it's always going through the process of deteriorating.) When feeding takes place in the imagination, “form” applies to whatever form you assume for yourself in the imagination, and to the imaginary forms from which you take pleasure.
- *Feeling:* the painful feeling of hunger or lack that drives you to look for food; the pleasant feeling of satisfaction that comes when you've found something to eat; and the added pleasure when you actually eat it. These feelings, too, are activities in that you can feel them only through the act of attention.
- *Perception:* the ability to identify the type of hunger you feel, and to identify which of the things in your world of experience will

satisfy that hunger. Perception also plays a central role in identifying what is and isn't food.

- *Fabrication*: This is a technical term that means, “putting together,” and it refers primarily to intentional attempts to shape your experience. In the context of feeding, it means the way you have to think about and evaluate strategies for finding food, for taking possession of it when you find it, and for fixing it if it's not edible in its raw state.
- *Consciousness*: the act of being aware of all these activities.

These activities, on their own, are not necessarily painful, but clinging to them makes them suffering. The Pāli word for clinging, *upādāna*, also means the act of taking sustenance—as when a tree takes sustenance from soil, or a fire from its fuel. This shows that suffering comes from a double level of feeding: feeding emotionally off the activities that go into easing our physical and emotional hunger.

There are four ways in which we cling to the aggregates:

- Through *sensuality*: a fascination with thoughts about how to gain and enjoy sensual pleasures. In the context of feeding, this refers to our fascination with planning how we're going to feed, whether on physical food or the enjoyment of other sensual pleasures. In fact, we cling more to our fantasies about sensual pleasures than we do to the pleasures themselves.
- Through *habits and practices*: an insistence that things have to be done a certain way, regardless of whether that way is really effective. In the context of feeding, this refers to our insistence on finding physical and emotional food in particular ways. In more extreme contexts, it refers to a fixation on ritual behavior: that everything depends on doing a certain ritual right.
- Through *views*: an insistence that certain views are right, regardless of the effects of holding to them; or a belief that simply holding to a particular view will make us pure or better than other people. In the context of feeding, this would apply to our views about what can and cannot be eaten, but this can refer to the way people feed off of political, religious, or philosophical views as well.

- Through *doctrines of the self*: beliefs about who we are, and what kind of person we become by feeding—physically or emotionally—in a particular way. This can also extend to beliefs about whether or not we have a true self and, if so, what that self is.

Because these forms of clinging necessarily entail suffering, they are the main problem that the Buddha’s teaching aims at solving.

The second noble truth. Clinging is caused by three types of craving that lead to further becoming—both on the small scale and on the large scale. Just as the Pāli word for clinging is related to feeding, the word for craving—*taṇhā*—literally means “thirst.” We feed because we feel hunger and thirst. To put an end to the need to feed, we have to put an end to hunger and thirst. The three types of thirst are:

- Craving for sensuality.
- Craving for becoming.
- Craving for not-becoming.

The last type of craving is the most counterintuitive, in that it would seem that craving to put an end to becoming would be a helpful motivation for putting an end to suffering. But actually, when the mind takes on the desire to end a particular type of becoming—either on the large-scale, in a desire to end a relationship or to commit suicide; or on the small-scale, in a desire to end the imaginings around a particular desire—it takes on a new identity, as a destroyer, and that becomes its new becoming.

This means that the path to put an end to suffering has to be strategic in two ways: One, it has to attack states of becoming indirectly. Instead of focusing directly on them, it has to focus on developing dispassion for their *causes*. Two, it has to focus its motivation, not on destroying becoming, but on abandoning unskillful qualities in the mind and developing skillful qualities that will allow becoming to run out on its own.

Because these three types of craving cause the clinging that constitutes suffering—and that leads to becoming—they are the main target that the path to the end of suffering will have to attack. So the Buddha provided a very detailed description not only of the steps by which the three cravings

lead to clinging, but also of the steps that lead up to these cravings. The complete list of steps is called **dependent co-arising**, or dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*), and although the list is long ([see the box](#)), four features stand out:

- 1) Although some of the names of the steps may seem strange, they are all things that you directly experience in your body and mind. Just as suffering is something you experience directly, in a part of your awareness that you don't and can't share with anyone else, the causes of suffering are things that you do on the same level of experience.
- 2) Many of the steps, including the intention that counts as kamma, come prior to contact at the six senses. This means that you can prime yourself unconsciously—by the way you think, even by the way you breathe—to suffer even from pleasant sensory experiences.
- 3) The list contains many feedback loops, with factors at one step in the list (such as feeling) also appearing later at other steps. This means that the relationships among the factors in the list are very complex.
- 4) The entire sequence depends on ignorance of the four noble truths. This doesn't mean simply not knowing the four truths. Instead, it means not looking at experience in terms of those truths—as when you look at an experience in terms of “me” and “mine,” or “not me” and “not mine.”

But if knowledge of the four noble truths is applied to any of the steps in the sequence, that turns that particular step from a cause of suffering into part of the path to the end of suffering. For example, if knowledge is applied to the in-and-out breath (under the step of fabrication), the breath becomes part of the path. In this way you can train yourself not to suffer even from unpleasant input from the senses. When knowledge becomes complete to the point where it develops total dispassion for any of the steps, it allows that step to disband and cease. The effect of this cessation ripples through the many feedback loops, allowing the whole sequence to cease. Craving is abandoned, and there is no more suffering for the mind. This is how the knowledge in terms of the four noble truths, the first factor in path to the end of suffering (the fourth noble truth) leads to the

cessation of suffering (the third noble truth). Just as suffering is caused from within, it can be ended from within.

The third noble truth. Suffering ceases when the three types of craving cease, and that happens when, through the ending of ignorance, the last trace of passion for those forms of craving is gone from the mind.

The fourth noble truth. The path to the cessation of suffering is also called the **Middle Way** because it avoids two extremes: (1) indulgence in the pleasures of sensuality and (2) devotion to the pain of self-torment. Yet this does not mean that the path pursues a course of middling pleasures and middling pains. Instead, it treats the pleasure of concentration, along with insight into the pain of clinging, not as ends in themselves but as tools to achieve a higher end: the deathless.

The path, however, does not *cause* the deathless. After all, if anything caused the deathless, it wouldn't be unconditioned. Instead, the path *leads to* the deathless—in the same way that a road to a mountain doesn't cause the mountain, but following the road can take you to the mountain.

The path is composed of eight factors. Because these factors achieve the goal of the noble search, the path as a whole is called the **noble eightfold path**. The factors are all said to be “right” in that they are effective in reaching the goal of awakening. Like suffering and its causes, the factors are things that you can directly experience, although you need some training in the Dhamma before you can bring them about.

The factors are these:

- *Right view*: seeing experience in terms of the noble truths.
- *Right resolve*: being resolved on abandoning thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of harm.
- *Right speech*: abstaining from telling lies (intentionally misrepresenting the truth), speaking divisively (to break up friendships between other people, or to prevent such friendships from developing), speaking harshly (with the purpose of hurting another person's feelings), and engaging in idle chatter (speaking with no clear intention in mind).
- *Right action*: abstaining from killing, stealing, and engaging in illicit sex.

- *Right livelihood*: abstaining from any ways of making a living that are dishonest or harmful, or that aim deliberately at giving rise to passion, aversion, or delusion within oneself or others.

- *Right effort*: generating the desire and carrying through with the effort to prevent unskillful states from arising in the mind; to abandon any unskillful states that have already arisen; to give rise to skillful states in the mind; and to bring to full development any skillful states that have already arisen. There is a common misunderstanding that the Buddha identified all forms of desire as causes of suffering, but that is not the case. Right effort is motivated by desires that bring an end to clinging, which is why they are part of the path to the end of suffering.

- *Right mindfulness*: Another common misunderstanding is that “mindfulness” means a non-reactive awareness of whatever arises. Actually, mindfulness means keeping something in mind. In the most general terms, *right* mindfulness means keeping in mind the need to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful qualities. It also keeps in mind the most effective ways to complete the work of abandoning and developing.

For mindfulness to be established, it needs a frame of reference, and there are four: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, and mental qualities in and of themselves. The “in and of itself” here means observing these things in the present moment without reference to their meaning in the context of the outside world. For instance, to stay focused on the breath, without thinking of issues outside of the breath, is one way of staying focused on the body in and of itself. To notice the feelings that arise from staying focused on the breath, as they happen, would be a way of staying with feelings in and of themselves, and so forth.

To stay established in these frames of reference, mindfulness needs the help of two other qualities: alertness and ardency. Alertness keeps you aware of what you’re doing in the present moment and of the results of what you’re doing. Mindfulness recognizes your actions as either skillful or unskillful, and remembers how to respond appropriately in either case. Ardency is essentially the same thing as right effort: the whole-hearted effort to do what is skillful in line with the directions given by mindfulness.

When mindfulness is well established in this way, it forms the theme of the last factor of the path:

- *Right concentration*: This is identical with all four levels of jhāna that the bodhisatta practiced on the night of his awakening.

The first jhāna is composed of a sense of pleasure and rapture that come from temporarily abandoning sensuality and other unskillful qualities, and directing the mind's thoughts to a single object—such as the breath. At the same time, you evaluate how to adjust the mind and the object so that they fit snugly and smoothly together. The resulting feelings of pleasure and rapture are then allowed to spread throughout the entire body.

The second jhāna is composed of a stronger sense of pleasure and rapture that comes when the mind no longer has to direct its thoughts to the object or to evaluate it, and can simply enter into a sense of oneness with the object. Again, the pleasure and rapture are allowed to permeate and to fill the entire body.

The third jhāna is composed of a sense of a more refined physical pleasure and mental equanimity that come when the mind no longer needs to feed off the sense of rapture. This pleasure, again, is allowed to fill the entire body.

The fourth jhāna is composed of a sense of equanimity and purified mindfulness, coming from the ability to let go of pleasure and the subtle stress that even refined pleasure entails. The in-and-out breath grows still, as the body's oxygen needs are reduced, and the body is filled with a bright, clear awareness.

As we noted above, right view is what does the work of actually getting craving to cease by developing dispassion for the steps in the processes leading up to craving. However, to do this work, right view needs to be strengthened by all the other factors of the path, and in particular by right concentration. In the Buddha's analogy, the pleasure of right concentration provides the food to nourish the other factors in doing their work.

The eight factors of the noble path fall under three headings. The first two factors—right view and right resolve—come under the heading of *discernment*; the next three—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—come under the heading of *virtue*; and the last three—right

effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration—under the heading of *concentration*. For this reason, the path is sometimes called the **Triple Training**: in heightened virtue, heightened mind (concentration), and heightened discernment.

THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

As noted above, each of the four noble truths entails a duty: Suffering is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed.

The Buddha provided many tools to help carry out these duties. Among the most important is a set of perceptions that are often called the three characteristics, but are more accurately called the three perceptions.

These are the perceptions of inconstancy (*anicca*), stress (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*). The perception of inconstancy calls attention to how things change in ways that make them unreliable sources for steady happiness. The perception of stress calls attention to the fact that unreliable sources of happiness make your happiness stressful as well. The perception of not-self calls attention to the fact that anything inconstant or stressful is not worth claiming as “you” or “yours.” You’re better off letting it go.

These perceptions play a role in fulfilling the duties of each of the noble truths. For example, with the *first noble truth*, the Buddha recommends applying each of these perceptions to each of the aggregates: To perceive, for instance, that feeling is inconstant means focusing on the fact that feelings keep changing. This draws your attention to the fact that no feeling can provide a secure source of happiness and wellbeing. Because every feeling is inconstant and unstable, it is stressful. And because it’s stressful, it doesn’t lie fully under your control and doesn’t deserve to be claimed as your own belonging. Thus it is not-self: in other words, not worth clinging to.

Some people have misinterpreted the teaching on not-self to mean that there is no self, but the Buddha identified both the view, “I have a self,” and the view, “I have no self,” as wrong views. Instead, “not-self” is a value judgment, saying simply that the object you perceive as not-self isn’t

worth claiming as “me,” “my self,” or “what I am,” because such a claim automatically entails suffering. This perception helps to undercut any desire you might have to fasten on to any of the aggregates through any of the four types of clinging, and in particular the fourth: clinging through doctrines of the self.

Applied to the *second noble truth*, these three perceptions can be applied in a similar way to the three types of craving, and to the processes leading up to them, to draw attention to the fact that they, too, are not worth clinging to.

As for the *third noble truth*, the perceptions of inconstancy and stress do not apply to the cessation of suffering, as it touches the deathless, which does not change and is free from stress. However, it is possible, on touching the deathless, to feel passion for the perception of the deathless, and to develop a subtle sense of identity and becoming around it. This would get in the way of total release. So the perception of not-self is often needed at this stage to cut through that passion so that cessation can be fully realized.

As for the *fourth noble truth*, all three perceptions play two distinct roles in the practice of mindfulness and concentration. At the beginning of the practice, they can be applied to any thought or object that would disturb the concentration, showing that such things are not worthy of interest. At the final level of the practice—after clings to all things outside of the path have been uprooted—these perceptions are applied to all the factors of the path itself.

For instance, you begin to recognize that even *jhāna* is composed of aggregates: the form of the breath, the feelings of pleasure and rapture, the perception of the breath that holds the mind in place, the fabrications of directed thought and evaluation, and the consciousness aware of all these things. You also come to recognize that even discernment does its work through thought-fabrications and perceptions. When the mind reaches the point where these path factors have done their work, it can apply the three perceptions to them. This gives rise to a sense of *dispassion* even for the path, which then *ceases*. The mind can then *relinquish* even these three perceptions and gain full release.

In this way, the duties of the four noble truths are completed in line with the steps of the final tetrad in breath meditation mentioned above:

contemplation of inconstancy (along with stress and not-self), dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment.

UNBINDING

The Buddha had many names for total release, to show how it solved many of the problems involved in wandering-on, but the name he most frequently used was **nibbāna**, which literally means “unbinding.” In everyday usage, the Pāli word *nibbāna* described the going-out of a fire. People in the Buddha’s time believed that fire was caused by the agitation of the fire-property, a potential that existed in a latent state everywhere in the physical world. When agitated, the fire-property would be ignited and then cling to its fuel, which was how a burning fire was sustained. The fire would go out when it let go of its fuel, and the fire-property—freed—would return to its earlier unagitated state.

The Buddha used the analogy between the freed fire and the released mind to make several points about total release:

- It is a cool state of calm and peace.
- It comes from letting go of clinging. Just as a burning fire is trapped, not by the fuel, but by its own clinging to the fuel, the mind is trapped not by the aggregates of experience, but by its clinging to the aggregates. This is why, when it lets go, the aggregates can’t keep it from gaining release.
- Just as a fire, when it has gone out, can’t be said to have gone east, west, north, or south, similarly, a person fully released can’t be described as existing, not existing, both, or neither. This point relates to the fact that, in the context of becoming, you define yourself by the desires you cling to. Because the released mind is free of clinging, it cannot be defined and so can’t be described. And just as the world of any becoming is also defined by the desires you cling to, a released mind cannot be located in any world.

However, the analogy between a released fire and a released mind is not perfect. Unlike the fire, a released mind does not return to a previous latent state and it cannot be provoked to leave its released state ever again. Nibbāna exists totally separate from the wandering-on of saṃsāra: outside of space and time, the process of becoming, and the worlds of the six

senses. It is not caused by anything and does not act as the cause of anything. This is why it brings all suffering to an end.

Many of the Buddha's terms for describing nibbāna tell what it is *not*, to show that it is not like anything in the six senses. For example, he calls it a dimension with no hunger, no attachments, no effluents, and no affliction. But he does make three positive points about what it *is*:

- It is total freedom.
- It is the ultimate happiness, although this happiness does not come under the aggregates as a pleasant feeling. Instead, it is a pleasure that is totally unconditioned and does not depend on the six senses.
- It is a type of consciousness, although again it does not come under the aggregate of consciousness, and does not depend on the senses. The Buddha's term for this consciousness is "consciousness without surface." The image is of a light beam that does not strike against anything: Even though it is bright in and of itself, it does not appear in any location.

A person who has reached nibbāna in this lifetime still experiences pleasure and pain at the senses, but his or her mind is once and for all freed from passion, aversion, and delusion. At death, all experience of the worlds of the six senses grows cold, and nibbāna is total. Again, the texts provide an image: Nibbāna in this lifetime is like a fire that has died down but whose embers are still warm. After this lifetime, it is like a fire so totally out that its embers have grown cold.

The Buddha realized that nibbāna might sound unpleasant or even scary to people still addicted to feeding, but he assured his listeners that the consciousness and happiness of unbinding are actually the highest happiness possible, the highest safety from hunger, and contain not the slightest trace of regret or nostalgia for what has been left behind.

THE STAGES OF AWAKENING

Awakening to nibbāna occurs in stages, although the time between the stages can be counted in moments or in entire lifetimes, depending on the discernment of the individual meditator.

There are four stages in all:

- The first level is *stream-entry*, when the mind gains its first experience of the deathless. This is called stream-entry by analogy: Once you attain this level of awakening, you will inevitably reach total unbinding in at most seven more lifetimes, just as the water in a stream draining into the ocean will inevitably reach the sea. In the meantime, if your awakening does take more than this lifetime, you will never fall below the human level.

- The second level is *once-return*, which guarantees that you will return only once more to the human world and then gain full awakening.

- The third level is *non-return*, which guarantees that you will never return to this world. Instead, you will be reborn in a very high level of heaven, in a set of brahmā worlds called the Pure Abodes, and gain full awakening there.

These three levels fall short of full awakening because the mind, on experiencing the deathless, develops a passion for it. That passion then causes a subtle level of becoming. This is why the Buddha recommends applying the perception of not-self not only to conditioned things like the aggregates, but also to the deathless, so as to prevent the mind from developing passion for it. When that passion is cut, the perception of not-self can be relinquished, and the mind attains—

- the fourth level of awakening, *arahantship*, which frees the mind from birth and death and the processes of becoming entirely.

The different levels have different results because they cut through different levels of defilement, called “fetters,” that bind the mind to the processes of birth, death, and wandering-on. Stream entry cuts through the fetters of self-identity views, doubt, and attachment to habits and practices. Once-return weakens passion, aversion, and delusion, but doesn’t cut through them. Non-return cuts through the fetters of sensual passion and irritation. Arahantship cuts through the fetters of passion for form, passion for formlessness—these two refer to passion for the different levels of jhāna—restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. When these fetters are gone, the mind has completed its duties with regard to the four noble truths and gains full release from the wandering-on of further becoming.

After his awakening, the Buddha spent the remaining 45 years of his life teaching others—human beings and heavenly beings; men, women, and even children; people from all walks of life—to gain the various levels of awakening for themselves. Among his earliest students were members of his own family, many of whom were able to gain awakening after listening to his teachings.

Many of the people he taught, however, did not gain awakening, either because they were not ready for it, or because their household duties gave them little time to practice the path in full. For these people, the Buddha gave instructions in how to find a lasting and beneficial happiness in their daily lives. For instance, he recommended that they be industrious in their work, take good care of their belongings, associate with admirable friends, and live in line with their means. He warned especially against getting into debt.

He also taught a path of practice for fostering a level of **integrity** that, even though it didn't bring full awakening, would provide for comfortable rebirths in the cycle of birth and death, and would provide conditions conducive for awakening in future lives.

A quality fundamental to integrity is **respect** for people deserving respect: those who have conviction in the principle of kamma, who are generous, virtuous, and wise. When you show respect to people like this, they are more likely to teach you the finer points of how to develop these good qualities in yourself, and you are more likely to absorb not only their words but also the example of their behavior.

Another quality basic to integrity is **conviction** in the Buddha's awakening and in the teachings on kamma and rebirth. The Buddha knew that he couldn't *prove* his awakening to others. They might be impressed by the outward results of his awakening—such as his wisdom, compassion, and steadfastness in the face of difficulties—but none of those qualities were actual proof that he was awakened. Only if they followed the noble eightfold path for themselves and tasted the first level of awakening for themselves would they know that his awakening was true.

Similarly with the principles of kamma and rebirth: The Buddha couldn't prove to others that they had freedom of choice, or that the results of their choices would carry over into future lifetimes. Only with

the attainment of stream-entry, when the mind steps outside of time, space, and the workings of intentions, would people know that these principles were true.

But to follow a path of action requires that you assume the principle that you do have freedom of choice. To make sacrifices now that will result in future happiness requires, again, that you assume the principle that the results of actions don't end with death. After all, look around you. You'll see many people who do evil and yet seem to escape the results of evil in this lifetime. And to set your sights on eventually reaching awakening, you have to assume that awakening is possible through human effort.

All of these assumptions are a matter of conviction. Notice, though, that this conviction is not a matter of blind faith in unknowable things. Instead, it functions as a working hypothesis that gets more and more confirmed as you act on it over time.

A third quality basic to integrity is **gratitude**—in particular, gratitude to your parents. Even if they weren't the best of parents, they at the very least gave you the opportunity to become a human being. If you don't appreciate the hardships that this required of them, it's unlikely that you will be able to endure the hardships that some of the forms of goodness require.

Further stages in developing integrity involve acts of *puñña*, which is commonly translated as “**merit**” but might better be translated as “**goodness**.” This goodness includes three major components: generosity, virtue, and the development of universal goodwill.

GENEROSITY

Generosity is the voluntary giving of a gift. This includes not only material gifts, but also gifts of your time, energy, knowledge, or forgiveness. When the Buddha was asked where a gift should be given, he replied simply, “Wherever the heart feels inspired.” In other words, generosity should be an act of free and voluntary sharing, with no external constraints. The giving of such a gift is a simple and direct lesson in one

of the most important principles of kamma: that we can exercise freedom of choice in the present moment and not be slaves to our stinginess.

But even though the Buddha placed no constraints on where a gift *should* be given, he was more specific in his advice when asked how and where to give a gift so as to *gain the best results*. Among his recommendations:

- Give a gift so that it harms no one—in other words, you don't harm the recipient, and you don't harm yourself in the giving.
- Choose the gift and the recipient so that you feel joy and satisfaction, before, while, and after giving the gift.
- Show respect and empathy for the recipient, and nurture a sense of conviction that the act of giving is worthwhile.
- Give to a person free from passion, aversion, and delusion, or to someone who is practicing to abandon passion, aversion, and delusion.

The goodness that comes from this sort of gift, the Buddha said, cannot be measured. However, even the goodness of this sort of generosity is a small thing compared to the goodness of virtue.

VIRTUE

Virtue is the voluntary intention to behave harmlessly. Training in virtue starts by taking on and following the **five precepts**. This means that you resolve not to intentionally engage in:

- 1) killing any human being, or any animal large enough to be seen with the naked eye;
- 2) stealing, i.e., taking possession of something belonging to someone else without that person's permission;
- 3) having illicit sex, i.e., with a minor or with an adult who is already in another relationship or when *you* are already in another relationship;
- 4) telling falsehoods, i.e., knowingly misrepresenting the truth; and
- 5) taking intoxicants.

As the Buddha said, when you observe these precepts in all situations, you are giving safety—at least from your quarter—to all living beings, and you gain a share in that universal safety as well. In fact, he states that you are the primary beneficiary of your own virtue. One of the best ways to benefit others is to get them to observe the precepts, too. In saying this, he's showing that you treat others not simply as objects of your own actions; you also give them the dignity of being agents in their own lives as well.

At the same time, the practice of observing the precepts develops mindfulness and alertness, qualities needed in meditation. It also develops discernment, as you figure out ways to keep to the precepts in difficult situations without putting yourself or others at a disadvantage. (An example would be knowing how, without lying, to keep information from people who would use that information to cause harm.) But just as the goodness of generosity is no match for the goodness of virtue, the goodness of virtue is no match for the goodness that comes from developing an attitude of universal goodwill.

GOODWILL

Goodwill (*mettā*) is a wish for true happiness. As a meditative exercise, you spread thoughts of goodwill to yourself and to living beings in all directions, on all the many levels of the cosmos. The Buddha recommended this way of expressing this wish: 'May these beings be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble, and may they look after themselves with ease!'

To be truly powerful, this goodwill has to be universal. In other words, you have to extend it even to people you don't like or who are acting in harmful ways. Remember that, in line with the principles of kamma, people and other living beings will find happiness not simply because you wish it for them. Their happiness has to be based on their own actions. This means that when you extend goodwill to those who are acting harmfully, you are expressing the wish that they will understand the causes of true happiness and act accordingly. When you think in this way, you can make your goodwill universal without any sense of hypocrisy.

The development of goodwill, however, is not just a meditative exercise. It is also meant to inform your choice of what to do, say, and think in all situations. The Buddha calls this practice a type of restraint, in that it places restraint on your likes and dislikes, your loves and hatreds, so that these emotions don't make you partial or unfair in your dealings with others. You want to act in a way that promotes the wellbeing of all, regardless of how much you like any of the individuals in that "all." In this way, goodwill makes you a more reliable person in your dealings with other people, and you can put more trust in yourself as well: that when situations get difficult, you'll be more likely to act in ways that are harmless all-around.

Limitless goodwill is the first of four attitudes that are called the **brahmavihāras**, or sublime attitudes. These are the attitudes that can turn people into brahmās—inhabitants of the highest heavens of form and formlessness. And they make you like a brahmā in this life. The other three are:

- limitless compassion, wanting all those who are suffering to be relieved of their suffering, and all those who are acting in ways that cause suffering to stop; this is an antidote to taking joy in the suffering of others;
- limitless empathetic joy, wanting all those who are happy to continue being happy, and all those who are acting in ways that lead to happiness to continue in those actions; this is an antidote to envy and resentment;
- limitless equanimity, realizing that there are times when the wishes of goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy cannot come true, and so focusing your attention on areas where you *can* be of help; this is an antidote to passion.

Although these four attitudes can make you more trustworthy in your actions, they don't make you fully reliable. The human mind is very changeable; the defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion can easily make you renounce your conviction in the principles of kamma and integrity. That lack of conviction will then interfere with your doing good, and even receiving the good results of your skillful actions, leading you to feel even less conviction, and so on, in a downward spiral. Only when your conviction in the Buddha's awakening is confirmed by your own first experience of the deathless will you become a truly reliable

person. This is why the Buddha stated that the highest form of goodness is the attainment of stream-entry, and why he encouraged all of his listeners to aim for awakening.

Many of the Buddha's listeners, on hearing his teachings or seeing his example, wanted to take up the life of a mendicant, just as he had. So he instituted two monastic communities, or **Saṅghas**, one for men and one for women.

Thus the Buddha's following falls into four groups: what is called the fourfold **parisā** of monks (*bhikkhus*), nuns (*bhikkhunīs*), lay men (*upāsakas*), and lay women (*upāsikās*).

Life in the Saṅgha was designed to be an apprenticeship, with students required to live with more senior monastics for a period of several years. This way, they would be able to pick up not only the words of the Dhamma, but also living examples of how the Dhamma is to be applied in every aspect of life.

The members of the monastic orders live on the gifts of lay people. This frees them to devote their lives entirely to learning the Buddha's teachings in detail and putting them fully into practice. The Buddha encouraged his monks to live in the wilderness, as he had, to train their powers of endurance and to take advantage of the solitude there, allowing them to focus directly on training their minds with a minimum of distraction. However, even during the Buddha's lifetime, both Saṅghas quickly received gifts of land, which eventually grew into monasteries. In this way, the monks and nuns had the choice of splitting their time between two ways of life: settled life in communities, and times of wandering, sometimes alone, in the wilderness.

As the Saṅghas grew during the Buddha's lifetime, many people who were not truly interested in the practice began to ordain as well. So the Buddha was forced to establish a code of discipline to set the standards for how his monks and nuns should behave. The full set of disciplinary rules is called the **Vinaya**. Central to the Vinaya for each of the orders is a code of important rules, called the **Pāṭimokkha**, which the members of each Saṅgha should listen to every two weeks.

The Buddha established the Vinaya rules to serve three purposes:

- to maintain the good faith of the laity,
- to promote harmony within the Saṅghas, and
- to help individual monks and nuns become sensitive to the effluents in their minds, and so be able to cleanse those effluents away.

A recurring theme in the rules is that the monks and nuns should behave in a way worthy of the gifts of their lay supporters. This provides an ideal environment for the laity to take genuine joy in the practice of generosity. To repay the laity for their support, the monks and nuns should practice the Dhamma sincerely and share their knowledge of the Dhamma freely. This is one of the reasons why Buddhist monastics, even though they are encouraged to seek solitude, do not live in cloisters cut off from the laity. At the very least, even when in the wilderness, they should have daily contact with the laity by going for alms. In this way they can extend their living example beyond the confines of the monastic order into society at large.

THE TRIPLE GEM

The Buddha used the term “Saṅgha” to mean, not only monastic communities, but also the community of all those, whether lay or ordained, who had reached stream-entry. So the word “Saṅgha” has two levels of meaning: the conventional Saṅgha, which refers to the monastic communities, and the noble Saṅgha, which refers to the community of all those who have reached at least their first experience of the deathless.

The conventional Saṅgha, even though it is imperfect, acts as the main carrier of the Buddha’s teachings, the Dhamma, on how to find true happiness. The noble Saṅgha brings those teachings to life by providing living examples of how to get the most use out of the Dhamma. For this reason, the Saṅgha in both senses of the term ranks with the Buddha and Dhamma as an example and a prime source of knowledge for how to find a happiness that’s reliable and harmless: a valuable treasure for the entire world. This is why the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha are called the **Triple Gem**. Because the example set by all three is so safe, they are also called the **Three Refuges**.

After teaching for 45 years, the Buddha saw that he had established his Dhamma and Vinaya—his own name for his teaching—on a firm foundation. Each of the four groups in his parisā contained people who had tasted at least some of the levels of awakening, and so could embody the Dhamma and Vinaya in their words and actions. So he relinquished the will to live further. That evening, he called the monks together and informed them of his decision, saying that his total unbinding would take place in three months' time. Then he summarized his lifetime of teaching into seven sets of principles, which eventually became known as the **Wings to Awakening** (*bodhi-pakkhiya-dhamma*).

We have already discussed three of these sets: the noble eightfold path, the four right exertions (= right effort), and the four establishing of mindfulness (= right mindfulness). The other four sets are:

- the four bases of success: concentration based on desire, persistence, intentness, and circumspection;
- the five strengths: conviction in the Buddha's awakening, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment;
- the five faculties (stronger versions of the five strengths); and
- the seven factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities of the mind, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity.

As long as the monks were harmonious in their understanding of these principles and put them into practice, the Buddha said, the Dhamma would endure.

On the morning of the day of his total unbinding, he suffered an attack of dysentery, but then continued walking all day until he reached a pair of trees flowering out of season in a park near a small town. There he lay down and gave his final instructions. He taught one last disciple, and told the monks to inform the man who had given the meal that brought on his dysentery not to regret his gift: That meal was one of the most meritorious gifts of food that anyone would ever make.

Instead of appointing a successor, the Buddha told the monks that they should regard the Dhamma he had taught and the Vinaya he had formulated as their teacher in his stead. He opened the opportunity for the monks to ask him questions on any doubts they still might have

concerning the Buddha, Dhamma, or Saṅgha, or the path of practice. When no one asked any questions, he spoke his final words: “Reach consummation through heedfulness.”

As a final instruction for those who could read his mind, he then went through the entire range of his concentration attainments, in forward and reverse order, and then—after returning to the fourth jhāna and immediately on leaving it—he was totally unbound.

The tradition established by the Buddha is no longer a single religion—or, in his words, a single Dhamma and Vinaya. Buddhism is now a family of religions, much like the various forms of monotheism in the West. Although the various Buddhist religions center their teachings on the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha, the meanings they give to all three of these refuges, along with the texts explaining these meanings, differ from one religion to the next.

This short introduction has been based on the Pāli Canon, the oldest extant record of the Buddha’s teachings, and the foundational text of the Theravāda, or the Teachings of the Elders. This is the Buddhist religion common in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos. Of course, the fact that the Pāli Canon is the oldest record is no guarantee that it is accurate, but as the Canon itself says, the true test of a teaching lies not in the claims of tradition, but in the results it gives when put into practice. To be fair, the test must involve four things:

- associating with people of integrity;
- listening to the true Dhamma;
- applying appropriate attention—i.e., questioning the Dhamma in line with the four noble truths, to see how its explanation of suffering and the end of suffering can be applied in your life; and
- practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma—i.e., practicing to give rise to dispassion for suffering and its cause.

The Canon also lists eight qualities for judging whether a teaching is true Dhamma or not: If putting it into practice leads to dispassion, to being unfettered, to shedding conceit, to modesty, to contentment, to disentanglement, to persistence, and to being unburdensome, then it’s genuine Dhamma. If it leads to the opposite qualities, it’s not.

People are free to take on this test, or not, as they see fit. But the fact of suffering makes the test urgent.

It's further made urgent by the fact that teachings of the Dhamma will not be available forever. Because the training of the Saṅgha requires a living apprenticeship, the Buddha made no provision for its revival in the event that it died out. The Theravāda Saṅgha of nuns died out in the thirteenth century, and so cannot be revived. Someday the Saṅgha of monks will die out as well, and the Dhamma will be forgotten until the time of the next Buddha, many millennia from now.

But for now, the Buddha's teachings are available, offering both a refuge—a place of safety—and a challenge.

The refuge they offer is the possibility of a true and reliable happiness, one that harms no one. If you follow the teachings, you protect yourself from the results of the unskillful actions you otherwise might take. Instead, your actions will reach a level of skill leading to a happiness you can trust. The safety of that happiness, both for yourself and for others, is your refuge.

As for the challenge: The Buddha said that he simply points out the path to true happiness. You, yourself, have to follow the path. The results you get will have to depend on the effort you put into mastering the Buddha's skills. The more skillful your actions, the more reliable and harmless the happiness they bring you—all the way to a happiness totally free from conditions, beyond the dimensions of the cosmos, a happiness that totally ends suffering.

It's up to you to decide if your happiness is important enough to test these claims, and if you are willing to train yourself in the skills required to make yourself a reliable judge of the test.

Dependent co-arising contains twelve steps, with craving as the eighth step.

The steps leading from craving to suffering are these:

8) The three types of *craving* condition...

9) the four types of *clinging*, which condition...

10) the three levels of *becoming*. Becoming provides the condition for the...

11) *birth* of an identity within becoming. This birth then leads inevitably to...

12) *aging, illness, and death*, along with sorrow, pain, despair, and *suffering*.

Tracing from craving back to its causes, the steps are these:

8) *Craving* is conditioned by...

7) *feelings* of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain. These feelings depend on...

6) *contact* at...

5) *the six senses* (the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind). These senses are conditioned by...

4) the internal sense of the *body and its mental events* (such as attention, intention, feeling, and perception). These, in turn, are conditioned by...

3) *consciousness at the six senses*, which is conditioned by...

2) three types of *fabrication*: bodily (the in-and-out breath), verbal (the mind's inner conversation of thinking and evaluating), and mental (feelings and perceptions). These fabrications, in turn, are conditioned by...

1) *ignorance*: not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

It may seem strange, in steps 2 and 3, to speak of fabrications happening *prior* to sensory consciousness, but we have to remember that the Buddha was describing experience as it appears from the perspective of someone who has gone beyond sensory consciousness and then returned to it while fully alert. So he was able to see how these fabrications influence your full consciousness of body and mind.

Even for someone who has not had that direct experience, it's useful to reflect on how consciousness is affected by these activities even before it engages fully with the body, with mental activities, and with input from the senses. That way you can be alert to how you are priming your consciousness to lead either toward suffering or away from it.

One of the reasons the Buddha taught mindfulness of breathing is that it focuses attention right at step 2. By using a mental label, or perception, to direct your thoughts to the breath, at the same time evaluating the breath, adjusting it to give rise to a feeling of pleasure, mindfulness of breathing brings knowledge to all three types of fabrication. In that way, it turns them from causes of craving and suffering into factors of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.