



# *Refuge*

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
BUDDHA, DHAMMA, & SANGHA

*by*

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*They go to many a refuge,  
to mountains, forests,  
parks, trees, and shrines:  
people threatened with danger.  
That's not the secure refuge,  
that's not the supreme refuge,  
that's not the refuge,  
having gone to which,  
you gain release  
from all suffering and stress.  
But when, having gone for refuge  
to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha,  
you see with right discernment  
the four noble truths—  
stress,  
the cause of stress,  
the transcending of stress,*

*and the noble eightfold path,  
the way to the stilling of stress:  
That's the secure refuge,  
that, the supreme refuge,  
that is the refuge,  
having gone to which,  
you gain release  
from all suffering and stress.*

—[\*Dhp 188-192\*](#)

# Preface

This book is a short introduction to the basic principles of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dhamma (his teachings), and Sangha (the community of his noble disciples), also known as the Triple Gem or the Triple Refuge. The material is divided into three parts: (I) an introductory essay on the meaning of refuge and the act of going for refuge; (II) a series of readings drawn from the earliest Buddhist texts illustrating the essential qualities of the Triple Gem; and (III) a set of essays explaining aspects of the Triple Gem that often provoke questions in those who are new to the Buddha's teachings. This last section concludes with an essay that summarizes, in a more systematic form, many of the points raised in the earlier parts of the book.

The readings on Dhamma form the core of the book, organized in a pattern—called a graduated discourse (*anupubbi-katha*)—that the Buddha himself often used when introducing his teachings to new listeners. After beginning with the joys of generosity, he would describe the joys of a virtuous life, followed by the rewards of generosity and virtue to be experienced here and, after death, in heaven; the drawbacks of sensual pleasures, even heavenly ones; and the rewards of renunciation. Then, when he sensed that his listeners were inclined to look favorably on renunciation as a way to true happiness, he would discuss the central message of his teaching: the four noble truths.

My hope is that this introduction will help answer many of the questions that newcomers bring to Buddhism, and will spark new questions in their minds as they contemplate the possibility of developing within their own lives the qualities of refuge exemplified by the Triple Gem.

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# I. Introduction

## **GOING FOR REFUGE**

The act of going for refuge marks the point where one commits oneself to taking the Dhamma, or the Buddha's teaching, as the primary guide to one's life. To understand why this commitment is called a "refuge," it's helpful to look at the history of the custom.

In pre-Buddhist India, going for refuge meant proclaiming one's allegiance to a patron—a powerful person or god—submitting to the patron's directives in hopes of receiving protection from danger in return. In the early years of the Buddha's teaching career, his new followers adopted this custom to express their allegiance to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, but in the Buddhist context this custom took on a new meaning.

Buddhism is not a theistic religion—the Buddha is not a god—and so a person taking refuge in the Buddhist sense is not asking for the Buddha personally to intervene to provide protection. Still, one of the Buddha's central teachings is that human life is fraught with dangers—from greed, anger, and delusion—and so the concept of refuge is central to the path of practice, in that the practice is aimed at gaining release from those dangers. Because the mind is the source both of the dangers and of release, there is a need for two levels of refuge: external refuges, which provide models and guidelines so that we can identify which qualities in the mind lead to danger and which to release; and internal refuges, i.e., the qualities leading to release that we develop in our own mind in imitation of our external models. The internal level is where true refuge is found.

Although the tradition of going to refuge is an ancient practice, it is still relevant for our own practice today, for we are faced with the same internal dangers that faced people in the Buddha's time. We still need the same protection as they. When a Buddhist takes refuge, it is essentially an

act of taking refuge in the doctrine of karma: It's an act of submission in that one is committed to living in line with the principle that actions based on skillful intentions lead to happiness, while actions based on unskillful intentions lead to suffering; it's an act of claiming protection in that, by following the teaching, one hopes to avoid the misfortunes that bad karma engenders. To take refuge in this way ultimately means to take refuge in the quality of our own intentions, for that's where the essence of karma lies.

The refuges in Buddhism—both on the internal and on the external levels—are the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, also known as the Triple Gem. They are called gems both because they are valuable and because, in ancient times, gems were believed to have protective powers. The Triple Gem outdoes other gems in this respect because its protective powers can be put to the test and can lead further than those of any physical gem, all the way to absolute freedom from the uncertainties of the realm of aging, illness, and death.

The Buddha, on the external level, refers to Siddhattha Gotama, the Indian prince who renounced his royal titles and went into the forest, meditating until he ultimately gained awakening. To take refuge in the Buddha means, not taking refuge in him as a person, but taking refuge in the fact of his awakening: placing trust in the belief that he did awaken to the truth, that he did so by developing qualities that we too can develop, and that the truths to which he awoke provide the best perspective for the conduct of our life.

The Dhamma, on the external level, refers to the path of practice the Buddha taught to his followers. This, in turn, is divided into three levels: the words of his teachings, the act of putting those teachings into practice, and the attainment of awakening as the result of that practice. This three-way division of the word “Dhamma” acts as a map showing how to take the external refuges and make them internal: learning about the teachings, using them to develop the qualities that the Buddha himself used to attain awakening, and then realizing the same release from danger that he found in the quality of Deathlessness that we can touch within.

The word Sangha, on the external level, has two senses: conventional and ideal. In its ideal sense, the Sangha consists of all people, lay or

ordained, who have practiced the Dhamma to the point of gaining at least a glimpse of the Deathless. In a conventional sense, Sangha denotes the communities of ordained monks and nuns. The two meanings overlap but are not necessarily identical. Some members of the ideal Sangha are not ordained; some monks and nuns have yet to touch the Deathless. All those who take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha become members of the Buddha's four-fold assembly (*parisa*) of followers: monks, nuns, male lay devotees, and female lay devotees. Although there's a widespread belief that all Buddhist followers are members of the Sangha, this is not the case. Only those who are ordained are members of the conventional Sangha; only those who have glimpsed the Deathless are members of the ideal Sangha. Nevertheless, any followers who don't belong to the Sangha in either sense of the word still count as genuine Buddhists in that they are members of the Buddha's *parisa*.

When taking refuge in the external Sangha, one takes refuge in both senses of the Sangha, but the two senses provide different levels of refuge. The conventional Sangha has helped keep the teaching alive for more than 2,500 years. Without them, we would never have learned what the Buddha taught. However, not all members of the conventional Sangha are reliable models of behavior. So when looking for guidance in the conduct of our lives, we must look to the living and recorded examples provided by the ideal Sangha. Without their example, we would not know (1) that awakening is available to all, and not just to the Buddha; and (2) how awakening expresses itself in real life.

On the internal level, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha are the skillful qualities we develop in our own minds in imitation of our external models. For instance, the Buddha was a person of wisdom, purity, and compassion. When we develop wisdom, purity, and compassion in our own minds, they form our refuge on an internal level. The Buddha tasted awakening by developing conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. When we develop these same qualities to the point of attaining awakening too, that awakening is our ultimate refuge. This is the point where the three aspects of the Triple Gem become one: beyond the reach of greed, anger, and delusion, and thus totally secure. This is also the point where we become members of the ideal

Sangha, providing an example for anyone else who wants to find the same security inside.

## II. Readings

*‘Indeed, the Blessed One [the Buddha] is worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in knowledge and conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the cosmos, unexcelled as a trainer for those people fit to be tamed, the Teacher of divine and human beings, awakened, blessed.’*

*‘The Dhamma is well-expounded by the Blessed One, to be seen here and now, timeless, inviting verification, pertinent, to be realized by the observant for themselves.’*

*‘The Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples who have practiced well... who have practiced straight-forwardly... who have practiced methodically... who have practiced masterfully—in other words, the four types of noble disciples when taken as pairs, the eight when taken as individual types—they are the Sangha of the Blessed One’s disciples: worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respect, the incomparable field of merit for the world.’*

[AN 10:92](#)

### **BUDDHA**

[The Buddha speaks:] “I lived in refinement, utmost refinement, total refinement. My father even had lotus ponds made in our palace: one where red-lotuses bloomed, one where white lotuses bloomed, one where blue lotuses bloomed, all for my sake. I used no sandalwood that was not from Varanasi. My turban was from Varanasi, as were my tunic, my lower garments, and my outer cloak. A white sunshade was held over me day and night to protect me from cold, heat, dust, dirt, and dew.

“I had three palaces: one for the cold season, one for the hot season, one for the rainy season. During the four months of the rainy season I was entertained in the rainy-season palace by minstrels without a single man

among them, and I did not once come down from the palace. Whereas the servants, workers, and retainers in other people's homes are fed meals of lentil soup and broken rice, in my father's home the servants, workers, and retainers were fed wheat, rice, and meat.

“Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: ‘When an untaught, run-of-the-mill person, himself subject to aging, not beyond aging, sees another who is aged, he is horrified, humiliated, and disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to aging, not beyond aging. If I—who am subject to aging, not beyond aging—were to be horrified, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another person who is aged, that would not be fitting for me.’ As I noticed this, the [typical] young person's intoxication with youth entirely dropped away.

“Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: ‘When an untaught, run-of-the-mill person, himself subject to illness, not beyond illness, sees another who is ill, he is horrified, humiliated, and disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to illness, not beyond illness. And if I—who am subject to illness, not beyond illness—were to be horrified, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another person who is ill, that would not be fitting for me.’ As I noticed this, the healthy person's intoxication with health entirely dropped away.

“Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: ‘When an untaught, run-of-the-mill person, himself subject to death, not beyond death, sees another who is dead, he is horrified, humiliated, and disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to death, not beyond death. And if I—who am subject to death, not beyond death—were to be horrified, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another person who is dead, that would not be fitting for me.’ As I noticed this, the living person's intoxication with life entirely dropped away.”

AN 3:38

## *The Quest for Awakening*

“Before my awakening, when I was still just an unawakened Bodhisatta, being subject myself to birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, and defilement, I sought [happiness in] what was subject to birth, aging, illness, death, sorrow, and defilement. The thought occurred to me: ‘Why am I, being subject myself to birth...defilement, seeking what is subject to birth...defilement? What if I...were to seek the unborn, unaging, unailing, undying, sorrowless, undefiled, unsurpassed security from bondage: Unbinding.’

“So at a later time, when I was still young, black-haired, endowed with the blessings of youth in the first stage of life, I shaved off my hair and beard—though my parents wished otherwise and were grieving with tears on their faces—and I put on the ochre robe and went forth from the home life into homelessness.

“Having gone forth in search of what might be skillful, seeking the unexcelled state of sublime peace, I went to where Alara Kalama was staying and, on arrival, said to him: ‘I want to practice in this doctrine and discipline.’

“When this was said, he replied to me, ‘You may stay here. This doctrine is such that a wise person can soon enter and dwell in his own teacher’s knowledge, having realized it for himself through direct knowledge.’

“I quickly learned the doctrine. As far as mere lip-reciting and repetition, I could speak the words of knowledge, the words of the elders, and I could affirm that I knew and saw—I, along with others.

“I thought: ‘It isn’t through mere conviction alone that Alara Kalama declares, “I have entered and dwell in this Dhamma, having realized it directly for myself.” Certainly he dwells knowing and seeing this Dhamma.’ So I went to him and said, ‘To what extent do you declare that you have entered and dwell in this Dhamma?’ When this was said, he declared the dimension of nothingness.

“I thought: ‘Not only does Alara Kalama have conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. I, too, have conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Suppose I were to endeavor to realize for myself the Dhamma that Alara Kalama

declares he has entered and dwells in....’ So it was not long before I entered and dwelled in that Dhamma, having realized it for myself through direct knowledge. I went to him and said, ‘Friend Kalama, is this the extent to which you have entered and dwell in this Dhamma, having realized it for yourself through direct knowledge?’

“‘Yes....’

“‘This is the extent to which I, too, have entered and dwell in this Dhamma, having realized it for myself through direct knowledge.’

“‘It is a gain for us, a great gain for us, that we have such a companion in the holy life.... As I am, so are you; as you are, so am I. Come friend, let us now lead this community together.’

“In this way did Alara Kalama, my teacher, place me, his pupil, on the same level with himself and pay me great honor. But the thought occurred to me, ‘This Dhamma leads not to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to awakening, nor to Unbinding, but only to reappearance in the sphere of nothingness.’ So, dissatisfied with that Dhamma, I left.”

### MN 26

“Now, Aggivessana, these three similes—spontaneous, never before heard—appeared to me. Suppose there were a wet, sappy piece of timber lying in the water, and a man were to come along with an upper fire-stick, thinking, ‘I’ll light a fire. I’ll produce heat.’ Now what do you think? Would he be able to light a fire and produce heat by rubbing the upper fire-stick in the wet, sappy timber lying in the water?”

“No, venerable sir....”

“So it is with any contemplative or brahman who does not live withdrawn from sensuality in body and mind, and whose desire, infatuation, urge, thirst, and fever for sensuality is not relinquished and stilled within him: Whether or not he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings due to his striving [for awakening], he is incapable of knowledge, vision, and unexcelled self-awakening....

“Then a second simile—spontaneous, never before heard—appeared to me. Suppose there were a wet, sappy piece of timber lying on land far from water, and a man were to come along with an upper fire-stick, thinking,

‘I’ll light a fire. I’ll produce heat.’ Now what do you think? Would he be able to light a fire and produce heat by rubbing the upper fire-stick in the wet, sappy timber lying on land?”

“No, venerable sir....”

“So it is with any contemplative or brahman who lives withdrawn from sensuality in body only, but whose desire, infatuation, urge, thirst, and fever for sensuality is not relinquished and stilled within him: Whether or not he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings due to his striving, he is incapable of knowledge, vision, and unexcelled self-awakening....

“Then a third simile—spontaneous, never before heard—appeared to me. Suppose there were a dry, sapless piece of timber lying on land far from water, and a man were to come along with an upper fire-stick, thinking, ‘I’ll light a fire. I’ll produce heat.’ Now what do you think? Would he be able to light a fire and produce heat by rubbing the upper fire-stick in the dry, sapless timber lying on land?”

“Yes, venerable sir....”

“So it is with any contemplative or brahman who lives withdrawn from sensuality in body and mind, and whose desire, infatuation, urge, thirst, and fever for sensuality is relinquished and stilled within him: Whether or not he feels painful, racking, piercing feelings due to his striving, he is capable of knowledge, vision, and unexcelled self-awakening....

“I thought: ‘Suppose that I, clenching my teeth and pressing my tongue against the roof of my mouth, were to beat down, constrain, and crush my mind with my awareness’.... So, just as if a strong man, seizing a weaker man by the head or the throat or the shoulders would beat him down, constrain and crush him, in the same way I beat down, constrained, and crushed my mind with my awareness. As I did so, sweat poured from my armpits. But although tireless persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established, my body was aroused and uncalm because of the painful exertion. But the painful feeling that arose in this way did not invade my mind or remain.

“I thought: ‘Suppose I were to become absorbed in the trance of non-breathing.’ So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths in my nose and mouth. As I did so, there was a loud roaring of winds coming out my earholes, just like the loud roar of winds coming out of a smith’s bellows.... So I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths in my nose and

mouth and ears. As I did so, extreme forces sliced through my head, just as if a strong man were slicing my head open with a sharp sword.... Extreme pains arose in my head, just as if a strong man were tightening a turban made of tough leather straps around my head.... Extreme forces carved up my stomach cavity, just as if a butcher or his apprentice were to carve up the stomach cavity of an ox.... There was an extreme burning in my body, just as if two strong men, grabbing a weaker man by the arms, were to roast and broil him over a pit of hot embers. But although tireless persistence was aroused in me, and unmuddled mindfulness established, my body was aroused and uncalm because of the painful exertion. But the painful feeling that arose in this way did not invade my mind or remain.

“Devas, on seeing me, said, ‘Gotama the contemplative is dead.’ Other devas said, ‘He isn’t dead, he’s dying.’ Others said, ‘He’s neither dead nor dying, he’s an arahant, for this is the way arahants live.’

“I thought: ‘Suppose I were to practice going altogether without food.’ Then devas came to me and said, ‘Dear sir, please don’t practice going altogether without food. If you go altogether without food, we’ll infuse divine nourishment in through your pores, and you will survive on that.’ I thought: ‘If I were to claim to be completely fasting while these devas are infusing divine nourishment in through my pores, I would be lying.’ So I dismissed them, saying, ‘Enough.’

“I thought: ‘Suppose I were to take only a little food at a time, only a handful at a time of bean soup, lentil soup, vetch soup, or pea soup.’ So I took only a little food at a time, only handful at a time of bean soup, lentil soup, vetch soup, or pea soup. My body became extremely emaciated. Simply from my eating so little, my limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems....My backside became like a camel’s hoof....My spine stood out like a string of beads....My ribs jutted out like the jutting rafters of an old, run-down barn....The gleam of my eyes appeared to be sunk deep in my eye sockets like the gleam of water deep in a well....My scalp shriveled and withered like a green bitter melon, shriveled and withered in the heat and the wind....The skin of my belly became so stuck to my spine that when I thought of touching my belly, I grabbed hold of my spine as well; and when I thought of touching my spine, I grabbed hold of the skin of my belly as well....If I urinated or defecated, I fell over on my face right there....Simply from my eating so

little, if I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair—rotted at its roots—fell from my body as I rubbed....

“I thought: ‘Whatever contemplatives or brahmans in the past have felt painful, racking, piercing feelings due to their striving, this is the utmost. None have been greater than this. Whatever contemplatives or brahmans in the future...in the present are feeling painful, racking, piercing feelings due to their striving, this is the utmost. None is greater than this. But with this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superior human state, any distinction in knowledge or vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening?’

“I thought: ‘I recall once, when my father the Sakyan was working, and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, then—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities—I entered and remained in the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. Could that be the path to awakening?’ Then there was the consciousness following on that memory: ‘That is the path to awakening.... So why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unskillful qualities?’ I thought: ‘I am no longer afraid of that pleasure... but it is not easy to achieve that pleasure with a body so extremely emaciated....’ So I took some solid food: some rice and porridge. Now five monks had been attending on me, thinking, ‘If Gotama, our contemplative, achieves some higher state, he will tell us.’ But when they saw me taking some solid food—some rice and porridge—they were disgusted and left me, thinking, ‘Gotama the contemplative is living luxuriously. He has abandoned his exertion and is backsliding into abundance.’

“So when I had taken solid food and regained strength, then—quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, I entered and remained in the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. But the pleasant feeling that arose in this way did not invade my mind or remain. With the stilling of directed thoughts and evaluations, I entered and remained in the second jhana: rapture and pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance.... With the fading of rapture I remained equanimous, mindful,

and alert, and sensed pleasure with the body. I entered and remained in the third jhana, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous and mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’... With the abandoning of pleasure and pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy and distress—I entered and remained in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. But the pleasant feeling that arose in this way did not invade my mind or remain.

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of recollecting my past lives. I recollected my manifold past lives, i.e., one birth, two... five, ten... fifty, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand, many eons of cosmic contraction, many eons of cosmic expansion, many eons of cosmic contraction and expansion: ‘There I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose there. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure and pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.’ Thus I remembered my manifold past lives in their modes and details.

“This was the first knowledge I attained in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, and resolute. But the pleasant feeling that arose in this way did not invade my mind or remain.

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings. I saw—by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human—beings passing away and re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their kamma: ‘These beings—who were endowed with bad conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the

lower realms, in hell. But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—with the break-up of the body, after death, have re-appeared in the good destinations, in the heavenly world.’ Thus—by means of the divine eye, purified and surpassing the human—I saw beings passing away and re-appearing, and I discerned how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate in accordance with their kamma.

“This was the second knowledge I attained in the second watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, and resolute. But the pleasant feeling that arose in this way did not invade my mind or remain.

“When the mind was thus concentrated, purified, bright, unblemished, rid of defilement, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental effluents (*asava*). I discerned, as it was actually present, that ‘This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress... These are effluents... This is the origination of effluents... This is the cessation of effluents... This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.’ My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the effluent of sensuality, released from the effluent of becoming, released from the effluent of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, ‘Released.’ I discerned that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’

“This was the third knowledge I attained in the third watch of the night. Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, and resolute. But the pleasant feeling that arose in this way did not invade my mind or remain.”

### [MN 36](#)

Through the round of many births I roamed  
without reward,  
without rest,

seeking the house builder.  
Painful is birth again  
and again.

House builder, you're seen!  
You will not build a house again.  
All your rafters broken,  
the ridge pole destroyed,  
immersed in dismantling, the mind  
has attained the end of craving.

[\*Dhp 153-54\*](#)

### *The Buddha's Passing Away*

Now at that time Subhadda the wanderer was staying in Kusinara. He heard that "Tonight, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of Gotama the contemplative will take place." Then this thought occurred to him: "I have heard the elder wanderers, teachers of teachers, saying that only once in a long, long time do Tathagatas—worthy ones, rightly self-awakened—appear in the world. Tonight, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of Gotama the contemplative will take place. Now there is a doubt that has arisen in me, but I have faith that he could teach me the Dhamma in such a way that I might abandon that doubt."

So he went to the Mallan Sal Tree grove and, on arrival, said to Ven. Ananda, "I have heard the elder wanderers, teachers of teachers, saying that only once in a long, long time do Tathagatas—worthy ones, rightly self-awakened—appear in the world. Tonight, in the last watch of the night, the total Unbinding of Gotama the contemplative will take place. Now there is a doubt that has arisen in me, but I have faith that he could teach me the Dhamma in such a way that I might abandon that doubt. It would be good, Ven. Ananda, if you would let me see him."

When this was said, Ven. Ananda said to him, "Enough, friend Subhadda. Don't bother the Blessed One. The Blessed One is tired."

For a second time... For a third time, Subhadda the wanderer said to Ven. Ananda, "...It would be good, Ven. Ananda, if you would let me see him."

For a third time, Ven. Ananda said to him, “Enough, friend Subhadda. Don’t bother the Blessed One. The Blessed One is tired.”

Now, the Blessed One heard the exchange between Ven. Ananda and Subhadda the wanderer, and so he said to Ven. Ananda, “Enough, Ananda. Don’t stand in his way. Let him see the Tathagata. Whatever he asks me will all be for the sake of knowledge, and not to be bothersome. And whatever I answer when asked, he will quickly understand.”

So Ven. Ananda said to Subhadda the wanderer, “Go ahead, friend Subhadda. The Blessed One gives you his leave.”

Then Subhadda went to the Blessed One and exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, “Venerable sir, these contemplative and brahmans, each with his group, each with his community, each the teacher of his group, an honored leader, well-regarded by people at large—i.e., Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambalin, Pakudha Kaccayana, Sañjaya Belatthitaputta, and the Nigantha Nathaputta: Do they all have direct knowledge as they themselves claim, or do they all not have direct knowledge, or do some of them have direct knowledge and some of them not?”

“Enough, Subhadda. Put this question aside. I will teach you the Dhamma. Listen, and pay close attention. I will speak.”

“Yes, lord,” Subhadda answered, and the Blessed One said, “In any doctrine and discipline where the noble eightfold path is not found, no contemplative of the first... second... third... fourth order [stream-winner, once-returned, non-returned, arahant] is found. But in any doctrine and discipline where the noble eightfold path *is* found, contemplatives of the first... second... third... fourth order *are* found. The noble eightfold path is found in this doctrine and discipline, and right here there are contemplatives of the first... second... third... fourth order. Other teachings are empty of knowledgeable contemplatives. And if the monks dwell rightly, this world will not be empty of arahants.

At age twenty-nine I went forth,  
seeking what might be skillful,  
and since my going forth

more than fifty years have past.  
Outside of the realm  
of methodical Dhamma,  
there is no contemplative.

“And no contemplative of the second... third... fourth order. Other teachings are empty of knowledgeable contemplatives. And if the monks dwell rightly, this world will not be empty of arahants.”

Then Subhadda the wanderer said, “Magnificent, lord, magnificent! In many ways has the Blessed One made the Dhamma clear—just as if one were to place upright what has been overturned, to reveal what has been hidden, to point out the way to one who is lost, or to set out a lamp in the darkness so that those with eyes might see forms. I go to the Blessed One for refuge, and to the Dhamma and to the community of monks. Let me obtain the going forth in the Blessed One’s presence, let me obtain admission.”

“Anyone, Subhadda, who has previously belonged to another sect and who desires the going forth and admission in this doctrine and discipline must first undergo probation for four months. If, at the end of four months, the monks feel so moved, they give him the going forth and admit him to the monk’s state. But I know distinctions among individuals in this matter.”

“Lord, if that is so, I am willing to undergo probation for four years. If, at the end of four years, the monks feel so moved, let them give me the going forth and admit me to the monk’s state.”

Then the Blessed One said to Ven. Ananda, “Very well then, Ananda, give Subhadda the going forth.”

“Yes, lord,” Ven. Ananda answered.

Then Subhadda said to Ven. Ananda, “It is a gain for you, Ananda, a great gain, that you have been anointed here in the Teacher’s presence with the pupil’s anointing.”

Then Subhadda the wanderer received the going forth and the admission in the Blessed One’s presence. And not long after his admission—dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, and resolute—he in no long time reached and remained in the supreme goal of the holy life, for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing and

realizing it for himself in the here and now. He knew: “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world.” And thus Ven. Subhadda became another one of the arahants, the last of the Blessed One’s face-to-face disciples....

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, “I exhort you, monks: Fabrications are subject to decay. Bring about completion by being heedful.” Those were the Tathagata’s last words.

Then the Blessed One entered the first jhana. Emerging from that he entered the second. Emerging from that, he entered the third... the fourth... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of nothingness... the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception... the cessation of perception and feeling.

Then Ven. Ananda said to Ven. Anuruddha, “The Blessed One, sir, has entered total Unbinding.”

“No, friend, the Blessed One has not entered total Unbinding. He has attained the cessation of perception and feeling.”

Then emerging from the cessation of perception and feeling, the Blessed One entered the dimension of neither perception nor non-perception... the dimension of nothingness... the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness... the dimension of the infinitude of space... the fourth jhana... the third... the second... the first jhana. Emerging from the first jhana he entered the second... the third... the fourth jhana. Emerging from the fourth jhana, he entered total Unbinding in the interim....

When the Blessed One had attained total Unbinding, Sakka, ruler of the gods, uttered this stanza:

“How inconstant are compounded things!  
Their nature: to arise and pass away.  
They disband as they are arising.  
Their total stilling  
is bliss.”

[DN 16](#)

## DHAMMA

### *Basic Principles*

Phenomena are  
preceded by the heart,  
ruled by the heart,  
made of the heart.  
If you speak or act with a corrupted heart,  
then suffering follows you—  
as the wheel of the cart,  
the track of the ox that pulls it.

Phenomena are  
preceded by the heart,  
ruled by the heart,  
made of the heart.  
If you speak or act with a calm, bright heart,  
then happiness follows you  
like a shadow that never leaves.

[Dhp 1-2](#)

Heedfulness: the path to the Deathless;  
Heedlessness: the path to death.  
The heedful do not die;  
The heedless are as if  
already dead.

Knowing this as a true distinction,  
those wise in heedfulness  
rejoice in heedfulness,  
enjoying the range of the noble ones.

[Dhp 21-22](#)

“There are these five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained. Which five?

“‘I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging’....

“‘I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness’....

“‘I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death’....

“‘I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me’....

“‘I am the owner of my actions (kamma), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir’....

“These are the five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.

“Now, for what compelling reason should one often reflect... that ‘I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging’? There are beings who are intoxicated with a [typical] youth’s intoxication with youth. Because of that intoxication with youth, they conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind. But when they often reflect on that fact, that youth’s intoxication with youth will either be entirely abandoned or grow weaker....

“Now, for what compelling reason should one often reflect... that ‘I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness’? There are beings who are intoxicated with a [typical] healthy person’s intoxication with health. Because of that intoxication with health, they conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind. But when they often reflect on that fact, that healthy person’s intoxication with health will either be entirely abandoned or grow weaker....

“Now, for what compelling reason should one often reflect... that ‘I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death’? There are beings who are intoxicated with a [typical] living person’s intoxication with life. Because of that intoxication with life, they conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind. But when they often reflect on that fact, that living person’s intoxication with life will either be entirely abandoned or grow weaker....

“Now, for what compelling reason should one often reflect... that ‘I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me’?

There are beings who feel desire and passion for the things they find dear and appealing. Because of that passion, they conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind. But when they often reflect on that fact, that desire and passion for the things they find dear and appealing will either be entirely abandoned or grow weaker....

“Now, for what compelling reason should one often reflect... that ‘I am the owner of my actions (*kamma*), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir’? There are beings who conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind. But when they often reflect on that fact, that bad conduct in body, speech, and mind will either be entirely abandoned or grow weaker....

“Now, a disciple of the noble ones considers this: ‘I am not the only one subject to aging, who has not gone beyond aging. To the extent that there are beings—past and future, passing away and re-arising—all beings are subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging.’ When he/she often reflects on this, the [factors of the] path take birth. He/she sticks with that path, develops it, cultivates it. As he/she sticks with that path, develops it and cultivates it, the fetters are abandoned, the latent tendencies destroyed. [Similarly with each of the other contemplations.]”

[AN 5:57](#)

The non-doing    of any evil,  
the performance    of what’s skillful,  
the cleansing    of one’s own mind:

This is the Buddhas’ teaching.

Not disparaging, not injuring,  
restraint    in line with the Patimokkha,  
moderation    in food,  
dwelling    in seclusion,  
commitment to the heightened mind:

This is the Buddhas’ teaching.

[Dhp 183](#), 185

“I don’t see any one quality by which unarisen skillful qualities arise, and arisen unskillful qualities subside, like friendship with admirable people. When a person is friends with admirable people, unarisen skillful qualities arise, and arisen unskillful qualities subside.”

*AN 1:72*

“Now what, TigerPaw (Byagghapajja), is friendship with admirable people? There is the case where a lay person, in whatever town or village he may dwell, spends time with householders or householders’ sons, young or old, who are advanced in virtue. He talks with them, engages them in discussions. He emulates consummate conviction [in the principle of kamma] in those who are consummate in conviction, consummate virtue in those who are consummate in virtue, consummate generosity in those who are consummate in generosity, and consummate discernment in those who are consummate in discernment. This is called friendship with admirable people.”

[\*AN 8:54\*](#)

“A female disciple of the noble ones who grows in terms of these five types of growth grows in the noble growth, grasps hold of what is essential, what is excellent in the body. Which five? She grows in terms of conviction, in terms of virtue, in terms of learning, in terms of generosity, in terms of discernment. Growing in terms of these five types of growth, the female disciple of the noble ones grows in the noble growth, grasps hold of what is essential, what is excellent in the body.

“Growing in conviction and virtue  
discernment, generosity, and learning,  
a virtuous female lay disciple  
such as this  
takes hold of the essence within herself.”

[\*SN 37:34\*](#)

“Kamma should be known. The cause by which kamma comes into play should be known. The diversity in kamma should be known. The

result of kamma should be known. The cessation of kamma should be known. The path of practice for the cessation of kamma should be known.’ Thus it has been said. Why was it said?

“Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and intellect.

“And what is the cause by which kamma comes into play? Contact....

“And what is the diversity in kamma? There is kamma to be experienced in purgatory, kamma to be experienced in the realm of common animals, kamma to be experienced in the realm of the hungry shades, kamma to be experienced in the human world, kamma to be experienced in the celestial worlds....

“And what is the result of kamma? The result of kamma is of three sorts, I tell you: that which arises right here and now, that which arises later [in this lifetime], and that which arises following that....

“And what is the cessation of kamma? From the cessation of contact is the cessation of kamma....

“And what is the way leading to the cessation of kamma? Just this noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

“Now when a disciple of the noble ones discerns kamma in this way, the cause by which kamma comes into play in this way, the diversity of kamma in this way, the result of kamma in this way, the cessation of kamma in this way, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of kamma in this way, then he discerns this penetrative holy life as the cessation of kamma.”

#### [AN 6:63](#)

The Buddha: “What do you think, Rahula? What is a mirror for?”

Rahula: “For reflection, sir.”

The Buddha: “In the same way, Rahula, bodily actions, verbal actions, and mental actions are to be done with repeated reflection.

“Whenever you want to perform a bodily action, you should reflect on it: ‘This bodily action I want to perform—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it

would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with happy consequences, happy results, then any bodily action of that sort is fit for you to do.

[Similarly with verbal actions and mental actions.]

“While you are performing a bodily action, you should reflect on it: ‘This bodily action I am doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?’ If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to affliction of others, or both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

[Similarly with verbal actions and mental actions.]

“Having performed a bodily action, you should reflect on it.... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed and joyful, training day and night in skillful qualities.

[Similarly with verbal actions.]

“Having performed a mental action, you should reflect on it.... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should feel horrified, humiliated, and disgusted with it. Feeling horrified... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful mental action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed and joyful, training day and night in skillful qualities.

“Rahula, all the contemplatives and brahmans in the course of the past who purified their bodily actions, verbal actions, and mental actions, did it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, and mental actions in just this way.

“All the contemplatives and brahmans in the course of the future... All the contemplatives and brahmans at present who purify their bodily actions, verbal actions, and mental actions, do it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, and mental actions in just this way.

“Therefore, Rahula, you should train yourself: ‘I will purify my bodily actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my verbal actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my mental actions through repeated reflection.’ That’s how you should train yourself.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, Ven. Rahula delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

#### [MN 61](#)

“These five things are welcome, agreeable, pleasant, and hard to obtain in the world. Which five? Long life... beauty... pleasure... status... rebirth in heaven.... Now, I tell you, these five things are not to be obtained by reason of prayers or wishes. If they were to be obtained by reason of prayers or wishes, who here would lack them? It is not fitting for the disciple of the noble ones who desires long life to pray for it or to delight in doing so. Instead, the disciple of the noble ones who desires long life should follow the path of practice leading to long life. In so doing, he will attain long life, either human or divine. [Similarly with beauty, pleasure, status, and rebirth in heaven.]”

#### [AN 5:43](#)

I have heard that at one time the Blessed One was staying in Savatthi at Jeta’s Grove, Anathapindika’s park. Then a certain deva, in the far extreme of the night, her extreme radiance lighting up the entirety of Jeta’s Grove, approached the Blessed One. On approaching, having bowed down to the Blessed One, she stood to one side. As she was standing there, she addressed him with a verse.

“Many devas and humans beings  
give thought to protective charms,  
desiring well-being.  
Tell, then, the highest protective charm.”

[The Buddha:]

“Not consorting with fools,  
consorting with the wise,  
homage to those deserving of homage:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Living in a civilized land,  
having made merit in the past,  
directing oneself rightly:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Broad knowledge, skill,  
well-mastered discipline,  
well-spoken words:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Support for one’s parents,  
assistance to one’s wife and children,  
consistency in one’s work:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Generosity, living in rectitude,  
assistance to one’s relatives,  
deeds that are blameless:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Avoiding, abstaining from evil;  
refraining from intoxicants,  
being heedful of the qualities of the mind:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Respect, humility,  
contentment, gratitude,  
hearing the Dhamma on timely occasions:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Patience, composure,  
seeing contemplatives,  
discussing the Dhamma on timely occasions:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Austerity, celibacy,  
seeing the noble truths,  
realizing Unbinding:  
This is the highest protective charm.

A mind that, when touched  
by the ways of the world,  
is unshaken, sorrowless, dustless, secure:  
This is the highest protective charm.

Everywhere undefeated  
when acting in this way,  
people go everywhere in well-being:  
This is their highest protective charm.”

[Sn 2:4](#)

## *Generosity*

“These are the five rewards of generosity: One is dear and appealing to people at large, one is admired by good people, one’s good name is spread about, one does not stray from the rightful duties of the householder, and with the break-up of the body at death, one reappears in a good destination, in the heavenly worlds.”

*AN 5:35*

What the miser fears,  
that keeps him from giving,  
is the very danger that comes  
when he doesn’t give.

*SN 1:32*

No misers go  
to the world of the devas.  
Those who don't praise giving  
are fools.

The enlightened  
express their approval for giving  
and so find ease  
in the world beyond.

*Dhp 177*

“If beings knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would the stain of miserliness overcome their minds. Even if it were their last bite, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared, if there were someone to receive their gift. But because beings do not know, as I know, the results of giving and sharing, they eat without having given. The stain of miserliness overcomes their minds.”

*Iti 26*

Now on that occasion Princess Sumana—with an entourage of 500 ladies-in-waiting riding on 500 carriages—went to where the Buddha was staying. On arrival, having bowed down, she sat to one side. As she was sitting there, she said to the Blessed One, “Suppose there were two disciples of the Blessed One, equal in conviction, virtue, and discernment, but one was a giver of alms and the other was not. At the break-up of the body, after death, they would reappear in a good destination, in the heavenly world. Having become devas, would there be any distinction, any difference between the two?”

“Yes, there would,” said the Blessed One. “The one who was a giver of alms, on becoming a deva, would surpass the other in five areas: in divine life span, divine beauty, divine pleasure, divine status, and divine power....”

“And if they were to fall from there and reappear in this world: Having become human beings, would there be any distinction, any difference between the two?”

“Yes, there would,” said the Blessed One. “The one who was a giver of alms, on becoming a human being, would surpass the other in five areas: in human life span, human beauty, human pleasure, human status, and human power....”

“And if they were to go forth from home into the homeless life of a monk: Having gone forth, would there be any distinction, any difference between the two?”

“Yes, there would,” said the Blessed One. “The one who was a giver of alms, on going forth, would surpass the other in five areas: He would often be asked to make use of robes; it would be rare that he wouldn’t be asked. He would often be asked to take food... to make use of shelter... to make use of medicine; it would be rare that he wouldn’t be asked. His companions in the holy life would often treat him with pleasing actions... pleasing words... pleasing thoughts... and present him with pleasing gifts, and rarely with unpleasing....”

“And if both were to attain arahantship, would there be any distinction, any difference between their attainments of arahantship?”

“In that case, I tell you that there would be no difference between the two as to their release.”

“It’s amazing, lord, and astounding. Just this is reason enough to give alms, to make merit, in that it benefits one as a deva, as a human being, and as a monk.”

[AN 5:31](#)

## *Virtue*

“These five gifts, five great gifts—original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning—are not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and are unfaulted by knowledgeable brahmans and contemplatives. Which five?

“There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he

gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression....

“Abandoning taking what is not given (stealing), he abstains from taking what is not given....

“Abandoning illicit sex, he abstains from illicit sex....

“Abandoning lying, he abstains from lying....

“Abandoning the use of intoxicants, he abstains from taking intoxicants. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression.... This is the fifth gift, the fifth great gift—original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning—that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives and brahmans.”

*AN 7:39*

“Cleansing with regard to the body, Cunda, is threefold; cleansing with regard to speech is fourfold; and cleansing with regard to the mind, threefold. And how is cleansing with regard to the body threefold? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he abstains from taking what is not given. He does not take the ungiven property of another, whether in a village or in the wilderness, with thievish intent. Abandoning sensual misconduct, he abstains from sensual misconduct. He does not get sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man. This is how cleansing with regard to the body is threefold.

“And how is cleansing with regard to speech fourfold? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, abstains from false

speech. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty [i.e., a court proceeding], if he is asked as a witness, ‘Come and tell, good man, what you know’: If he doesn’t know, he says, ‘I don’t know.’ If he does know, he says, ‘I know.’ If he hasn’t seen, he says, ‘I haven’t seen.’ If he has seen, he says, ‘I have seen.’ Thus he doesn’t consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning divisive speech, he abstains from divisive speech. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord. Abandoning abusive speech, he abstains from abusive speech. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large. Abandoning idle chatter, he abstains from idle chatter. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, and the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal. This is how cleansing with regard to speech is fourfold.

“And how is cleansing with regard to the mind threefold? There is the case where a certain person is not covetous. He does not covet the property of another, thinking, ‘O, if only what belongs to another were mine!’ He is not malevolent at heart or destructive in his resolves. He thinks, ‘May these beings—free from animosity, free from oppression, and free from trouble—look after themselves with ease.’ He has right views and an unperverted outlook. He believes, ‘There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits and results of good and bad actions. There is this world and the next world. There is mother and father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives and brahmans who, living rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.’ This is how cleansing with regard to the mind is threefold.”

[AN 10:165](#)

“There are these five benefits in being virtuous, in being consummate in virtue. Which five? There is the case where a virtuous person, consummate in virtue, through not being heedless in his affairs amasses a great quantity of wealth.... His good name is spread about.... When approaching an assembly of nobles, brahmans, householders, or contemplatives, he does so unabashed and with assurance.... He dies without becoming delirious.... With the break-up of the body, after death, he reappears in a good destination, in the heavenly world. These are the five benefits in being virtuous, in being consummate in virtue.”

[DN 16](#)

This is to be done by one skilled in aims  
appreciating the state of peace:  
Be capable, upright, and straightforward,  
easy to instruct, gentle, and not proud,  
content and easy to support,  
with few duties, living lightly,  
with peaceful faculties, masterful,  
modest, and no greed for supporters.  
Do not do the slightest thing  
that the wise would later censure.  
Think: Happy and secure,  
may all beings be happy at heart.  
Whatever beings there may be,  
weak or strong, without exception,  
long, large,  
middling, short,  
subtle, blatant,  
seen & unseen,  
near & far,  
born & seeking birth:  
May all beings be happy at heart.  
Let no one deceive another  
or despise anyone anywhere,  
or through anger or irritation

wish for another to suffer.  
As a mother would risk her life  
to protect her child, her only child,  
even so should one cultivate  
a limitless heart  
with regard to all beings.  
With good will for the entire cosmos,  
cultivate a limitless heart:  
above, below, & all around,  
unobstructed, without enmity or hate.  
Whether standing, walking,  
sitting, or lying down,  
as long as one is alert,  
one should be resolved on this mindfulness.  
This is called a sublime abiding here & now.  
Not taken with views,  
but virtuous & consummate in vision,  
having subdued desire for sensual pleasures,  
one never again will lie in the womb.

[Sn 1:8](#)

## *Heaven*

Blinded this world—  
how few here see clearly!  
Just as birds that have escaped from a net are  
few, few  
are the people who make it to heaven.

[Dhp 174](#)

The Buddha: “Suppose that a Universal Monarch possessed the seven treasures [the treasure of a divine wheel, the treasure of an ideal jewel, the treasure of an ideal elephant, the treasure of an ideal horse, the treasure of an ideal wife, the treasure of an ideal steward, and the treasure of an ideal

counselor] and the four forms of prowess [he is surpassingly attractive, he has a surpassingly long life, he is surpassingly free from illness, and he loves his subjects and is loved by them]. Now what do you think? Would he... experience pleasure and joy?"

The monks: "Yes, lord."

Then, taking a small stone, the size of his hand, the Blessed One said, "What do you think? Which is larger, this small stone that I have taken, the size of my hand, or the Himalayas, king of mountains?"

"It's minuscule, the small stone.... It doesn't count beside the Himalayas, the king of mountains. It's not even a small fraction. There's no comparison."

"In the same way, the pleasure and joy that the Universal Monarch experiences on account of his seven treasures and four forms of prowess do not count beside the pleasures of heaven. They're not even a small fraction. There is no comparison."

MN 129

## *Drawbacks*

"Now what is the allure of sensuality? There are, monks, these five strands of sensuality. Which five? Forms cognizable via the eye—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. Sounds cognizable via the ear... Aromas cognizable via the nose... Flavors cognizable via the tongue... Tactile sensations cognizable via the body—agreeable, pleasing, charming, endearing, fostering desire, enticing. Now whatever pleasure or joy arises in dependence on these five strands of sensuality, that is the allure of sensuality.

"And what is the drawback of sensuality? There is the case where, on account of the occupation by which a clansman makes a living—whether checking or accounting or calculating or plowing or trading or cattle tending or archery or as a king's man, or whatever the occupation may be—he faces cold; he faces heat; being harassed by mosquitoes, flies, wind, sun, and creeping things; dying from hunger and thirst.

"Now this drawback in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here and now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source,

sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

“If the clansman gains no wealth while thus working and striving and making effort, he sorrows, grieves and laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught: ‘My work is in vain, my efforts are fruitless!’ Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here and now, has sensuality for its reason....

“If the clansman gains wealth while thus working and striving and making effort, he experiences pain and distress in protecting it: ‘How shall neither kings nor thieves make off with my property, nor fire burn it, nor water sweep it away, nor hateful heirs make off with it?’ And as he thus guards and watches over his property, kings or thieves make off with it, or fire burns it, or water sweeps it away, or hateful heirs make off with it. And he sorrows, grieves and laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught: ‘What was mine is no more!’ Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here and now, has sensuality for its reason....

“Furthermore, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source, sensuality for the cause, the reason being simply sensuality, that kings quarrel with kings, nobles with nobles, brahmans with brahmans, householders with householders, mother with child, child with mother, father with child, child with father, brother with brother, sister with sister, brother with sister, sister with brother, friend with friend. And then in their quarrels, brawls, and disputes, they attack one another with fists or with clods or with sticks or with knives, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here and now, has sensuality for its reason....

“Furthermore, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (men), taking swords and shields and buckling on bows and quivers, charge into battle massed in double array while arrows and spears are flying and swords are flashing; and there they are wounded by arrows and spears, and their heads are cut off by swords, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here and now, has sensuality for its reason....

“Furthermore, it is with sensuality for the reason, sensuality for the source... that (men), taking swords and shields and buckling on bows and quivers, charge slippery bastions while arrows and spears are flying and

swords are flashing; and there they are splashed with boiling cow dung and crushed under heavy weights, and their heads are cut off by swords, so that they incur death or deadly pain. Now this drawback too in the case of sensuality, this mass of stress visible here and now, has sensuality for its reason, sensuality for its source, sensuality for its cause, the reason being simply sensuality.

“And what is the escape from sensuality? Any subduing of passion and desire, abandoning of passion and desire for sensuality: That is the escape from sensuality.”

### [MN 13](#)

“Which do you think is greater: the tears you have shed while transmigrating and wandering this long time—crying and weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, from being separated from what is pleasing—or the water in the four great oceans?” ... “This is the greater: The tears you have shed.... Why is that? From an inconceivable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, although beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating and wandering on. Long have you thus experienced stress, experienced pain, experienced loss, swelling the cemeteries—long enough to become disenchanted with all fabrications, enough to become dispassionate, enough to be released.”

### [SN 15:3](#)

## *Renunciation*

Janussoni: “I hold that there is no one who, subject to death, is not afraid or in terror of death.”

The Buddha: “There are those who, subject to death, are afraid and in terror of death. And there are those who, subject to death, are not afraid or in terror of death.”

“And who is the person who, subject to death, is afraid and in terror of death? There is the case of the person who has not abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for sensuality. When he comes down with a serious disease, the thought occurs to him, ‘O, those beloved

sensual pleasures will be taken from me, and I will be taken from them!’ He grieves and is tormented, weeps, beats his breast, and grows delirious....

“Furthermore, there is the case of the person who has not abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for the body. When he is touched by a serious disease, the thought occurs to him, ‘O, my beloved body will be taken from me, and I will be taken from my body!’ He grieves and is tormented, weeps, beats his breast, and grows delirious....

“Furthermore, there is the case of the person who has not done what is good, has not done what is skillful, has not given protection to those in fear, and instead has done what is evil, savage, and cruel. When he comes down with a serious disease, the thought occurs to him, ‘... After death I am headed for the destination of those who have done what is evil, savage, and cruel.’ He grieves and is tormented, weeps, beats his breast, and grows delirious....

“Furthermore, there is the case of the person in doubt and perplexity, who has not arrived at certainty with regard to the True Dhamma. When he comes down with a serious disease, the thought occurs to him, ‘How doubtful and perplexed I am! I have not arrived at any certainty with regard to the True Dhamma!’ He grieves and is tormented, weeps, beats his breast, and grows delirious. This is another person who, subject to death, is afraid and in terror of death.

“And who is the person who is not afraid or in terror of death? There is the case of the person who has abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for sensuality.... who has abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for the body.... who has done what is good, what is skillful, has given protection to those in fear, and has not done what is evil, savage, or cruel.... who has no doubt or perplexity, who has arrived at certainty with regard to the True Dhamma. When he comes down with a serious disease... he doesn’t grieve, isn’t tormented, doesn’t weep or beat his breast or grow delirious. This is another person who, subject to death, is not afraid or in terror of death.”

[AN 4:184](#)

Now at that time, Ven. Bhaddiya Kaligodha, on going to a forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, would repeatedly exclaim, “What

bliss! What bliss!” Many monks heard him... repeatedly exclaim, “What bliss! What bliss!” and on hearing him, the thought occurred to them, “There’s no doubt but that Ven. Bhaddiya Kaligodha doesn’t enjoy leading the holy life, for when he was a householder he knew the bliss of kingship, so that now, on recollecting that... he is repeatedly exclaiming, ‘What bliss! What bliss!’ They went to the Blessed One... and told him... and he told a certain monk, “Come, monk. In my name, call Bhaddiya, saying, “The Teacher calls you, my friend.”

“Yes, lord,” the monk answered....

Then Ven. Bhaddiya went to where the Blessed One was staying and, on arrival, having bowed down, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, “Is it true, Bhaddiya that, on going to a forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, you repeatedly exclaim, ‘What bliss! What bliss!’?”

“Yes, lord.”

“What do you have in mind that you repeatedly exclaim, ‘What bliss! What bliss!’?”

“Before, when I was a householder, maintaining the bliss of kingship, I had guards posted within and without the royal apartments, within and without the city, within and without the countryside. But even though I was thus guarded, thus protected, I dwelled in fear—agitated, distrustful, and afraid. But now, on going alone to a forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, I dwell without fear, unagitated, confident, and unafraid—unconcerned, unruffled, my wants satisfied, with my mind like a wild deer. This is what I have in mind that I repeatedly exclaim, ‘What bliss! What bliss!’”

[Ud 2:10](#)

### *The Four Noble Truths*

“Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion and delight, relishing now here and now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading and cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving.

“And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

“Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of stress’.... ‘This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended’.... ‘This noble truth of stress has been comprehended’....

“‘This is the noble truth of the origination of stress’.... ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned’.... ‘This noble truth of the origination of stress has been abandoned’....

“‘This is the noble truth of the cessation of stress’.... ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress is to be directly experienced’.... ‘This noble truth of the cessation of stress has been directly experienced’....

“‘This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of stress’.... ‘This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of stress is to be developed’.... ‘This noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of stress has been developed.’

“And, monks, as long as this knowledge and vision of mine—with its three rounds and twelve permutations concerning these four noble truths as they have come to be—was not pure, I did not claim to have directly awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening.... But as soon as this knowledge and vision of mine—with its three rounds and twelve permutations concerning these four noble truths as they have come to be—*was* truly pure, then did I claim to have directly awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening.... The knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘Unprovoked is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.’”

## *The First Truth*

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Varanasi, in the Game Refuge at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks:

“Form, monks, is not-self. If form were self, this form (body) would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to form, ‘May my form be like this; may it not be like that.’ But precisely because form is not-self, it lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible to say with regard to form, ‘May my form be like this; may it not be like that.’

“Feeling is not-self.... Perception is not-self.... Fabrications are not-self....

“Consciousness, monks, is not-self. If consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible to say with regard to consciousness, ‘May my consciousness be like this; may it not be like that.’ But precisely because consciousness is not-self, it lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible to say with regard to consciousness, ‘May my form be like this; may it not be like that.’

“What do you think, monks: Is form constant or inconstant?”—  
“Inconstant, lord.”—“And whatever is inconstant: Is it easeful or stressful?”—“Stressful, lord.”—“And is it right to assume with regard to whatever is inconstant, stressful, subject to change, that ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am?’”—“No, lord.”

‘...Is feeling constant or inconstant?... Is perception constant or inconstant?... Are fabrications constant or inconstant?...

“What do you think, monks: Is consciousness constant or inconstant?”—“Inconstant, lord.”—“And whatever is inconstant: Is it easeful or stressful?”—“Stressful, lord.”—“And is it right to assume with regard to whatever is inconstant, stressful, subject to change, that ‘This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am?’”—“No, lord.”

“Thus, monks, any form whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle, common or sublime, far or near: every form

—is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Any feeling whatsoever.... Any perception whatsoever.... Any fabrications whatsoever....

“Any consciousness whatsoever—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle, common or sublime, far or near: every consciousness—is to be seen as it actually is with right discernment as: ‘This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.’

“Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, and disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he grows dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, ‘Released.’ He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the group of five monks delighted at his words. And while this explanation was being given, the hearts of the group of five monks, through not clinging (not being sustained), were released from the mental effluents.

[SN 22:59](#)

## *The Second and Third Truths*

If this sticky, uncouth craving  
overcomes you in the world,  
your sorrows grow like wild grass  
after rain.  
If, in the world, you overcome  
this sticky, uncouth craving,  
sorrows roll off you,  
like water beads off  
a lotus.

[Dhp 335-336](#)

If its root remains  
undamaged and strong,  
a tree, even if cut,  
will grow back.  
So too if latent craving  
is not rooted out,  
this suffering returns  
again  
and  
again.

[Dhp 338](#)

“And what is the noble method that is rightly seen and rightly ferreted out by discernment? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones notices:

*“When this is, that is.*

*“From the arising of this comes the arising of that.*

*“When this isn’t, that isn’t.*

*“From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.*

“In other words:

“From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

“From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

“From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.

“From name-and-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

“From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

“From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

“From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.

“From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.

“From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.

“From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.

“From birth as a requisite condition, then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair come into play. Such is the

origination of this entire mass of stress and suffering.

“Now from the remainderless fading and cessation of that very ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications. From the cessation of fabrications comes the cessation of consciousness. From the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-and-form. From the cessation of name-and-form comes the cessation of the six sense media. From the cessation of the six sense media comes the cessation of contact. From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling. From the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving. From the cessation of craving comes the cessation of clinging. From the cessation of clinging comes the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress and suffering.

“This is the noble method that is rightly seen and rightly ferreted out by discernment.”

[AN 10:92](#)

“Stress and suffering have birth as their prerequisite,  
conviction has stress and suffering as its prerequisite,  
joy has conviction as its prerequisite,  
rapture has joy as its prerequisite,  
serenity has rapture as its prerequisite,  
pleasure has serenity as its prerequisite,  
concentration has pleasure as its prerequisite,  
knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be has  
concentration as its prerequisite,  
disenchantment has knowledge and vision of things as they have  
come to be as its prerequisite,  
dispassion has disenchantment as its prerequisite,  
release has dispassion as its prerequisite,  
knowledge of ending has release as its prerequisite.”

[SN 12:23](#)

## *The Fourth Truth*

“What is the noble eightfold path? Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

“And what is right view? Knowledge with regard to stress, knowledge with regard to the origination of stress, knowledge with regard to the cessation of stress, and knowledge with regard to the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: This is called right view.

“And what is right resolve? Being resolved on renunciation, on freedom from ill will, and on harmlessness: This is called right resolve.

“And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter: This is called right speech.

“And what is right action? Abstaining from taking life, from stealing, and from uncelibate behavior: This is called right action.

“And what is right livelihood? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, having abandoned dishonest livelihood, keeps alive through right livelihood. This is called right livelihood.

“And what is right effort? There is the case where a monk generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful qualities that have not yet arisen... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen... (and) for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This is called right effort.”

“And what is right mindfulness? There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. He remains focused on feelings in and of themselves...the mind in and of itself... mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. This is called right mindfulness.”

“And what is right concentration? There is the case where a monk... enters and remains in the first jhana... the second jhana... the third

jhana... the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is called right concentration.”

[SN 45:8](#)

## *Right View*

Then Anathapindika the householder went to where the wanderers of other persuasions were staying. On arrival he greeted them courteously. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he sat down to one side. As he was sitting there, the wanderers said to him, “Tell us, householder, what views the contemplative Gotama has.”

“Venerable sirs, I don’t know entirely what views the Blessed One has.”

“Well, well. So you don’t know entirely what views the contemplative Gotama has. Then tell us what views the monks have.”

“I don’t even know entirely what views the monks have.”

“So you don’t know entirely what views the contemplative Gotama has or even that the monks have. Then tell us what views *you* have.”

“It wouldn’t be difficult for me to expound to you what views I have. But please let the venerable ones expound each in line with his position, and then it won’t be difficult for me to expound to you what views I have.”

When this had been said, one of the wanderers said to Anathapindika the householder, “*The cosmos is eternal*. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have.”

Another wanderer said to Anathapindika, “*The cosmos is not eternal*. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have.”

Another wanderer said, “*The cosmos is finite...*”... “*The cosmos is infinite...*”... “*The soul and the body are the same...*”... “*The soul is one thing and the body another...*”... “*After death a Tathagata exists...*”... “*After death a Tathagata does not exist...*”... “*After death a Tathagata both does and does not exist...*”... “*After death a Tathagata neither does nor does not exist*. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have.”

When this had been said, Anathapindika the householder said to the wanderers, “As for the venerable one who says, ‘*The cosmos is eternal*. Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless. This is the sort of view I have,’ his view arises from his own inappropriate attention or in dependence on the words of another. Now this view has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated. Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. This venerable one thus adheres to that very stress, submits himself to that very stress. [Similarly for the other positions.]”

When this had been said, the wanderers said to Anathapindika the householder, “We have each and every one expounded to you in line with our own positions. Now tell us what views you have.”

“Whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. This is the sort of view I have.”

“So, householder, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. You thus adhere to that very stress, submit yourself to that very stress.”

“Venerable sirs, whatever has been brought into being, is fabricated, willed, dependently originated, that is inconstant. Whatever is inconstant is stress. Whatever is stress is not me, is not what I am, is not my self. Having seen this well with right discernment as it has come to be, I also discern the higher escape from it as it has come to be.”

When this had been said, the wanderers fell silent, abashed, sitting with their shoulders drooping, their heads down, brooding, at a loss for words. Anathapindika the householder, perceiving that the wanderers were silent, abashed...at a loss for words, got up and left.

### [AN 10:93](#)

“There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person... does not discern what ideas are fit for attention, or what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he does not attend to ideas fit for attention, and

attends instead to ideas unfit for attention....This is how he attends inappropriately: ‘Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?’ Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: ‘Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?’

“As this person attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view *I have a self* arises in him as true and established, or the view *I have no self*...or the view *It is by means of self that I perceive self*...or the view *It is by means of self that I perceive not-self*...or the view *It is by means of not-self that I perceive self* arises in him as true and established, or else he has a view like this: *This very self of mine—the knower that is sensitive here and there to the ripening of good and bad actions—is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity*. This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. He is not freed from stress, I say.

“The well-taught disciple of the noble ones... discerns what ideas are fit for attention, and what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he does not attend to ideas unfit for attention, and attends instead to ideas fit for attention.... He attends appropriately, *This is stress...This is the origin of stress...This is the cessation of stress...This is the way leading to the cessation of stress*. As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: identity-view, doubt, and grasping at habits and practices.”

### [MN 2](#)

Kaccayana: “Lord, ‘Right view, right view,’ it is said. To what extent is there right view?”

The Buddha: “By and large, Kaccayana, this cosmos is supported by (takes as its object) a polarity, that of existence and non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the cosmos as it actually is with right

discernment, ‘non-existence’ with reference to the cosmos does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the cosmos as it actually is with right discernment, ‘existence’ with reference to the cosmos does not occur to one.

“By and large, Kaccayana, this cosmos is in bondage to attachments, clingings (sustenances), and biases. But one such as this does not get involved with or cling to these attachments, clingings, fixations of awareness, biases, and latent tendencies; nor is he resolved on ‘my self.’ He has no uncertainty or doubt that, when there is arising, only stress is arising; and that when there is passing away, stress is passing away. In this, one’s knowledge is independent of others. It is to this extent, Kaccayana, that there is right view.”

[SN 12:15](#)

### *Right Mindfulness and Concentration*

Visakha: “Now what is concentration, what qualities are its themes, what qualities are its requisites, and what is its development?”

Sister Dhammadinna: “Singleness of mind is concentration; the four frames of reference [the activities of right mindfulness] are its themes; the four right exertions [right effort] are its requisites; and any cultivation, development, and pursuit of these qualities is its development.”

[MN 44](#)

“Mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, when developed and pursued, brings the four frames of reference to their culmination. The four frames of reference, when developed and pursued, bring the seven factors for awakening to their culmination. The seven factors for awakening, when developed and pursued, bring clear knowing and release to their culmination.

“Now how is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing developed and pursued so as to bring the four frames of reference to their culmination?

“There is the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs

crosswise, holding his body erect, and setting mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

“(1) Breathing in long, he discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out long, he discerns that he is breathing out long. (2) Or breathing in short, he discerns that he is breathing in short; or breathing out short, he discerns that he is breathing out short. (3) He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the entire body, and to breathe out sensitive to the entire body. (4) He trains himself to breathe in calming bodily fabrication, and to breathe out calming bodily fabrication.

“(5) He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to rapture, and to breathe out sensitive to rapture. (6) He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to pleasure, and to breathe out sensitive to pleasure. (7) He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication, and to breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication. (8) He trains himself to breathe in calming mental fabrication, and to breathe out calming mental fabrication.

“(9) He trains himself to breathe in sensitive to the mind, and to breathe out sensitive to the mind. (10) He trains himself to breathe in gladdening the mind, and to breathe out gladdening the mind. (11) He trains himself to breathe in steadying the mind, and to breathe out steadying the mind. (12) He trains himself to breathe in releasing the mind, and to breathe out releasing the mind.

“(13) He trains himself to breathe in focusing on inconstancy, and to breathe out focusing on inconstancy. (14) He trains himself to breathe in focusing on dispassion [*literally*, fading], and to breathe out focusing on dispassion. (15) He trains himself to breathe in focusing on cessation, and to breathe out focusing on cessation. (16) He trains himself to breathe in focusing on relinquishment, and to breathe out focusing on relinquishment.

“Now, on whatever occasion a monk breathing in long discerns that he is breathing in long; or breathing out long, discerns that he is breathing out long; or breathing in short, discerns that he is breathing in short; or breathing out short, discerns that he is breathing out short; trains himself to breathe in...and...out sensitive to the entire body; trains himself to breathe in...and...out calming bodily fabrication: On that occasion the monk remains focused on the *body* in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. I tell

you, monks, that this—the in-and-out breath—is classed as a body among bodies, which is why the monk on that occasion remains focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

“On whatever occasion a monk trains himself to breathe in...and... out sensitive to rapture; trains himself to breathe in...and...out sensitive to pleasure; trains himself to breathe in...and...out sensitive to mental fabrication; trains himself to breathe in...and...out calming mental fabrication: On that occasion the monk remains focused on *feelings* in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. I tell you, monks, that this—close attention to in-and-out breaths—is classed as a feeling among feelings, which is why the monk on that occasion remains focused on feelings in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

“On whatever occasion a monk trains himself to breathe in...and... out sensitive to the mind; trains himself to breathe in...and...out satisfying the mind; trains himself to breathe in...and...out steadying the mind; trains himself to breathe in...and...out releasing the mind: On that occasion the monk remains focused on the *mind* in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. I don’t say that there is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing in one of confused mindfulness and no alertness, which is why the monk on that occasion remains focused on the mind in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

“On whatever occasion a monk trains himself to breathe in...and...out focusing on inconstancy; trains himself to breathe in...and...out focusing on dispassion; trains himself to breathe in...and...out focusing on cessation; trains himself to breathe in...and...out focusing on relinquishing: On that occasion the monk remains focused on *mental qualities* in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. He who sees clearly with discernment the abandoning of greed and distress is one who oversees with equanimity, which is why the monk on that occasion remains

focused on mental qualities in and of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

“This is how mindfulness of in-and-out breathing is developed and pursued so as to bring the four frames of reference to their culmination.

“And how are the four frames of reference developed and pursued so as to bring the seven factors for awakening to their culmination?

“(1) On whatever occasion the monk remains focused on the *body* in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, on that occasion his mindfulness is steady and without lapse. When his mindfulness is steady and without lapse, then *mindfulness* as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

“(2) Remaining mindful in this way, he examines, analyzes, and comes to a comprehension of that quality with discernment. When he remains mindful in this way, examining, analyzing, and coming to a comprehension of that quality with discernment, then *analysis of qualities* as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

“(3) In one who examines, analyzes, and comes to a comprehension of that quality with discernment, unflagging persistence is aroused. When unflagging persistence is aroused in one who examines, analyzes, and comes to a comprehension of that quality with discernment, then *persistence* as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

“(4) In one whose persistence is aroused, a rapture not-of-the-flesh arises. When a rapture not-of-the-flesh arises in one whose persistence is aroused, then *rapture* as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

“(5) For one who is enraptured, the body grows calm and the mind grows calm. When the body and mind of an enraptured monk grow calm, then *serenity* as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

“(6) For one who is at ease—his body calmed—the mind becomes concentrated. When the mind of one who is at ease—his body calmed—becomes concentrated, then *concentration* as a factor for awakening

becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

“(7) He oversees the mind thus concentrated with equanimity. When he oversees the mind thus concentrated with equanimity, *equanimity* as a factor for awakening becomes aroused. He develops it, and for him it goes to the culmination of its development.

“[Similarly with the other three frames of reference: feelings, mind, and mental qualities.]

“This is how the four frames of reference are developed and pursued so as to bring the seven factors for awakening to their culmination.

And how are the seven factors for awakening developed and pursued so as to bring clear knowing and release to their culmination? There is the case where a monk develops *mindfulness* as a factor for awakening dependent on seclusion... *dispassion*... *cessation*, resulting in relinquishment. He develops *analysis of qualities* as a factor for awakening... *persistence* as a factor for awakening... *rapture* as a factor for awakening... *serenity* as a factor for awakening... *concentration* as a factor for awakening... *equanimity* as a factor for awakening dependent on seclusion... *dispassion*... *cessation*, resulting in relinquishment.

“This is how the seven factors for awakening are developed and pursued so as to bring clear knowing and release to their culmination.”

#### [MN 118](#)

“[On attaining the fourth level of jhana] there remains only equanimity: pure and bright, pliant, malleable and luminous. Just as if a skilled goldsmith or goldsmith’s apprentice were to prepare a furnace, heat up a crucible, and, taking gold with a pair of tongs, place it in the crucible. He would blow on it periodically, sprinkle water on it periodically, examine it periodically, so that the gold would become refined, well-refined, thoroughly refined, flawless, free from dross, pliant, malleable and luminous. Then whatever sort of ornament he had in mind—whether a belt, an earring, a necklace, or a gold chain—it would serve his purpose. In the same way, there remains only equanimity: pure and bright, pliant, malleable, and luminous. He [the meditator] discerns: ‘If I were to direct equanimity as pure and bright as this toward the dimension

of the infinitude of space, I would develop the mind along those lines, and thus this equanimity of mine—thus supported, thus sustained—would last for a long time. [Similarly with the dimensions of the infinitude of consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception.]’

“He discerns that ‘If I were to direct equanimity as pure and bright as this toward the dimension of the infinitude of space and to develop the mind along those lines, that would be fabricated. [Similarly with the dimensions of the infinitude of consciousness, nothingness, and neither perception nor non-perception.]’ He neither fabricates nor wills for the sake of becoming or un-becoming. This being the case, he doesn’t cling to anything in the world. Not clinging, he isn’t agitated. Unagitated, he is totally unbound right within. He discerns that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’”

[MN 140](#)

## *Liberation*

“There is that dimension where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither sphere of the infinitude of space, nor sphere of the infinitude of consciousness, nor sphere of nothingness, nor sphere of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor stasis; neither passing away nor arising: without stance, without foundation, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress.”

[Ud 8:1](#)

Where water, earth, fire, and wind have no footing:  
There the stars do not shine,  
the sun is not visible,  
the moon does not appear,  
darkness is not found.

And when a sage, a worthy one, through sagacity  
has known (this) for himself,

then from form and formless,  
from pleasure and pain,  
he is freed.

*Ud 1:10*

Aggivessana Vacchagotta: “But, Master Gotama the monk whose mind is thus released: Where does he reappear?”

The Buddha: “‘Reappear,’ Vaccha, doesn’t apply.”

“In that case, Master Gotama, he does not reappear.’

“‘Does not reappear,’ Vaccha, doesn’t apply.’

“...both does and does not reappear.”

“...doesn’t apply.”

“...Neither does nor does not reappear.”

“...doesn’t apply.”....

“At this point, Master Gotama, I am befuddled; at this point, confused. The modicum of clarity coming to me from your earlier conversation is now obscured.”

“Of course you’re befuddled, Vaccha. Of course you’re confused. Deep, Vaccha, is this phenomenon, hard to see, hard to realize, tranquil, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be-experienced by the wise. For those with other views, other satisfactions, other aims, other teachers, it is difficult to know. That being the case, I will now cross-question to you. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, Vaccha: If a fire were burning in front of you, would you know that, ‘This fire is burning in front of me’?”

“...yes...”

“And suppose someone were to ask you, Vaccha, ‘This fire burning in front of you, dependent on what is it burning?’ Thus asked, how would you reply?”

“...I would reply, ‘This fire burning in front of me is burning dependent on grass and timber as its sustenance.’”

“If the fire burning in front of you were to go out, would you know that ‘This fire burning in front of me has gone out’?”

“...yes...”

“And suppose someone were to ask you, ‘This fire that has gone out in front of you, in which direction from here has it gone? East? West? North? Or south?’ Thus asked, how would you reply?”

“That doesn’t apply, Venerable Gotama. Any fire burning dependent on a sustenance of grass and timber, being unnourished—from having consumed that sustenance and not being offered any other—is classified simply as ‘out.’”

“Even so, Vaccha, any form by which one describing the Tathagata would describe him: That the Tathagata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of existence, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form, Vaccha, the Tathagata is deep, boundless, hard-to-fathom, like the sea. ‘Reappears’ doesn’t apply. ‘Does not reappear’ doesn’t apply. ‘Both does and does not reappear’ doesn’t apply. ‘Neither reappears nor does not reappear’ doesn’t apply.

“Any feeling.... Any perception.... Any fabrication....

“Any consciousness by which one describing the Tathagata would describe him: That the Tathagata has abandoned.... Freed from the classification of consciousness, Vaccha, the Tathagata is deep, boundless, hard-to-fathom, like the ocean.”

[MN 72](#)

## SANGHA

### *The Rewards of the Contemplative Life*

“There is the case where a Tathagata appears in the world, worthy and rightly self-awakened.... He teaches the Dhamma admirable in its beginning, admirable in its middle, admirable in its end. He proclaims the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely perfect and pure.

“A householder or householder’s son, hearing the Dhamma, gains conviction in the Tathagata and reflects: ‘Household life is confining, a dusty path. The life gone forth is like the open air. It’s not easy living at home to practice the holy life totally perfect, totally pure, like a polished shell. Suppose I were to go forth?’

“So after some time he abandons his mass of wealth, large or small; leaves his circle of relatives, large or small; shaves off his hair and beard, puts on the saffron robes, and goes forth from the household life into homelessness.

“When he has thus gone forth, he lives restrained by the rules of the monastic code, seeing danger in the slightest faults. Consummate in his virtue, he guards the doors of his senses, is possessed of mindfulness and alertness, and is content....

“Now, how does a monk guard the doors of his senses? On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at any theme or variations by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. [Similarly with the ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect.]

“And how is a monk possessed of mindfulness and alertness? When going forward and returning, he acts with alertness. When looking toward and looking away.... when bending and extending his limbs... when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe, and his bowl... when eating, drinking, chewing, and tasting... when urinating and defecating... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and remaining silent, he acts with alertness.

“And how is a monk content? Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden; so too is he content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms food to provide for his hunger. Wherever he goes, he takes only his barest necessities along.

“He seeks out a secluded dwelling: a forest, the shade of a tree, a mountain, a glen, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle grove, the open air, a heap of straw. After his meal, returning from his alms round, he sits down, crosses his legs, holds his body erect, and brings mindfulness to the fore. He purifies his mind from greed, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty. As long as these five hindrances are not abandoned within him, he regards it as a debt, a sickness, a prison, slavery, a road through desolate country. But when these five hindrances are abandoned within him, he regards it as unindebtedness, good health, release from prison, freedom, a place of security. Seeing that they have been abandoned within him, he becomes glad, enraptured, tranquil, sensitive to pleasure. Feeling pleasure, his mind becomes concentrated.

“Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, he enters and remains in the first jhana: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Just as if a skilled bathman or bathman’s apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without—would nevertheless not drip; even so, the monk permeates... this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. This is a reward of the contemplative life, visible here and now, more excellent than the previous ones and more sublime.

“Furthermore, with the stilling of directed thoughts and evaluations, he enters and remains in the second jhana: rapture and pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation—internal assurance. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of concentration. Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no

inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time and again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; even so, the monk permeates... this very body with the rapture and pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born of composure. This, too, is a reward of the contemplative life, visible here and now, more excellent than the previous ones and more sublime.

“And furthermore, with the fading of rapture, he remains equanimous, mindful, and alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters and remains in the third jhana, of which the noble ones declare, ‘Equanimous and mindful, he has a pleasant abiding.’ He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born and growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; even so, the monk permeates... this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture. This, too, is a reward of the contemplative life, visible here and now, more excellent than the previous ones and more sublime.

“And furthermore, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joy and distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; even so, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness. This, too, is a reward of the contemplative life, visible here and now, more excellent than the previous ones and more sublime....

“With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, he directs it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental effluents. Just as if there were a pool of water in a mountain glen—clear, limpid, and unsullied—where a

man with good eyesight standing on the bank could see shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also shoals of fish swimming about and resting, and it would occur to him, 'This pool of water is clear, limpid, and unsullied. Here are these shells, gravel, and pebbles, and also these shoals of fish swimming about and resting.' In the same way, the monk discerns, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress... These are mental effluents... This is the origination of effluents... This is the cessation of effluents... This is the way leading to the cessation of effluents.' His heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, is released from the effluents of sensuality, becoming, and ignorance. With release, there is the knowledge, 'Released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.' This, too, is a reward of the contemplative life, visible here and now, more excellent than the previous ones and more sublime. And as for another visible fruit of the contemplative life, higher and more sublime than this, there is none."

## [DN 2](#)

### *Aids to Awakening*

Then Ven. Assaji, arising early in the morning, taking his robe and bowl, entered Rajagaha for alms: gracious in the way he approached and departed, looked forward and behind, drew in and stretched out his arm; his eyes downcast, his every movement consummate. Sariputta the wanderer saw Ven. Assaji going for alms in Rajagaha: gracious... his eyes downcast, his every movement consummate. On seeing him, the thought occurred to him, "Surely, of those in this world who are arahants or have entered the path to arahantship, this is one. What if I were to approach him and question him: 'On whose account have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Of whose Dhamma do you approve?'"

But then the thought occurred to Sariputta the wanderer, "This is the wrong time to question him. He is going for alms in the town. What if I were to follow behind this monk who has found the path for those who seek it?"

Then Ven. Assaji, having gone for alms in Rajagaha, left, taking the alms he had received. Sariputta the wanderer approached him and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he stood to one side. As he was standing there he said, “Bright are your faculties, my friend, pure and clear your complexion. On whose account have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Of whose Dhamma do you approve?”

“There is, my friend, the Great Contemplative, a son of the Sakyans, gone forth from a Sakyan family. I have gone forth on account of that Blessed One. That Blessed One is my teacher. It is of that Blessed One’s Dhamma that I approve.”

“But what is your teacher’s teaching? What does he proclaim?”

“I am new, my friend, not long gone forth, only recently come to this doctrine and discipline. I cannot explain the doctrine in detail, but I can give you the gist in brief.”

Then Sariputta the wanderer spoke thus to the Ven. Assaji:

“Speak a little or a lot,  
but tell me just the gist.  
The gist is what I want.  
What use is a lot of verbosity?”

Then Ven. Assaji gave this Dhamma exposition to Sariputta the wanderer:

“Whatever phenomena arise from cause:  
their cause  
& their cessation.  
Such is the teaching of the Tathagata,  
the Great Contemplative.”

Then to Sariputta the wanderer, as he heard this Dhamma exposition, there arose the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye: *Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.*

[Mv I.23.5](#)

Then Mahapajapati Gotami [the first nun, and the Buddha's foster mother] approached the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down, stood to one side. As she was standing there, she said, "It would be good if the Blessed One would teach me the Dhamma in brief so that I, having heard the Dhamma, might dwell alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, and resolute."

"....Gotami, the qualities of which you may know, 'These qualities lead to dispassion, not to passion; to being unfettered and not to being fettered; to shedding and not to accumulation; to modesty and not to self-aggrandizement; to contentment and not to discontent; to seclusion and not to entanglement; to the arousing of persistence and not to laziness; to being unburdensome and not to being burdensome': You may categorically hold, 'This is the Dhamma, this is the Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction.'"

[According to the commentaries, Mahapajapati Gotami gained arahantship soon after receiving this instruction.]

[Cv X.5](#)

### *Sister Sona on Aging*

Ten children I bore  
from this physical heap.  
Then weak from that, aged,  
I went to a nun.

She taught me the Dhamma:  
aggregates, sense spheres, elements.  
Hearing the Dhamma,  
I cut off my hair and ordained.  
Having purified the divine eye  
while still a trainee,  
I know my previous lives,  
where I lived in the past.  
I develop the theme-less meditation:  
well-focused singleness.  
I gain the liberation of immediacy—

through lack of clinging, unbound.  
The five aggregates, comprehended,  
stand like a tree with its root cut through.  
I spit on old age.  
There is now no further becoming.

[Thig 5:8](#)

### *Ven. Punna on Death*

Ven. Punna: “Lord, I am going to live in the Sunaparanta country.”

The Buddha: “Punna, the Sunaparanta people are fierce. They are rough. If they insult and ridicule you, what will you think?”

“...I will think, ‘These Sunaparanta people are civilized, very civilized, in that they don’t hit me with their hands.’ That’s what I will think....”

“But if they hit you with their hands...?”

“...I will think, ‘These Sunaparanta people are civilized, very civilized, in that they don’t hit me with a clod’....”

“But if they hit you with a clod...?”

“...I will think, ‘These Sunaparanta people are civilized, very civilized, in that they don’t hit me with a stick’....”

“But if they hit you with a stick...?”

“...I will think, ‘These Sunaparanta people are civilized, very civilized, in that they don’t hit me with a knife’....”

“But if they hit you with a knife...?”

“...I will think, ‘These Sunaparanta people are civilized, very civilized, in that they don’t take my life with a sharp knife’....”

“But if they take your life with a sharp knife...?”

“...I will think, ‘There are disciples of the Blessed One who—horrified, humiliated, and disgusted by the body and by life—have sought for an assassin, but here I have met my assassin without searching for him.’ That’s what I will think....”

“Good, Punna, very good. Possessing such calm and self-control you are fit to dwell among the Sunaparantans. Now it is time to do as you see fit.”

Then Ven. Punna, delighting and rejoicing in the Blessed One's words, rising from his seat, bowed down to the Blessed One and left, keeping him to his right. Setting his dwelling in order and taking his robe and bowl, he set out for the Sunaparanta country and, after wandering stage by stage, he arrived there. There he lived. During that Rains retreat he established 500 male and 500 female lay followers in the practice, while he realized the three knowledges. At a later time, he attained total (final) Unbinding.

*MN 145*

### *Sister Patacara on Awakening*

Washing my feet, I noticed  
the  
water.  
And in watching it flow from high  
to  
low,  
my heart was composed  
like a fine thoroughbred steed.  
Then taking a lamp, I entered the hut,  
checked the bedding,  
sat down on the bed.  
And taking a pin, I pulled out the wick:  
Like the flame's unbinding  
was the liberation  
of awareness.

*Thig 5:10*

# III. Essays

## BUDDHA

### *The Meaning of the Buddha's Awakening*

The two crucial aspects of the Buddha's awakening are the *what* and the *how*: what he awakened to and how he did it. His awakening is special in that the two aspects come together. He awakened to the fact that there is an undying happiness, and that it can be attained through human effort. The human effort involved in this process ultimately focuses on the question of understanding the nature of human effort itself—in terms of skillful kamma and dependent co-arising—what its powers and limitations are, and what kind of right effort (i.e., the noble path) can take one beyond its limitations and bring one to the threshold of the Deathless.

As the Buddha described the awakening experience in one of his discourses, first there is the knowledge of the regularity of the Dhamma—which in this context means dependent co-arising—then there is the knowledge of nibbana. In other passages, he describes the three stages that led to insight into dependent co-arising: knowledge of his own previous lifetimes, knowledge of the passing away and rebirth of all living beings, and finally insight into the four noble truths. The first two forms of knowledge were not new with the Buddha. They have been reported by other seers throughout history, although the Buddha's insight into the second knowledge had a special twist: He saw that beings are reborn according to the ethical quality of their thoughts, words, and deeds, and that this quality is essentially a factor of the mind. The quality of one's views and intentions determines the experienced result of one's actions.

This insight had a double impact on his mind. On the one hand, it made him realize the futility of the round of rebirth—that even the best efforts aimed at winning pleasure and fulfillment within the round could

have only temporary effects. On the other hand, his realization of the importance of the mind in determining the round is what led him to focus directly on his own mind in the present to see how the processes in the mind that kept the round going could be disbanded. This was how he gained insight into the four noble truths and dependent co-arising—seeing how the aggregates that made up his sense of self-identity were also the impelling factors in the experience of the world at large, and how the whole show could be brought to cessation. With its cessation, there remained the unconditioned, which he also termed nibbana (Unbinding), consciousness without surface or feature, the Deathless.

When we address the question of how other “enlightenment” experiences recorded in world history relate to the Buddha’s, we have to keep in mind the Buddha’s own dictum: First there is the knowledge of dependent co-arising, then the knowledge of nibbana. Without the first knowledge—which includes not only an understanding of kamma, but also of how kamma leads to the understanding itself—then no matter how calm or boundless the realization, it can’t count as an awakening in the Buddhist sense. True awakening necessarily involves both ethics and insight into causality.

As for what the Buddha’s awakening means for us now, four points stand out.

1) The role that kamma plays in the awakening is empowering. It means that what each of us does, says, and thinks *does* matter—this, in opposition to the sense of futility that can come from reading, say, world history, geology, or astronomy, and realizing the fleeting nature of the entire human enterprise. The awakening lets us see that the choices we make in each moment of our lives are real, and that they produce real consequences. The fact that we are empowered also means that we are responsible for our experiences. We are not strangers in a strange land. We have formed and are continuing to form the world we experience. This helps us to face the events we encounter in life with greater equanimity, for we know that we had a hand in creating them. At the same time, we can avoid any debilitating sense of guilt because with each new choice we can always make a fresh start.

2) The awakening also tells us that good and bad are not mere social conventions but are built into the structure of experience. We may be free

to design our lives, but not to change the underlying rules that determine what good and bad actions are, and how the process of kamma works itself out. Thus cultural relativism—even though it may have paved the way for many of us to leave our earlier religious orientations and enter the Buddhist fold—has no place once we are within that fold. There are certain ways of acting that are inherently unskillful, and we are fools if we insist on our right to follow them.

3) As the Buddha says at one point in describing his awakening, “Ignorance was destroyed; knowledge arose; darkness was destroyed; light arose—as happens in one who is heedful, ardent, and resolute.” In other words, he gained liberating knowledge through qualities that we can all develop: heedfulness, ardency, resolution. If we are willing to face the implications of this fact, we realize that the Buddha’s awakening is a challenge to our entire set of values. The fact that the Unconditioned can be attained forces us to re-evaluate any other goals we may set for ourselves, any worlds we may want to create in our lives. On an obvious level, it points out the spiritual poverty of a life devoted to wealth, status, or sensual pursuits; but it also forces us to take a hard look at other more “worthwhile” goals that our culture and its sub-cultures tend to exalt, such as social acceptance, meaningful relationships, stewardship of the planet, etc. These, too, will inevitably lead to suffering. The interdependence of all things cannot be, for any truly sensitive mind, a source of security or comfort. If the Unconditioned is available, and it’s the only trustworthy happiness around, the most sensible course is to invest our efforts and whatever mental and spiritual resources we have in its direction.

4) Even for those who are not ready to make that kind of investment, the awakening assures us that happiness comes from developing qualities within ourselves that we can be proud of, such as kindness, sensitivity, equanimity, mindfulness, conviction, determination, and discernment. Again, this is a very different message from the one we pick up from the world telling us that in order to gain happiness we have to develop qualities we can’t take any genuine pride in: aggressiveness, self-aggrandizement, dishonesty, etc. Just this much can give an entirely new orientation to our lives and our ideas of what is worthwhile investment of our time and efforts.

The news of the Buddha's awakening sets the standards for judging the culture we were brought up in, and not the other way around. This is not a question of choosing Asian culture over American. The Buddha's awakening challenged many of the presuppositions of Indian culture in his day; and even in so-called Buddhist countries, the true practice of the Buddha's teachings is always counter-cultural. It's a question of evaluating our normal concerns—conditioned by time, space, and the limitations of aging, illness, and death—against the possibility of a timeless, spaceless, limitless happiness. All cultures are tied up in the limited, conditioned side of things, while the Buddha's awakening points beyond all cultures. It offers the challenge of the Deathless that his contemporaries found liberating and that we, if we are willing to accept the challenge, may find liberating ourselves.

## DHAMMA

### *Life Isn't Just Suffering*

You've probably heard the rumor that Buddhism is pessimistic, that "Life is suffering" is the Buddha's first noble truth. It's a rumor with good credentials, spread by well-respected academics and meditation teachers alike, but a rumor nonetheless. The real truth about the noble truths is far more interesting. The Buddha taught four truths—not one—about life: There is suffering, there is a cause for suffering, there is an end of suffering, and there is a path of practice that puts an end to suffering. These truths, taken as a whole, are far from pessimistic. They're a practical, problem-solving approach—the way a doctor approaches an illness, or a mechanic a faulty engine. You identify a problem and look for its cause. You then put an end to the problem by eliminating the cause.

What's special about the Buddha's approach is that the problem he attacks is the whole of human suffering, and the solution he offers is something human beings can do for themselves. Just as a doctor with a surefire cure for measles isn't afraid of measles, the Buddha isn't afraid of any aspect of human suffering. And, having experienced a happiness that's totally unconditional, he's not afraid to point out the suffering and stress inherent in places where most of us would rather not see it—in the conditioned pleasures we cling to. He teaches us not to deny that suffering and stress, or to run away from it, but to stand still and face up to it. To examine it carefully. That way—by understanding it—we can ferret out its cause and put an end to it. Totally. How confident can you get?

A fair number of writers have pointed out the basic confidence inherent in the four noble truths, and yet the rumor of Buddhism's pessimism persists. I wonder why. One possible explanation is that, in coming to Buddhism, we sub-consciously expect it to address issues that have a long history in our own culture. By starting out with suffering as his first truth, the Buddha seems to be offering his position on a question with a long history in the West: is the world basically good or bad?

According to Genesis, this was the first question that occurred to God after he had finished his creation: had he done a good job? So he looked at the world and saw that it was good. Ever since then, people in the West have sided with or against God on his answer, but in doing so they have affirmed that the question was worth asking to begin with. When Theravada—the only form of Buddhism to take on Christianity when Europe colonized Asia—was looking for ways to head off what it saw as the missionary menace, Buddhists who had received their education from the missionaries assumed that the question was valid and pressed the first noble truth into service as a refutation of the Christian God: Look at how miserable life is, they said, and it's hard to accept God's verdict on his handiwork.

This debating strategy may have scored a few points at the time, and it's easy to find Buddhist apologists who—still living in the colonial past—keep trying to score the same points. The real issue, though, is whether the Buddha intended for his first noble truth to be an answer to God's question in the first place and—more importantly—whether we're getting the most out of the first noble truth if we see it in that light.

It's hard to imagine what you could accomplish by saying that life is suffering. You'd have to spend your time arguing with people who see more than just suffering in life. The Buddha himself says as much in one of his discourses. A brahman named Long-nails (Dighanakha) comes to him and announces that he doesn't approve of anything. This would have been a perfect time for the Buddha, if he had wanted, to chime in with the truth that life is suffering. Instead, he attacks the whole notion of taking a stand on whether life is worthy of approval. There are three possible answers to this question: (1) nothing is worthy of approval, (2) everything is, and (3) some things are and some things aren't. If you take any of these three positions, you end up arguing with the people who take either of the other two positions. And where does that get you?

The Buddha then teaches Long-nails to look at his body and feelings as instances of the first noble truth: they're stressful, inconstant, and don't deserve to be clung to as self. Long-nails follows the Buddha's instructions and, in letting go of his attachment to body and feelings, gains his first glimpse of the Deathless, of what it's like to be totally free from suffering.

The point of this story is that trying to answer God's question, passing judgment on the world, is a waste of time. And it offers a better use for the first noble truth: looking at things, not in terms of "world" or "life," but simply identifying suffering so that you can comprehend it, let it go, and attain release. Rather than asking us to make a blanket judgment—which, in effect, would be asking us to be blind partisans—the first noble truth asks us to look and see precisely where the problem of suffering lies.

Other discourses make the point that the problem isn't with body and feelings in and of themselves. They themselves aren't suffering. The suffering lies in clinging to them. In his definition of the first noble truth, the Buddha summarizes all types of suffering under the phrase, "the five aggregates of clinging": clinging to physical form (including the body), feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness. However, when the five aggregates are free from clinging, he tells us, they lead to long-term benefit and happiness. Of course, by "happiness" he isn't here referring to the arts, food, travel, sports, family life, or any of the other sections of the Sunday newspaper. He's talking about the solid well-being that comes when we treat the aggregates as factors in the path to the Deathless. The aggregates in themselves are neutral. The role they play in leading to true happiness or suffering lies in whether or not we cling.

So the first noble truth, simply put, is that *clinging* is suffering. It's because of clinging that physical pain becomes mental pain. It's because of clinging that aging, illness, and death cause mental distress. How do we cling? The texts list four ways: the clinging of sensual passion, the clinging of views, the clinging of precepts and practices, and the clinging of doctrines of the self. It's rare that a moment passes in the ordinary mind without some form of clinging. Even when we abandon a particular form of clinging, it's usually because it gets in the way of another form. We may abandon a puritanical view because it interferes with sensual pleasure; or a sensual pleasure because it conflicts with a view about what we should do to stay healthy. Our views of who we are may expand and contract depending on which of our many senses of "I" is feeling the most pain, expanding into a sense of cosmic oneness when we feel confined by the limitations of our small mind-body complex, shrinking into a small shell when we feel wounded from identifying with a cosmos so filled with cruelty, thoughtlessness, and waste. When the insignificance of our finite

self becomes oppressive again, we may jump at the idea that we have no self, but then *that* becomes oppressive.

So our minds jump from clinging to clinging like a bird trapped in a cage. And when we realize we're captive, we naturally search for a way out. This is where it's so important that the first noble truth *not* say that "Life is suffering," for if life were suffering, where would we look for an end to suffering? We'd be left with nothing but death and annihilation. But when the actual truth is that clinging is suffering, we simply have to look to see precisely where clinging is and learn not to cling.

This is where we encounter the Buddha's great skill as a strategist: He tells us to take the clingings we'll have to abandon and transform them into the path to their abandoning. We'll need a certain amount of sensory pleasure—in terms of adequate food, clothing, and shelter—to find the strength to go beyond sensual passion. We'll need right view—seeing all things, including views, in terms of the four noble truths—to undermine our clinging to views. And we'll need a regimen of the five ethical precepts and the practice of meditation to put the mind in a solid position where it can drop its clinging to precepts and practices. Underlying all this, we'll need a strong sense of self-responsibility and self-discipline to master the practices leading to the insight that cuts through our clinging to doctrines of the self.

So we start the path to the end of suffering, not by trying to drop our clingings immediately, but by learning to cling more strategically. In other words, we start where we are and make the best use of the habits we've already got. We progress along the path by finding better and better things to cling to, and more skillful ways to cling, in the same way you climb a ladder to the top of a roof: grab hold of a higher rung so that you can let go of a lower rung, and then grab onto a rung still higher. As the rungs get further off the ground, you find that the mind grows clearer and can see precisely where its clingings are. It gets a sharper sense of which parts of experience belong to which noble truth and what should be done with them: the parts that are suffering should be comprehended, the parts that cause of suffering—craving and ignorance—should be abandoned; the parts that form the path to the end of suffering should be developed; and the parts that belong to the end of suffering should be verified. This helps you get higher and higher on the ladder until you find

yourself securely on the roof. That's when you can finally let go of the ladder and be totally free.

So the real question we face isn't God's question, passing judgment on how skillfully he created life or the world. It's *our* question: how skillfully are we handling the raw stuff of life? Are we clinging in ways that serve only to continue the round of suffering, or are we learning to cling in ways that will reduce suffering so that ultimately we can grow up and won't have to cling. If we negotiate life armed with all four noble truths, realizing that life contains both suffering and an end to suffering, there's hope: hope that we'll be able to sort out which parts of life belong to which truth; hope that someday, in this life, we'll come to the point where we agree with the Buddha, "Oh. Yes. This is the end of suffering and stress."

### *No-self or Not-self?*

One of the first stumbling blocks that Westerners often encounter when they learn about Buddhism is the teaching on *anatta*, often translated as no-self. This teaching is a stumbling block for two reasons. First, the idea of there being no self doesn't fit well with other Buddhist teachings, such as the doctrine of kamma and rebirth: If there's no self, what experiences the results of kamma and takes rebirth? Second, it doesn't fit well with our own Judeo-Christian background, which assumes the existence of an eternal soul or self as a basic presupposition: If there's no self, what's the purpose of a spiritual life? Many books try to answer these questions, but if you look at the Pali Canon—the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—you won't find them addressed at all. In fact, the one place where the Buddha was asked point-blank whether or not there was a self, he refused to answer. When later asked why, he said that to hold either that there is a self or that there is no self is to fall into extreme forms of wrong view that make the path of Buddhist practice impossible. Thus the question should be put aside. To understand what his silence on this question says about the meaning of *anatta*, we first have to look at his teachings on how questions should be asked and answered, and how to interpret his answers.

The Buddha divided all questions into four classes: those that deserve a categorical (straight yes or no) answer; those that deserve an analytical answer, defining and qualifying the terms of the question; those that deserve a counter-question, putting the ball back in the questioner's court; and those that deserve to be put aside. The last class of question consists of those that don't lead to the end of suffering and stress. The first duty of a teacher, when asked a question, is to figure out which class the question belongs to, and then to respond in the appropriate way. You don't, for example, say Yes or No to a question that should be put aside. If you are the person asking the question and you get an answer, you should then determine how far the answer should be interpreted. The Buddha said that there are two types of people who misrepresent him: those who draw inferences from statements that shouldn't have inferences drawn from them, and those who don't draw inferences from those that should.

These are the basic ground rules for interpreting the Buddha's teachings, but if we look at the way most writers treat the anatta doctrine, we find these ground rules ignored. Some writers try to qualify the no-self interpretation by saying that the Buddha denied the existence of an *eternal* self or a *separate* self, but this is to give an analytical answer to a question that the Buddha showed should be put aside. Others try to draw inferences from the few statements in the discourse that seem to imply that there is no self, but it seems safe to assume that if one forces those statements to give an answer to a question that should be put aside, one is drawing inferences where they shouldn't be drawn.

So, instead of answering No to the question of whether or not there is a self—interconnected or separate, eternal or not—the Buddha felt that the question was misguided to begin with. Why? No matter how you define the line between “self” and “other,” the notion of self involves an element of self-identification and clinging, and thus suffering and stress. This holds as much for an interconnected self, which recognizes no “other,” as it does for a separate self. If one identifies with all of nature, one is pained by every felled tree. It also holds for an entirely “other” universe, in which the sense of alienation and futility would become so debilitating as to make the quest for happiness—one's own or that of others—impossible. For these reasons, the Buddha advised paying no attention to such

questions as “Do I exist?” or “Don’t I exist?” for however you answer them, they lead to suffering and stress.

To avoid the suffering implicit in questions of “self” and “other,” he offered an alternative way of dividing up experience: the four noble truths of stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Rather than viewing these truths as pertaining to self or other, he said, one should recognize them simply for what they are, in and of themselves, as they are directly experienced, and then perform the duty appropriate to each. Stress should be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. These duties form the context in which the anatta doctrine is best understood. If you develop the path of virtue, concentration, and discernment to a state of calm well-being and use that calm state to look at experience in terms of the noble truths, the questions that occur to the mind are not “Is there a self? What is my self?” but rather “Am I suffering stress because I’m holding onto this particular phenomenon? Is it really me, myself, or mine? If it’s stressful but not really me or mine, why hold on?” These last questions merit straightforward answers, as they then help you to comprehend stress and to chip away at the attachment and clinging—the residual sense of self-identification—that cause it, until ultimately all traces of self-identification are gone, and all that’s left is limitless freedom.

In this sense, the anatta teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness. At that point, questions of self, no-self, and not-self fall aside. Once there’s the experience of such total freedom, where would there be any concern about what’s experiencing it, or whether or not it’s a self?

## *Nibbana*

We all know what happens when a fire goes out. The flames die down and the fire is gone for good. So when we first learn that the name for the goal of Buddhist practice, nibbana (nirvana), literally means the extinguishing of a fire, it’s hard to imagine a deadlier image for a spiritual goal: utter annihilation. It turns out, though, that this reading of the concept is a mistake in translation, not so much of a word as of an image.

What did an extinguished fire represent to the Indians of the Buddha's day? Anything but annihilation.

According to the ancient Brahmins, when a fire was extinguished it went into a state of latency. Rather than ceasing to exist, it became dormant and, in that state—unbound from any particular fuel—was diffused throughout the cosmos. When the Buddha used the image to explain nibbana to the Indian Brahmins of his day, he bypassed the question of whether an extinguished fire continues to exist or not, and focused instead on the impossibility of defining a fire that doesn't burn: thus his statement that the person who has gone totally "out" can't be described.

However, when teaching his own disciples, the Buddha used nibbana more as an image of freedom. Apparently, all Indians at the time saw burning fire as agitated, dependent, and trapped, both clinging and being stuck to its fuel as it burned. To ignite a fire, one had to "seize" it. When fire let go of its fuel, it was "freed," released from its agitation, dependence, and entrapment—calm and unconfined. This is why Pali poetry repeatedly uses the image of extinguished fire as a metaphor for freedom. In fact, this metaphor is part of a pattern of fire imagery that involves two other related terms as well. *Upadana*, or clinging, also refers to the sustenance a fire takes from its fuel. *Khandha* means not only one of the five "heaps" (form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness) that define all conditioned experience, but also the trunk of a tree. Just as fire goes out when it stops clinging and taking sustenance from wood, so the mind is freed when it stops clinging to the khandhas.

Thus the image underlying nibbana is one of freedom. The Pali commentaries support this point by tracing the word nibbana to a verbal root that means "unbinding." What kind of unbinding? The texts describe two levels. One is the unbinding in this lifetime, symbolized by a fire that has gone out but whose embers are still warm. This stands for the enlightened arahant, who is conscious of sights and sounds, sensitive to pleasure and pain, but freed from passion, aversion, and delusion. The second level of unbinding, symbolized by a fire so totally out that its embers have grown cold, is what the arahant experiences after this life. All input from the senses cools away, and he/she is totally freed from even the

subtlest stresses and limitations of existence or non-existence in space and time.

The Buddha insists that this level is indescribable, even in terms of existence or nonexistence, because words work only for things that have limits. All he really says about it—apart from images and metaphors—is that one can have foretastes of the experience in this lifetime, and that it's the ultimate happiness, something truly worth knowing.

So the next time you watch a fire going out, see it not as a case of annihilation, but as a lesson in how freedom is to be found in letting go.

## SANGHA

### *The Economy of Gifts*

According to the Buddhist monastic code, monks and nuns are not allowed to accept money or even to engage in barter or trade with lay people. They live entirely in an economy of gifts. Lay supporters provide gifts of material requisites for the monastics, while the monastics provide their supporters with the gift of the teaching. Ideally—and to a great extent in actual practice—this is an exchange that comes from the heart, something totally voluntary. There are many stories in the texts that emphasize the point that returns in this economy—it might also be called an economy of merit—depend not on the material value of the object given, but on the purity of heart of the donor and recipient. You give what is appropriate to the occasion and to your means, when and wherever your heart feels inspired. For the monastics, this means that you teach, out of compassion, what should be taught, regardless of whether it will sell. For the laity, this means that you give what you have to spare and feel inclined to share. There is no price for the teachings, nor even a “suggested donation.” Anyone who regards the act of teaching or the act of giving requisites as a repayment for a particular favor is ridiculed as mercenary. Instead, you give because giving is good for the heart and because the survival of the Dhamma as a living principle depends on daily acts of generosity.

The primary symbol of this economy is the alms bowl. If you are a monastic, it represents your dependence on others, your need to accept generosity no matter what form it takes. You may not get what you want in the bowl, but you realize that you always get what you need, even if it's a hard-earned lesson in doing without. One of my students in Thailand once went to the mountains in the northern part of the country to practice in solitude. His hillside shack was an ideal place to meditate, but he had to depend on a nearby hilltribe village for alms, and the diet was mostly plain rice with some occasional boiled vegetables. After two months on this diet, his meditation theme became the conflict in his mind over whether he should go or stay. One rainy morning, as he was on

his alms round, he came to a shack just as the morning rice was ready. The wife of the house called out, asking him to wait while she got some rice from the pot. As he was waiting there in the pouring rain, he couldn't help grumbling inwardly about the fact that there would be nothing to go with the rice. It so happened that the woman had an infant son who was sitting near the kitchen fire, crying from hunger. So as she scooped some rice out of the pot, she stuck a small lump of rice in his mouth. Immediately, the boy stopped crying and began to grin. My student saw this, and it was like a light bulb turning on in his head. "Here you are, complaining about what people are giving you for free," he told himself. "You're no match for a little kid. If he can be happy with just a lump of rice, why can't you?" As a result, the lesson that came with his scoop of rice that day gave my student the strength he needed to stay on in the mountains for another three years.

For a monastic the bowl also represents the opportunity you give others to practice the Dhamma in accordance with their means. In Thailand, this is reflected in one of the idioms used to describe going for alms: *proad sat*, doing a favor for living beings. There were times on my alms round in rural Thailand when, as I walked past a tiny grass shack, someone would come running out to put rice in my bowl. Years earlier, as lay person, my reaction on seeing such a bare, tiny shack would have been to want to give monetary help to them. But now I was on the receiving end of *their* generosity. In my new position I may have been doing less for them in material terms than I could have done as a lay person, but at least I was giving them the opportunity to have the dignity that comes with being a donor.

For the donors, the monk's alms bowl becomes a symbol of the good they have done. On several occasions in Thailand people would tell me that they had dreamed of a monk standing before them, opening the lid to his bowl. The details would differ as to what the dreamer saw in the bowl, but in each case the interpretation of the dream was the same: the dreamer's merit was about to bear fruit in an especially positive way.

The alms round itself is also a gift that goes both ways. On the one hand, daily contact with lay donors reminds the monastics that their practice is not just an individual matter, but a concern of the entire community. They are indebted to others for the right and opportunity to

practice, and should do their best to practice diligently as a way of repaying that debt. At the same time, the opportunity to walk through a village early in the morning, passing by the houses of the rich and poor, the happy and unhappy, gives plenty of opportunities to reflect on the human condition and the need to find a way out of the grinding cycle of death and rebirth.

For the donors, the alms round is a reminder that the monetary economy is not the only way to happiness. It helps to keep a society sane when there are monastics infiltrating the towns every morning, embodying an ethos very different from the dominant monetary economy. The gently subversive quality of this custom helps people to keep their values straight.

Above all, the economy of gifts symbolized by the alms bowl and the alms round allows for specialization, a division of labor, from which both sides benefit. Those who are willing can give up many of the privileges of home life and in return receive the free time, the basic support, and the communal training needed to devote themselves fully to Dhamma practice. Those who stay at home can benefit from having full-time Dhamma practitioners around on a daily basis.

I have always found it ironic that the modern world honors specialization in almost every area—even in things like running, jumping, and throwing a ball—but not in the Dhamma, where it is denounced as “dualism,” “elitism,” or worse. The Buddha began the monastic order on the first day of his teaching career because he saw the benefits that come with specialization. Without it, the practice tends to become limited and diluted, negotiated into the demands of the monetary economy. The Dhamma becomes limited to what will sell and what will fit into a schedule dictated by the demands of family and job. In this sort of situation, everyone ends up poorer in things of the heart.

The fact that tangible goods run only one way in the economy of gifts means that the exchange is open to all sorts of abuses. This is why there are so many rules in the monastic code to keep the monastics from taking unfair advantage of the generosity of lay donors. There are rules against asking for donations in inappropriate circumstances, from making claims as to one’s spiritual attainments, and even from covering up the good foods in one’s bowl with rice, in hopes that donors will then feel inclined

to provide something more substantial. Most of the rules, in fact, were instituted at the request of lay supporters or in response to their complaints. They had made their investment in the merit economy and were interested in protecting their investment.

This observation applies not only to ancient India, but also to the modern-day West. On their first contact with the Sangha, most people tend to see little reason for the disciplinary rules, and regard them as quaint holdovers from ancient Indian prejudices. When, however, they come to see the rules in the context of the economy of gifts and begin to participate in that economy themselves, they also tend to become avid advocates of the rules and active protectors of “their” monastics. The arrangement may limit the freedom of the monastics in certain ways, but it means that the lay supporters take an active interest not only in what the monastic teaches, but also in how the monastic lives—a useful safeguard to make sure that teachers walk their talk. This, again, insures that the practice remains a communal concern. As the Buddha said,

“Monks, householders are very helpful to you, as they provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicine. And you, monks, are very helpful to householders, as you teach them the Dhamma admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, and admirable in the end, as you expound the holy life both in its particulars and in its essence, entirely complete, surpassingly pure. In this way the holy life is lived in mutual dependence, for the purpose of crossing over the flood, for making a right end to suffering and stress.”

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Periodically, throughout the history of Buddhism, the economy of gifts has broken down, usually when one side or the other gets fixated on the tangible side of the exchange and forgets the qualities of the heart that are its reason for being. And periodically it has been revived when people are sensitive to its rewards in terms of the living Dhamma. By its very nature, the economy of gifts is something of a hothouse creation that requires careful nurture and a sensitive discernment of its benefits. I find it amazing that such an economy has lasted for more than 2,600

years. It will never be more than an alternative to the dominant monetary economy, largely because its rewards are so intangible and require so much patience, trust, and discipline in order to be appreciated.

Those who demand immediate return for specific services and goods will always require a monetary system. Sincere Buddhist lay people, however, have the chance to play an amphibious role, engaging in the monetary economy in order to maintain their livelihood, and contributing to the economy of gifts whenever they feel so inclined. In this way they can maintain direct contact with teachers, insuring the best possible instruction for their own practice, in an atmosphere where mutual compassion and concern are the medium of exchange, and purity of heart the bottom line.

## SUMMARY

### *A Refuge in Skillful Action*

Is human action real or illusory? If real, is it effective? If it is effective, does one have a choice in what one does? If one has a choice, can one choose to act in a way that will lead to genuine happiness? If so, what is that way? These are questions that lie at the heart of the way we conduct our lives. The way we answer them will determine whether we look for happiness through our own abilities, seek happiness through outside help, or abandon the quest for a higher-than-ordinary happiness altogether.

These questions were precisely the ones that led Siddhattha Gotama—the Bodhisatta, or Buddha-to-be—to undertake his quest for awakening. He felt that there was no honor, no value in life, if true happiness could not be found through one's own efforts. Thus he put his life on the line to see how far human effort could go. Eventually he found that effort, skillfully applied, could lead to an awakening to the Deathless. The lessons he learned about action and effort in the course of developing that skill, and which were confirmed by the experience of his awakening, formed the basis of his doctrine of kamma (in Sanskrit: *karma*). This doctrine lies at the heart of his teaching, and forms the essence of the Triple Refuge. Put briefly, it states that action is real, effective, and the result of one's own choice. If one chooses to act skillfully and works to develop that skill, one's actions can lead to happiness, not only on the ordinary sensory level, but also on a level that transcends all the dimensions of time and the present. To understand this doctrine and get a sense of its full implications, we must first have some background on how the Buddha arrived at it. This will help us to see how kamma can act as a refuge, and what kind of refuge it provides.

## BACKGROUND

People often believe that the Buddha simply picked up the doctrine of kamma from his environment, but nothing could be further from the

truth. Northern India at his time was a place of great intellectual activity, and—as science made new advances and called many of the old, established beliefs into question—all of the great philosophical and religious issues of human life were up for grabs. The foremost science at that time was astronomy. New, precise observations of planetary movements, combined with new advances in mathematics, had led astronomers to conclude that time was measured in eons, incomprehensibly long cycles that repeat themselves endlessly. Philosophers of the time tried to work out the implications of this vast temporal frame for the drama of human life and the quest for ultimate happiness. These philosophers fell into two broad camps: those who conducted their speculations within the traditions of the Vedas, orthodox religious and ritual texts; and other, unorthodox groups, called the Samanas (contemplatives), who questioned the authority of the Vedas.

By the time of Siddhattha Gotama, philosophers of the Vedic and Samana schools had developed widely differing views of the laws of nature and how they affected the pursuit of true happiness. Their main points of disagreement were two:

1) *Personal identity*. Most Vedic and Samana philosophers assumed that a person's identity extended beyond this lifetime, eons before birth back into the past, and after death on into the future. There was some disagreement, however, as to whether one's identity from life to life would change or remain the same. The Vedas had viewed rebirth in a positive light, but by the time of Prince Siddhattha the influence of the newly discovered astronomical cycles had led those who believed in rebirth to regard the cycles as pointless and confining, and release as the only possibility for true happiness. There was, however, a Samana school of hedonist materialists, called Lokayatans, who denied the existence of any identity beyond death and insisted that happiness could be found only by indulging in sensual pleasures here and now.

2) *Action and causality*. The ancient Vedas had formulated a doctrine of kamma, or action, which stated that correctly performed actions played a causal role in providing for one's happiness in the life after death. The primary actions recognized by these texts, though, were ritualistic: ritually performed sacrifices, often involving the slaughter of animals, and gifts to priests. To be effective, the ritual actions had to be correctly

performed. This concern for correct performance led the Vedists to compose ritual manuals prescribing in minute detail the proper things to do and say in the course of their rituals. They even included special chants and spells to compensate for any inadvertent mistakes in the course of a particular ritual, so great was their conviction that the quality of an act depend on its physical expression.

The Samana schools rejected the Vedic teachings on kamma, but for a variety of different reasons. One set of Samana schools, called the Ajivakas, asserted that an individual's actions were not in the least bit responsible for the course of his/her life. One branch of the Ajivakas taught that all action in the cosmos is illusory, as the only truly existing things are the unchanging substances of which the cosmos is made. Thus there is no such thing as right or wrong, good or evil, for in the ultimate sense there is no such thing as action.

Another branch of the Ajivakas taught that action was real but totally subject to fate: deterministic causal laws that left no room for free will. Thus they insisted that release from the round of rebirth came only when the round worked itself out. Peace of mind could be found by accepting one's fate and patiently waiting for the cycle, like a ball of string unwinding, to come to its end. Although these two positions derived from two very different pictures of the cosmos, they both led to the same conclusion: Good and evil were illusory social conventions, human beings were not responsible for their acts, and human action had no role in shaping one's experience of the cosmos.

The Lokayatans came to a similar conclusion, but for different reasons. They agreed with the Vedists that physical action was real but they maintained that it bore no results. There was no way to observe any invariable cause-effect relationship between events, they said; as a result, all events were spontaneous and self-caused. This meant that human actions had no consequences, and thus there were no such things as good and evil because no action could have a good or evil effect on anything else. They concluded that one could safely ignore moral rules in one's pursuit of sensual pleasure, and would be a fool to deny oneself immediate gratification of one's desires whenever the opportunity appeared.

Another school, the Jains, accepted the Vedic premise that one's actions shaped one's experience of the cosmos, but they differed from the Vedas in the way they conceived of action. All action, according to them, was a form of violence. The more violent the act, the more it produced effluents, conceived as sticky substances that bound the soul to the round of rebirth. Thus they rejected the Vedic assertion that ritual sacrifice produced good kamma, for the violence involved in killing the sacrificial animals was actually a form of very sticky bad kamma. In their eyes, the only way to true happiness was to escape the round of kamma entirely. This was to be done by violence against themselves: various forms of self-torture that were supposed to burn away the effluents, the "heat" of pain being a sign that the effluents were burning. At the same time, they tried to create as little new kamma as possible. This practice would culminate in total abstinence from physical action, resulting in suicide by starvation, the theory being that if old kamma were completely burned away, and no new kamma created, there would be no more effluents to bind the soul to the cosmos. Thus the soul would be released.

Despite the differences between the Vedic and Jain views of action, they shared some important similarities: Both believed that the physical performance of an action, rather than the mental attitude behind it, determined its kammic result. And, both saw kamma as acting under deterministic, linear laws. Kamma performed in the present would not bear fruit until the future, and the relationship between a particular action and its result was predictable and fixed.

These divergent viewpoints on the nature of action formed the backdrop for the Bodhisatta's quest for ultimate happiness. On the one side stood the Ajivakas and Lokayatans, who insisted for various reasons that human action was ineffective: either non-existent, chaotic, or totally pre-determined. On the other side stood the Vedic and Jain thinkers, who taught that physical action was effective, but that it was subject to deterministic and linear laws, and could not lead to true happiness beyond the round of rebirth. The Buddha's position on kamma broke from both sides of the issue, largely because he approached the question from a radically new direction.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF SKILLFUL ACTION

Instead of arguing from abstract science, the Bodhisatta focused directly on the level of immediate experience and explored the implications of truths that both sides overlooked. Instead of fixing on the content of the views expressed, he considered the actions of those who were expressing the views. If views of determinism and total chaos were followed to their logical end, there would be no point in purposeful action, and yet the proponents of both theories continued to act in purposeful ways. If only physical acts bore consequences, there would be no point in teaching a proper understanding of the nature of action—for the mental act of understanding, right or wrong, would have no consequences—and yet all sides agreed that it was important to understand reality in the right way. The fact that each side insisted that the other used unskillful forms of observation and argumentation to advance its views implied that mental skills were crucial in determining the truth. Thus the Bodhisatta looked directly at skillful mental action in and of itself, followed its implications in developing knowledge itself as a skill—rather than as a body of facts—and found that those implications carried him all the way to release.

The most basic lesson he learned was that mental skills can be developed. As one of the Pali discourses notes, he found that thoughts imbued with passion, aversion, and delusion were harmful; thoughts devoid of these qualities were not harmful; and he could shepherd his thoughts in such a way to avoid harm. The fact that he could develop this skill meant that mental action is not illusory, that it actually gives results. Otherwise, there would be no such thing as skill, for no actions would be more effective than others. The fact of skillfulness also implies that some results are preferable to others, for otherwise there would be no point in trying to develop skills. In addition, the fact that it is possible to learn from mistakes in the course of developing a skill—so that one's future actions may be more skillful—implies that the cycle of action, result, and reaction is not entirely deterministic. Acts of perception, attention, and intention can actually provide new input as the cycle goes through successive turns.

The important element in this input is attention. Anyone who has mastered a skill will realize that the process of attaining mastery requires attention to three things: (1) to pre-existing conditions, (2) to what one is

doing in relation to those conditions, and (3) to the results that come from one's actions. This threefold focus enables one to monitor one's actions and adjust them accordingly. In this way, attention to conditions, actions, and effects allows the results of an action to feed back into future action, thus allowing for refinement in one's skill.

In the first stage of his practice, the Bodhisatta refined the skillfulness of his mind until it reached a state of jhana, or concentrated mental absorption, marked by perfect equanimity and mindfulness. The question that occurred at that point was how much further the principle of skillful action could be applied. Did intentional action directly or indirectly explain all experience in the world, or only some of it? If all of it, could the same principle be used to gain escape from the suffering inherent in the world, or were the Jains right in saying that action could only keep one bound to the cycle of suffering?

As the texts tell us, the Bodhisatta's first attempt to answer these questions was to direct his mind—now stable, bright, clear, and malleable—to knowledge of previous lifetimes. If it were true that he had been born before, his actions from past lives might explain experiences in this life—such as the circumstances into which he was born—for which no actions in this life could account. He found that he could indeed remember previous lives, many thousands of them: what he had been born as, where, what his experience of pleasure and pain, how he had died and then experienced rebirth as something else.

This first insight, however, did not fully answer his question. He needed to know if kamma was indeed the principle that shaped life, not only in terms of the narrative of his own lives, but also as a cosmic principle effecting the lives of all beings. So he directed his mind to knowledge of the passing away and arising of beings throughout the cosmos, and found that he could indeed see beings dying and gaining rebirth, that the pleasure and pain of their new lives was shaped by the quality of their kamma, and the kamma in turn was dependent on the views that gave rise to it. Right views—believing that good kamma, based on skillful intentions, gave rise to happiness—lay behind good kamma, while wrong views—not believing these principles—lay behind bad.

Even this second insight, however, didn't fully answer his question. To begin with, there was no guarantee that the visions providing this

knowledge were true or complete. And, even if they were, they did not tell whether there was a form of right view that would underlie a level of skillful kamma that would lead, not simply to a pleasant rebirth within the cycle of rebirth, but to release from the cycle altogether.

Here was where the Bodhisatta turned to look again at the events in the mind, in and of themselves in the present, and in particular at the process of developing of skillfulness, to see if it offered any clues as to what a right view leading out of the cycle of rebirth might be. As we noted above, the process of skillfulness implies two things: a non-linear principle of cause and effect, involving feedback loops to allow for greater skillfulness; and the fact that some results are preferable to others. The Bodhisatta used these principles, in their most basic form, to divide experience into four categories based on two sets of variables: cause and effect on one hand, and stress and its cessation on the other. He then dropped the categories in which the first two knowledges had been expressed. In other words, he dropped the sense of “self” and “others” in which the narrative of the first knowledge had been expressed; and the sense of “beings” inhabiting a “world” in which the cosmology of the second knowledge had been expressed. In his place, he analyzed experience in categories empty of those concepts, simply in terms of the direct experience of stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path of mental factors leading to its cessation.

In the first round of this new insight, he was able to identify each of these categories: stress, in ultimate terms, was attachment to anything that might be identified as a “self.” The cause of stress was craving, which in turn was based on ignorance about the true nature of stress. The cessation of stress was the total abandoning of craving, while the path to the cessation of stress was a cluster of eight factors: right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In the second round of this insight, he realized the duties that had to be performed with regard to each of these categories. Stress was to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path developed.

He then pursued those duties until the mental powers of the path were so fully developed that stress was totally comprehended. This meant that there were no more objects on which craving could land, and so it was naturally abandoned. Thus in the third round of this insight he realized

that the duties with regard to all four truths had been fulfilled. At that point there was nothing further for the mind to do—there was nothing more it *could* do in these terms. Right view and concentration—the mental qualities lying at the heart of the path—had done such a thorough job of ferreting out stress and craving that, as their final act, they detected the subtle stress and craving inherent in the act of right view and right concentration themselves. Thus, as its final act, the mind let go even of these path factors, just as a carpenter would let go of his tools when they had finished their job.

As a result, all present mental input into the processes of experience naturally came to a halt in a state of non-fashioning. This state opened onto an experience of total liberation, called Unbinding (*nibbana*; in Sanskrit, *nirvana*). Realizing that this Unbinding was the total cessation of suffering and of the processes of death and rebirth as generated in the mind, the Bodhisatta, now the Buddha, knew that his questions had been answered. Skillful action, based on right view in the form of the four categories based around stress—which he termed the four noble truths—could indeed bring about a total happiness free from the limitations of birth, aging, illness, and death.

## THE TEACHING OF RIGHT VIEW

The texts tell us that the Buddha spent the first seven weeks after his awakening experiencing that happiness and freedom. Then he decided to teach the way to that happiness to others. His teachings were based on the three insights that had led to his own experience of awakening. Because right view lay at the heart of his analysis of kamma and the way out of kamma, his teachings focused in particular on the two forms of right view that he learned in the course of those insights: the form he learned in the second insight, which led to a favorable rebirth; and the form he learned in the third insight, which led out from the cycle of death and rebirth once and for all.

The first level of right view the Buddha termed mundane right view. He expressed it in these terms:

“There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed.  
There are fruits and results of good and bad actions. There is this  
world and the next world. There is mother and father. There are

spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives and brahmans who, faring rightly and practicing rightly, proclaim this world and the next after having directly known and realized it for themselves.”

### [MN 117](#)

This passage means that there is merit in generosity; that the moral qualities of good and bad are inherent in the universe, and not simply social conventions; that there is life after death; that one has a true moral debt to one’s parents; and that there are people who have lived the renunciate’s life properly in such a way that they have gained true and direct knowledge of these matters. These beliefs form the minimum prerequisite for following the path of skillful action that will lead to happy results within the cycle of rebirth. Thus this might be termed right view for the purpose of a happy rebirth.

The second level of right view, which the Buddha termed transcendent right view, he expressed simply as:

“Knowledge in terms of stress, knowledge in terms of the origination of stress, knowledge in terms of the cessation of stress, knowledge in terms of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress.”

### [DN 22](#)

In other words, this level of right view consists of knowledge in terms of the four noble truths, and might be called right view for the purpose of escaping from rebirth altogether.

Just as the third insight grew out of the first two insights, the second level of right view grows out of the first. Its purpose is impossible to fathom if taken outside of the context of mundane good and bad kamma and their good and bad results. Together, the two levels of right view provide a complete and complementary picture of the nature of kamma as viewed from two different perspectives. The first level views kamma as a cosmic principle at work in the narrative of each individual’s many lives. The second form views kamma as a principle at work in the present moment, approached from a frame of mind empty of the categories of self

and other, being and non-being, which lie at the essence of narratives and cosmologies.

To see how these two levels of right view complement one another in shaping the form and content of the Buddha's teachings, we can look at his most common mode of presenting his teachings: the "graduated discourse" (*anupubbi-katha*), beginning with the principle of good and bad kamma and gradually building up through the topics of generosity, virtue, heaven, drawbacks, and renunciation, ending with the topic of the four noble truths. There were several reasons for this gradual approach, but primarily they came down to the fact that the four truths were too abstract to appear immediately relevant, and the goal of escape from rebirth made no sense unless viewed in the proper context. The role of the graduated discourse was to provide that sense of relevance and context.

Starting with the first level of right view, the Buddha would describe good actions under two main categories: generosity and virtue. Together, the two categories could be stretched to cover almost any type of good physical, verbal, or mental deeds. For example, generosity covers not only the giving of material gifts, but also generosity with one's time, knowledge, gratitude, and forgiveness. Virtue begins with the five precepts—against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, and taking intoxicants—includes prohibitions against five forms of wrong livelihood—selling slaves, intoxicants, poisons, weapons, and animals to be killed for food—and goes on to cover abstention from all forms of harmful behavior. Thus good behavior, taken under the categories of generosity and virtue, means both refraining from harmful behavior and performing actions that are beneficial.

Having described good actions, the Buddha would describe their rewards, as results of the cosmic principle of kamma. The rewards here include both those visible in this world and those to be anticipated in the next. The Buddhist texts contain glowing descriptions both of the sense of well-being in the immediate present that results from good actions, and of the exquisite pleasures that rebirth in heaven entails. Implicit in these descriptions is the dark side of the principle of kamma: the inherent punishments that come from bad behavior, again both in this world and in the next: in the various levels of hell and other lower births—such as a

common animal—and again in this world on one’s return to the human state.

However—because finite actions can’t produce infinite results—the rewards of kamma, good or bad, are not eternal. This point led naturally to the next topic in the discourse: the drawbacks of the cycle of rebirth as a whole. No happiness within the cycle is permanent; even the most refined heavenly pleasures must end when the force of one’s good kamma ends, and one is forced to return to the rough and tumble of lower realms of being. The changeability of the mind lying behind the creation of kamma means that the course of an individual’s life through the realms of rebirth is not necessarily ever upward. In fact, as the Buddha saw from his remembrance of his own lives, the course leading from one rebirth to another is filled with aimless ups and downs, like a stick thrown into the air: sometimes landing on this end, sometimes on the other end, sometimes in the middle. The amount of suffering and stress suffered in the course of these many throws is more than can be measured.

These considerations led naturally to the next topic of the discourse: renunciation. Having realized the fleeting nature of even the most refined pleasures in the round of rebirth, the sensitive listener would be prepared to look favorably on the idea of renouncing any aspiration for happiness within the round, and cultivating the path to release. The texts compare this mental preparation to the act of washing a cloth so that it would be ready to take dye. This was when the Buddha would take the listener beyond the level of mundane right view and broach the transcendent level.

The texts describing the steps of the graduated discourse describe this step simply as “the teaching special to the Buddhas: stress, its origination, its cessation, and the path,” i.e., the four noble truths. However, the four noble truths are simply one out of three interrelated versions of transcendent right view taught in the texts: (1) this/that conditionality (*idappaccayata*), (2) dependent co-arising (*paticca samuppada*), and (3) the four noble truths (*ariya sacca*). In order to gain a full picture of the Buddha’s teachings on the nature of kamma, we should look at all three.

## THIS/THAT CONDITIONALITY

The most basic version of right view is simply the causal principle of feedback loops that the Buddha found in the process of developing skillful action. He called this principle “this/that conditionality” because it explains experience in terms that are immediately present to awareness—events that can be pointed to in the mind as “this” or “that”—rather than principles hidden from awareness. He expressed this principle in a simple-looking formula:

- “(1) When this is, that is.
- (2) From the arising of this comes the arising of that.
- (3) When this isn’t, that isn’t.
- (4) From the stopping of this comes the stopping of that.”

[AN 10:92](#)

Of the many possible ways of interpreting this formula, only one does justice both to the way the formula is worded and to the complex, fluid manner in which specific examples of causal relationships are described in the texts. That way is to view the formula as the interplay of two causal principles: one *diachronic*, acting over time; and the other *synchronic*, acting in a single instant of time. The two principles combine to form a non-linear pattern. The diachronic principle—taking (2) and (4) as a pair—connects events over time; the synchronic principle—(1) and (3)—connects objects and events in the present moment. The two principles intersect, so that any given event is influenced by two sets of conditions: input from the past and input from the present.

Although each principle seems simple, their interaction makes their consequences very complex. To begin with, every act has repercussions in the present moment together with reverberations extending into the future. Depending on the intensity of the act, these reverberations can last for a very short or a very long time. Thus every event takes place in a context determined by the combined effects of past events coming from a wide range in time, together with the effects of present acts. These effects can intensify one another, can coexist with little interaction, or can cancel one another out. Thus, even though it is possible to predict that a certain type of act will tend to give a certain type of result—for example,

acting on anger will lead to pain—there is no way to predict when or where that result will make itself felt.

The complexity of the system is further enhanced by the fact that both causal principles meet at the mind. Through its views and intentions, the mind keeps both principles active. Through its sensory powers, it is affected by the results of the causes it has set in motion. This allows for the causal principles to feed back into themselves, as the mind reacts to the results of its own actions. These reactions can form positive feedback loops, intensifying the original input and its results, much like the howl in a speaker placed next to the microphone feeding into it. They can also create negative feedback loops, counteracting the original input, in the same way that a thermostat turns off a heater when the temperature in a room is too high, and turns it on again when it gets too low. Because the results of actions can be immediate, and the mind can react to them immediately, these feedback loops can sometimes quickly spin out of control; at other times, they may provide skillful checks on one's behavior.

For example, a man may act out of anger, which gives him an immediate sense of dis-ease to which he may react with further anger, thus creating a snowballing effect. On the other hand, he may come to understand that the anger is causing his dis-ease, and so immediately attempt to stop it. However, there can also be times when the results of his past actions may obscure his present dis-ease, so that he doesn't immediately react to it at all. This means that, although there are general patterns relating habitual acts to their results, there is no set one-for-one, tit-for-tat, relationship between a particular action and its results. Instead, the results are determined by the entire context of the act, shaped by the actions that preceded or followed it, and by one's state of mind at the time of acting or experiencing the result.

In this way, the combination of two causal principles—influences from the past interacting with those in the immediate present—accounts for the complexity of causal relationships on the level of immediate experience. However, the combination of the two principles also opens the possibility for finding a systematic way to break the causal web. If causes and effects were entirely linear, the cosmos would be totally deterministic, and nothing could be done to escape from the

machinations of the causal process. If they were entirely synchronic, there would be no relationship from one moment to the next, and all events would be arbitrary. The web could break down totally or reform spontaneously for no reason at all. However, with the two modes working together, one can learn from causal patterns observed from the past and apply one's insights to disentangling the same causal patterns acting in the present. If one's insights are true, one can then gain freedom from those patterns. This allows for escape from the cycle of kamma altogether by developing kamma at a heightened level of skill by pursuing the noble eightfold path.

In addition, the non-linearity of this/that conditionality explains why heightened skillfulness, when focused on the present moment, can succeed in leading to the end of the kamma that has formed the experience of the entire cosmos. All non-linear processes exhibit what is called scale invariance, meaning that the behavior of the process on any one scale is similar to its behavior on smaller or larger scales. To understand, say, the large-scale pattern of a particular non-linear process, one need only focus on its behavior on a smaller scale that is easier to observe, and one will see the same pattern at work. In the case of kamma, one need only focus on the process of kamma in the immediate present, in the course of developing heightened skillfulness, and the large-scale issues over the expanses of space and time will become clear as one gains release from them.

## DEPENDENT CO-ARISING

The teaching on dependent co-arising helps to provide more detailed instructions on this point, showing precisely where the cycle of kamma provides openings for more skillful present input. In doing so, it both explains the importance of the act of attention in developing heightened skillfulness, and acts as a guide for focusing attention on present experience in appropriate ways.

Dependent co-arising shows how the cosmos, when viewed in the context of how it is directly experienced by a person developing skillfulness, is subsumed entirely under factors immediately present to awareness: the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental fabrication, and consciousness, and the six sense media—i.e., the five

senses plus the mind. The standard list of causal factors runs as follows: the suffering and stress of aging, illness, and death depend on birth; birth in turn depends on becoming; and so on down through clinging, craving, feeling, sensory contact, the six senses, name and form (mental and physical phenomena), sensory consciousness, mental fabrications, and ignorance. Although the list reads like a linear pattern, the precise definitions of the terms show that it is filled with many feedback loops. Because it is non-linear, it thus functions on several scales: “Birth,” for instance, refers both to the birth of a physical organism and to the birth of a sense of being in the mind.

Included in this list is the Buddha’s ultimate analysis of kamma and rebirth. For instance, the nexus of kamma, clinging, becoming, and birth accounts for the realm in which birth takes place. Kamma (covered under the factors of name and form) gives rise to the five aggregates, which form the objects for craving and clinging. Once there is clinging, there is a “coming-into-being” in any of three realms: the sensual realm, the realm of form, and the formless realm. These realms refer not only to levels of being on the cosmic scale, but also to levels of mental states. Some mental states are concerned with sensual images, others with forms, and still others with formless abstractions.

The relationship between birth and becoming can be compared to the process of falling asleep and dreaming. As drowsiness leads the mind to lose contact with waking reality, a dream image of another place and time will appear in it. The appearance of this image is called becoming. The act of entering into this image and taking on a role or identity within it—and thus entering the world of the dream and falling asleep—is birth. The commentaries to the Pali texts maintain that precisely the same process is what enables rebirth to follow the death of the body. At the same time, the analogy between falling asleep and taking birth explains why release from the cycle of becoming is called awakening.

Once there is birth in a particular realm, the nexus of name-and-form with consciousness accounts for the arising and survival of the active organism within that realm. Without consciousness, the mental and physical organism would die. Without the mental and physical organism, consciousness would have no place to land and develop. This nexus also explains the feedback loops that can lead to skillful action. “Name”

includes the sub-factors of attention, intention, feeling, perception, and contact, which are precisely the factors at work in the process of kamma and its result.

The first lesson of skillfulness is that the essence of an action lies in the intention motivating it: an act motivated by the intention for greater skillfulness will give results different from those of an act motivated by greed, aversion, or delusion. Intention, in turn, is influenced by the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the act of attention to one's circumstances. The less an act of attention is clouded by delusion, the more clearly it will see things in appropriate terms. The combination of attention and intention in turn determines the quality of the feeling and the physical events ("form") that result from the act. The more skilled the action, the more refined these results will be. Perceptions arise with regard to those results, some more appropriate than others. The act of attention selects which ones to focus on, thus feeding back into another round in the cycle of action. Underlying the entire cycle is the fact that all its factors are in contact with consciousness.

This interplay of name, form, and consciousness provides an answer to the quandary of how the stress and suffering inherent in the cycle of action can be ended. If one tried simply to stop the cycle through a direct intention, the intention itself would count as kamma, and thus as a factor to keep the cycle going. This double bind can be dissolved, however, if one can watch as the contact between consciousness and the cycle naturally falls away. This requires, not inaction, but more and more appropriate attention to the process of kamma itself. When one's attention to and mastery of the process becomes fully complete, there occurs a point of equipoise called "non-fashioning" (*atammayata*), in which the contact between the processes of kamma and consciousness—still fully conscious—naturally becomes disengaged. One modern teacher has compared this disengagement to that of a fruit naturally falling, when fully ripened, from the tree. This is how the cycle of action comes to an end in the moment of awakening.

As this analysis shows, the most important obstacle to release is the ignorance that keeps attention from being fully perceptive. As the Buddha traced the element of ignorance that underlay the processes of mental fabrication, he found that it came down to ignorance of the four noble

truths: the identity of the truths, the duties appropriate to each, and the mastery of those duties. When this ignorance is fully overcome, the craving that keeps the cycle going will have nothing to fasten on, for all its possible objects are seen for what they are: suffering and stress. With no place to land, craving disappears, and the cycle can come to an end.

## THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

Because knowledge in terms of the four noble truths is what ends ignorance and craving, the Buddha most often expressed transcendent right view in their terms. These truths focus the analysis of kamma directly on the question of stress and suffering: issues at the heart of the narratives that people make of their own life experiences. As the Buddha noted in his second insight, his memory of previous lives included his experience of pleasure and pain in each life, and most people—when recounting their own lives—tend to focus on these issues as well.

The four truths, however, do not stop simply with tales about stress: they approach it from the problem-solving perspective of a person engaged in developing a skill. What this means for the meditator trying to master heightened skillfulness is that these truths cannot be fully comprehended by passive observation. Only by participating sensitively in the process of developing skillful powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—and gaining a practical feel for the relationship of cause and effect among the mental factors that shape that process—can one eradicate the ignorance that obstructs the ending of kamma. Thus, only through developing skillfulness to the ultimate degree can the cycle be brought to equilibrium and, as a result, disband.

## THE KNOWLEDGE OF UNBINDING

The truth of the Buddha's understanding of the processes of kamma—as informed by this/that conditionality, dependent co-arising, and the four noble truths—was confirmed by the knowledge of Unbinding that followed immediately on his mastery of heightened skillfulness. He found that when skillfulness is intentionally brought to a point of full consummation, as expressed in the direct awareness of this/that conditionality, it leads to a state of non-fashioning that opens to a level of consciousness in which all experience of the cosmos has fallen away.

When one's experience of the cosmos resumes after the experience of awakening, one sees clearly that it is composed entirely of the results of old kamma; with no new kamma added to the process, all experience of the cosmos will eventually run out—or, in the words of the texts, “will grow cold right here.”

This discovery confirmed the basic premise that kamma not only plays a role in shaping experience of the cosmos, it plays the primary role. If this were not so, then even when kamma was ended there would still remain the types of experience that came from other sources. But because none of the limitations of the cosmos—time, space, etc.—remain when all present kamma disbands, and none resume after all old kamma runs out, kamma must be the factor accounting for all experience of those limitations. This fact implies that even the limiting factors that one encounters in terms of sights, sounds, etc., are actually the fruit of past kamma in thought, word, and deed—committed not only in this, but also in many preceding lifetimes. Thus, even though the Buddha's development of heightened skillfulness focused on the present moment, the resulting awakening gave insights that encompassed all of time.

### FAITH IN THE PRINCIPLE OF KAMMA

From this discussion it should become clear why kamma, as an article of faith, is a necessary factor in the path of Buddhist practice. The teaching on kamma, in its narrative and cosmological forms, provides the context for the practice, giving it direction and urgency. Because the cosmos is governed by the laws of kamma, those laws provide the only mechanism by which happiness can be found. But because good and bad kamma, consisting of good and bad intentions, simply perpetuate the ups and downs of experience in the cosmos, a way must be found out of the mechanism of kamma by mastering it in a way that allows it to disband in an attentive state of non-intention. And, because there is no telling what sudden surprises the results of one's past kamma may still hold in store, one should try to develop that mastery as quickly as possible.

In its “empty” mode—i.e., focusing on the processes of action, without referring to questions of whether or not there is a self or a being behind the processes—the teaching on kamma accounts for the *focus* and the

*terms of analysis* used in the practice. It also accounts for the *mental qualities* needed to attain and maintain that level of focus and analysis.

In terms of focus, the principle of scale invariance means that the complexities of kamma can be mastered by giving total attention to phenomena in and of themselves in the immediate present. These phenomena are then analyzed in terms of the four noble truths, the terms used in observing and directing the experience of developing the qualities of skillful action. The most immediate skillful kamma that can be observed on this level is the mastery of the very same mental qualities that are supporting this refined level of focus and analysis: mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, together with the more basic qualities on which they are based. Thus, these mental qualities act not only as supports to the focus and analysis, but also as their object. Ultimately, discernment becomes so refined that the focus and analysis take as their object the act of focusing and analyzing, in and of themselves. The cycle of action then short-circuits as it reaches culmination, and Unbinding occurs.

It is entirely possible that a person with no firm conviction in the principle of kamma can follow parts of the Buddhist path, including mindfulness and concentration practices, and gain positive results from them. For instance, one can pursue mindfulness practice for the sense of balance, equanimity, and peace it gives to one's daily life, or for the sake of bringing the mind to the present for the purpose of spontaneity and "going with the flow." The full practice of the path, however, is a skillful diverting of the flow of the mind from its habitual kammic streams to the stream of Unbinding. As the Buddha said, this practice requires a willingness to "develop and abandon" to an extreme degree.

The *developing* requires a supreme effort aimed at full and conscious mastery of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment to the point of non-fashioning and on to release. A lack of conviction in the principle of kamma would undercut the patience and commitment, the desire, persistence, intent, and refined powers of discrimination needed to pursue concentration and discernment to the most heightened levels, beyond what is needed for a general sense of peace or spontaneity.

The *abandoning* involves uprooting the most deeply buried forms of clinging and attachment that maintain bondage to the cycle of rebirth.

Some of these forms of clinging—such as views and theories about self-identity—are so entrenched in the narrative and cosmological modes in which most people function that only firm conviction in the benefits to be had by abandoning them will be able to pry them loose. This is why the Buddha insisted repeatedly that conviction in the fact of his awakening necessarily involves conviction in the principle of kamma, and that both forms of conviction are needed for the full mastery of the kamma of heightened skillfulness leading to release.

There are many well-known passages in the Canon where the Buddha asks his listeners not to accept his teachings simply on faith, but these remarks were directed to people just beginning the practice. Beginners need only accept the general principles of skillful action on a trial basis, focusing on the input that their intentions are putting into the causal system at the present moment, and exploring the connection between skillful intentions and favorable results. The more complex issues of kamma come into play at this level only in forcing one to be patient with the practice. Many times skillful intentions do not produce their favorable results immediately, aside from the sense of well-being—sometimes clearly perceptible, sometimes barely—that comes with acting skillfully. Were it not for this delay, the principle of kamma would be self-evident, no one would dare act on unskillful intentions, and there would be no need to take the principle on faith. The complexity of this/that conditionality is the major cause of the confusion and lack of skill with which most people live their lives. The ability to master this process takes time.

As one progresses on the path, however—and as the process of developing skillfulness in and of itself gradually comes to take center stage in one's awareness—the actual results of developing skillfulness should give greater and greater reason for conviction in the principle of kamma. Except in cases where people fall into the trap of heedlessness or complacency, these results can spur and inspire one to hold to the principle of kamma with the increasing levels of firmness, focus, and refinement needed for awakening.

This, then, is the sense in which kamma, or intentional action, forms the basic refuge for the person on the path. On the one hand, as a doctrine, it provides guidance to the proper path of action, and

encouragement to muster the energy needed to follow the path. On the other hand, as the actual principle by which skillful action is brought to a pitch of non-fashioning on the threshold of the Deathless, it provides the mechanism by which human effort and action can bring about the ultimate in genuine happiness.

# Glossary

**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. The lower three levels of disciples are, in descending order: non-returners, those whose minds are freed from sensuality and will be reborn in the highest levels of heaven, there to attain nibbana, never again to return to this world; once-returners, those who will be reborn in this world once more before attaining nibbana; and stream-winners, those who have had their first glimpse of nibbana, leading them to abandon three fetters that bind them to the round of rebirth—self-identity views, doubt, and attachment to habits and practices—and who are destined to be reborn at most only seven more times.

**Asava:** Effluent; fermentation. Four qualities—sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance—that “flow out” of the mind and create the flood of the round of death and rebirth.

**Bodhisatta (Bodhisattva):** “A being (striving for) awakening.” The term used to describe the Buddha from his first aspiration to become a Buddha until the time of his full awakening.

**Brahman:** A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, “brahman” can also mean an arahant, conveying the point that excellence is based not on birth or race, but on the qualities attained in the mind.

**Deva:** Literally, “shining one.” An inhabitant of the heavenly realms.

**Dhamma (Dharma):** Event; phenomenon; the way things are in and of themselves; their inherent qualities; the basic principles underlying their behavior. Also, principles of human behavior, qualities of mind, both in a neutral and in a positive sense. By extension, “Dhamma” is used also to denote any doctrine that teaches such things. Thus the Dhamma

of the Buddha denotes both his teachings and the direct experience of the quality of nibbana at which those teachings are aimed.

**Jhana:** Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused in a single sensation or mental notion.

**Kamma (Karma):** Intentional acts that results in states of becoming and rebirth.

**Nibbana (Nirvana):** 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 nibbana” in some contexts denotes the experience of awakening; in others, the final passing away of an arahant.

**Pali:** The canon of texts preserved by the Theravada school and, by extension, the language in which those texts are composed.

**Patimokkha:** Basic code of monastic discipline, composed of 227 rules for monks and 310 rules for nuns.

**Sangha:** On the conventional (*sammati*) level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns; on the ideal (*ariya*) level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least their first glimpse of nibbana.

**Tathagata:** Literally, “one who has become real (*tatha-agata*),” 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 Buddhism, it usually refers specifically to the Buddha, although occasionally it also refers to any of his disciples who have attained the Buddhist goal.

**Vinaya:** The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text. The Buddha’s own term for the religion he founded was “this Dhamma-Vinaya.”

# Abbreviations

<i>AN</i>	<i>Anguttara Nikaya</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Digha Nikaya</i>
<i>Dhp</i>	<i>Dhammapada/Dharmapada</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nikaya</i>
<i>Mv</i>	<i>Mahavagga</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
<i>Sn</i>	<i>Sutta Nipata</i>
<i>Thig</i>	<i>Therigatha</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udana</i>

References to DN, MN, and Iti are to discourse. References to Dhp are to verse. References to Mv and Cv are to chapter, section, and sub-section. References to the remaining texts are to chapter (*vagga*, *nipata*, or *samyutta*) and discourse.

*Sabbe satta sada hontu  
Avera sukha-jivino.  
Katam puñña-phalam mayham  
Sabbe bhagi bhavantu te.*

May all beings always live happily,  
free from animosity.  
May all share in the blessings  
springing from the good I have done.