
THINGS
AS THEY
CAN BE

# *Things as They Can Be*

Essays on the Buddhist Path

*Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu*
*(Geoffrey DeGraff)*

*Questions about this book may be addressed to*

Metta Forest Monastery
Valley Center, CA 92082-1409
U.S.A.

*Additional resources*

More Dhamma talks, books and translations by Thanissaro Bhikkhu are available to download in digital audio and various ebook formats at dhammatalks.org.

*Printed copy*

A paperback copy of this book is available free of charge. To request one, write to: Book Request, Metta Forest Monastery, PO Box 1409, Valley Center, CA 92082 USA.

# *Acknowledgements*

Many people have read earlier versions of these essays and have kindly offered suggestions for improvements. In particular, I would like to thank the monks here at the monastery, as well as Andrea Kessler, Addie Onsanit, Dale Schultz, and Barbara Wright. Any mistakes that remain, of course, are my own responsibility.

Some of these essays have appeared on the *Tricycle* website. I would like to thank the editors of the webiste for their help in making the writing clearer and more coherent. These and other essays on Buddhist practice are available on the Internet at www.dhammatalks.org.

*Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu*
*(Geoffrey DeGraff)*

METTA FOREST MONASTERY
VALLEY CENTER, CA 92082-1409
JANUARY, 2026

# *In the Context of the Deathless*

The first thing the Buddha said after deciding that he would teach was, "Open are the doors to the deathless. Let those with ears show forth their conviction." The first thing he said when he met with his first disciples was, "The deathless has been attained. I will instruct you. I will teach you the Dhamma. Practicing as instructed, you will reach and remain in the supreme goal of the holy life" (MN 26).

It's hard to overstate how positive these first messages were. The spiritual quest in India had long been a search for the deathless. The ancient Vedas and the Upaniṣads had framed their quest in terms of a search for a deathless happiness sustained by an unending source of physical or mental food. Centuries later, this quest was still very much alive in the Buddha's time. He himself had framed his search in terms of a deathless that transcended all things negative:

> "What if I, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, were to seek the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding? What if I, being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, were to seek the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding?" — *MN 26*

And he wasn't the only one. Sāriputta and Moggallāna, before meeting with the Buddha, had expressed their spiritual yearning in the same terms, associating it, like the Buddha-to-be, in terms of a deathless happiness:

> And at that time Sāriputta & Moggallāna were living the holy life under Sañjaya. They had made this pact: "Whoever attains the deathless first will inform the other." — *Mv I.23.1*

After Sāriputta had reached the first stage of awakening while hearing a synopsis of the Buddha's teaching, he sought out Moggallāna:

> Moggallāna the wanderer saw Sāriputta the wanderer coming from afar and, on seeing him, said to him, "Clear, my friend, are your faculties—pure your complexion, and bright. Have you attained the deathless, my friend?"
>
> "Yes, my friend, I have attained the deathless." — *Mv I.23.6*

Of course, the desire for an undying happiness was not peculiar to ancient India. It's universal. In effect, when announcing that he would teach the deathless, the Buddha was announcing something thrilling and truly earth-shaking: that he had solved the problem of death.

When he attained the deathless, he knew that his release from birth, aging, and death was total. That was his total awakening (MN 26). As he discovered, genuine deathlessness is a state totally unlimited. It's a consciousness "without surface," which means that, unlike ordinary consciousness, it's not known through the six senses, so it's not restricted to the confines of past, present, or future (MN 49). It has none of the activities that characterize time and space: no coming, no going, no staying in place (Ud 8:1). Independent of time, it's permanent (SN 43). Independent of space, it's not limited to "here, there, or between the two" (Ud 8:4). It's the ultimate bliss (Dhp 204), a bliss beyond feelings of bliss, which means that it's totally unconditioned (MN 59)—neither conditioned by other things nor acting as a condition for anything else (MN 1). And because it's unconditioned, it has no need for sustenance. That's why it's truly deathless. As the Buddha said, it would be a mistake to think that there would be anything negative about this experience at all (DN 9). No wonder, then, that he termed the path to the deathless "unexcelled victory in battle" (SN 45:4) and his teaching "the roar of a lion" (MN 12; AN 4:33).

Given the extremely positive nature of this message—victory over death—it's ironic that generations of people in the West have viewed the Buddha as a pessimist. That's because they've focused on his negative judgments of the things that people most cherish in life, such as family, wealth, and possessions.

But these negative judgments have to be understood in context. As the Buddha saw, people trap themselves in birth, aging, and death because of

their cravings and clingings. He wanted them to see the negative side of the things they cling to, so that they would meet with the freedom that comes from letting go.

In particular, he saw that they crave and cling to five activities, called aggregates: form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and sensory consciousness. It's from these activities that they fashion the things they think give solid meaning to life: their sensual fantasies, their views about the world, their sense of what should and shouldn't be done, even their sense of who they are.

Because these clingings go deep, very deep, he had to provide strong medicine to counteract them. His prime medicine was this: He would point out first that the things they were attached to were composed of aggregates—even their experience of themselves and of the world was fashioned through aggregates—and then that anything composed of these activities couldn't constitute a lasting or reliable happiness.

This is why the Buddha taught that his listeners would benefit from seeing the aggregates in terms of three perceptions that focus on (1) the fact that all aggregates are fleeting and inconstant, (2) the fact that inconstant things, if you try to find happiness in them, are stressful, and (3) the fact that things that are inconstant and stressful, when viewed in the light of a deathless alternative, don't deserve to be clung to as "me, my self, or what I am." When these perceptions go to the heart, they induce a feeling of dispassion for the aggregates, allowing the mind to let them go.

Because the path to the end of suffering makes use of skillful versions of the aggregates—both to develop discernment and to provide nourishing pleasures along the way—these three perceptions have to be applied in stages. In the first stage, they're applied to anything that would pull the mind off the path. In the second, they're applied to the path itself, so that the mind can become totally free.

So even though these perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self focus on the negative side of the aggregates, their purpose, when viewed in context, is positive: to induce a thoroughgoing dispassion that would free the mind from the attachments that keep it enslaved to craving, coming back again and again to aging, illness, and death. In that way, these

perceptions allow the mind to open instead to the limitless happiness of the deathless.

The problem is that many people who identify as Buddhist or even Buddhist teachers get the context backwards. Instead of viewing the desire for a deathless happiness as the context, and the three perceptions as strategies whose purpose lies in serving that context, these people turn it around. They take the three perceptions as the context, defining the nature of reality, and assert that the desire for happiness, to be realistic, has to accept that context: The best that can be hoped for in an inconstant world is an inconstant happiness, inherently stressful, one that's not really you or yours.

When these perceptions—now termed, in line with the ancient commentaries, three "characteristics"—form the context, they reframe the problem of death. Death is no longer seen as the problem. Instead, the problem is the desire to escape from death to find an unchanging happiness. Clinging to that desire is now seen as the cause of suffering. True wisdom lies in accepting death, letting go of the desire for an unchanging happiness, and finding peace and contentment instead in embracing and letting go of the pleasures of the world as they come and go in the present moment.

This attitude is sometimes termed the practice of "embracing impermanence." In this practice, the inconstancy of the aggregates is no longer seen as a reason for wanting to let go of them once and for all. Instead, it's even more reason to cherish them before they pass away. A flower is said to be beautiful *because* it withers; a sunset is moving *because* it fades; each moment is infinitely valuable because it's fleeting, passing away even as it arises.

The appeal of this line of thinking is easy to see, in that it makes awakening accessible: near to hand and requiring no heroic effort. At the same time, it counsels the wisdom of contentment, resilience, and appreciation, all of which are good Buddhist virtues. But it does so at a price. It rejects the Buddha's teaching on the unchanging bliss to be found in a dimension freed from the confines of space, time, and the present moment. In its place, it contents itself with the meek and anemic pleasures that fall within those confines, confines that constantly take away whatever they offer. Compared to the deathless, the doctrine of embracing

impermanence is like one of Dante's visions of hell, in which lovers try to embrace but are repeatedly torn from one another's arms by a whirlwind that never stops.

It's possible to see this attitude simply as an excuse for being reluctant to take on the challenges of the path to the genuine deathless. And there's nothing new with that reluctance. Even in the Buddha's time, many of his followers weren't ready for the noble path. They contented themselves instead with the path to a happiness within this lifetime and the hope of a good future rebirth. It's sad that they were reluctant, but at least they honored the Buddha and those of his disciples who *were* willing to commit themselves to the noble path.

The modern attitude of embracing impermanence, though, is not simply one of reluctance. Its basic premise denies the possibility of the Buddha's victory. His desire for a deathless happiness, it implies, was misguided; his claims to have succeeded in finding the deathless, deluded. In this way, it denies the possibility of victory not only to the Buddha but also to all living beings. The Buddha's message, in its hands, has nothing to offer to those whose worlds are falling apart and whose sufferings are extreme.

So, for the Buddha's sake and for the sake of all of us who are suffering, we'd do better to get the context right. When he decided to teach, he didn't announce that he was opening the door to reduced expectations. When he approached his first disciples, he didn't murmur that he had found the wisdom of appreciating the fast-fading beauty of the flowers of the field. He roared because he had attained something infinitely more grand. He was opening the doors to the deathless, the highest happiness that anyone could desire. That was the context. The three perceptions functioned within that context, as strategies for freeing his listeners from their clinging attachments so that they, too, could attain the happiness of the deathless themselves.

# *The View from Outside the World*

A common attitude among many Western Buddhists is that the Buddha expressed the insights of his awakening in the context of the worldview of his time—one that featured kamma, rebirth, heavens, hells, and the unconditioned realm of nibbāna. Having started out with that understanding of the world, he taught his followers to desire a happiness that was possible within their shared view. We at present, however, have arrived at a radically different view of the world, so we have to pick and choose among the Buddha's teachings, accepting those that fit into the reality of our worldview and rejecting those that don't. If we were to try to force his worldview on our minds, we're told, it would be an act of cultural or intellectual dishonesty. We wouldn't be true to what we know about how the world really works and the limitations it imposes on us.

Now, there are many worldviews that vie for the title of "the" distinctive view of our modern or post-modern world, but the most assertive ones all agree on one thing: that we as human beings are thoroughly conditioned—by the laws of physics, biology, psychology, the assumptions of our culture, or all four—so there's no way that we could experience anything unconditioned. This means that the classical understanding of nibbāna as an unconditioned happiness has to be struck from Buddhism as it enters our world. In its place, we have to be realistic: to tame our desires in line with reality as we understand it, and to content ourselves with whatever happiness we can find in the conditioned realm.

The problem with this attitude is that it has everything backwards. Instead of starting with a worldview and then taming his desires to be realistic within that view, the Buddha worked the other way around. He started with an audacious, ideal desire: to see if a deathless, unconditioned happiness was possible. In the course of pursuing this desire, he discovered that he had to take, as working hypotheses, a handful of beliefs about the nature of action and the world in which he was acting, for a path to the deathless to be possible. Then, on the night of his awakening, he found that, yes, there was a path of action that led to the unconditioned happiness he

had desired. For the rest of his life, he taught others to share the same desire, and to adopt, on a provisional basis, whatever assumptions about the world and the power of human action were required to make the path to that happiness a reality.

So instead of starting with a worldview and taming his desires to fit into that view, the Buddha started with the best possible desire—for the deathless—and, once he had found that the deathless was possible, he taught a sketch of a worldview that could work in service of achieving that desire.

Now, this might sound like wishful thinking—making up a worldview in service of your desires—but as the Buddha said, all phenomena are rooted in desire (AN 10:58). This applies to worldviews as much as to anything else. After all, how do people arrive at worldviews to begin with? By using their desires to push against the world, to see where the world yields and where it pushes back. From the results of pushing here and there, we generalize about what's possible and impossible within the context of the world.

And that's exactly what the Buddha did. He didn't make anything up. He just pushed on the world in a radical and persistent way. We know from the story of his quest for awakening that the world pushed back very strongly on his early attempts, in a way that would have defeated anyone less determined on the deathless. But through being heedful, ardent, and resolute—those were the words he used to describe his attitude—he was ultimately able to learn how the world gave way to his desire for the unconditioned. That's how he got outside of the world, going beyond all desires and the phenomena they engendered.

This means that his teachings were determined, not by a worldview, but by an experience of how the deathless could be found.

This also means that just as the desire for the deathless was the determining factor in his quest, it was also the determining factor in how and what he taught. This can be shown both in how he dealt with other worldviews of his time and in how he advocated a worldview of his own.

In terms of other worldviews, we first have to note the simple fact that there was no single worldview that all his listeners adhered to. Some people of the time believed in rebirth; others didn't. Even those who did, didn't all agree that kamma, or action, played a role in determining how you were reborn, or even if kamma was real (DN 1; DN 2). There wasn't even any agreement on what "you" were to begin with, or whether you even existed (MN 2). And just as we have our modern materialist, determinist, and post-modern there-is-no-objective-truth teachers, similar teachers existed in the Buddha's time as well. The concept of the deathless was very much alive at the time, but more as a question than as a common belief: Did a deathless realm exist, and if so, how could it be found? No one had arrived at a convincing answer.

In addressing the people of his time, the Buddha strictly avoided getting into many of the discussions of the world that were the hot issues of the day, such as whether the world was finite or infinite, eternal or not (MN 72). He also discouraged his listeners from getting involved in cosmic speculation as a whole. Talk about the origin of the world he lumped in with gossip of the street and of the well as "animal talk" (AN 10:69). As he said, the nature of the world is so complex that it's inconceivable; trying to figure it out would lead to nothing but madness (AN 4:77). Instead of providing a map of the entire world, he saw that the world was on fire, so he showed the way to the fire escape, focusing all his attention on the question of suffering and its end. This was his radically new approach to the problem of how the deathless could be found.

The only times he got involved in discussions about the nature of the world were over the issue of kamma: Any doctrines that taught inaction—the principle that actions were illusory or powerless to have any effect—he rejected, on the grounds that they would make a path of practice for the end of suffering impossible. Here again, we see how, in his eyes, the truth of his experience of the deathless overrode any arguments that could have been advanced in favor of such teachings.

A prime example is the case of the sectarians who taught that your present experience of pleasure or pain was the result of past actions. This doctrine, too, the Buddha labeled a doctrine of inaction in that it denied any

present responsibility for actions that you were doing here and now. There would be no reason to think that standards of what should or shouldn't be done would have any meaning, or that you could choose to follow a path of action to the deathless. In the Buddha's terms, you'd be left bewildered and unprotected (AN 3:62).

Which means that he judged worldviews according to how well they accommodated the fact that he had actually realized his desire in finding the deathless.

As for the worldview the Buddha *did* recommend, we should note at the outset that when he introduced the four noble truths about suffering and its end to his first disciples, he didn't preface his remarks with an explanation of the world. Instead, he started by saying that the deathless had been attained, and that if his listeners followed his teachings, they could attain it, too (MN 26). In other words, he started by affirming that their desire for the deathless was realistic, and he would show how it could be fulfilled. That was the assumption on which everything else rested.

Now, in the course of explaining suffering and its causes, there were certain features of the world that, over the years, he had to explain as well. These derived from the three knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening (MN 4).

- His knowledge of previous lives showed that death was not the end of suffering, and that if the process of rebirth wasn't stopped, the suffering of birth, aging, and death would continue without end.
- His knowledge of how beings are reborn after death in line with their actions showed that the universe as a whole had no overarching purpose. Instead, it was driven by the intentional actions of individual beings, which in turn were guided by their views. He also saw that those actions could lead to rebirth on a wide range of levels, from the very high to the very low. None of those rebirths, however, were permanent. They all ended in death, followed by repeated rebirth.
- His third knowledge showed him the views about suffering and its end that could guide the actions that would lead to freedom from the otherwise ceaseless, meaningless round.

That was it.

It's worth emphasizing that the Buddha's descriptions of the world were really quite sketchy. How the world got started, he didn't say. How far it extended in space, he didn't say. Occasionally he'd give a few detailed accounts of particular heavens and hells, largely just to show that those realms fell under the sway of kamma, and that the inhabitants of the heavens could be ignorant and heedless, and so shouldn't be trusted, much less worshiped (DN 11; MN 37). However, those accounts didn't amount to a complete map. The complete maps we now have of the Buddhist cosmos came from later generations. The Buddha himself was interested in providing his listeners with just a handful of leaves compared to the forest of leaves he had discovered through his awakening (SN 56:31). He gave no more information about the world than his listeners needed to know for putting an end to suffering and for nurturing a sense that a deathless happiness was desirable and within the reach of human action.

Even the doctrine of kamma, which was the main linchpin of his picture of the world, was never laid out in full. As he noted, if you tried to comprehend the full complexity of kamma, it would drive you crazy. All you need to know about kamma boils down to four things:

> (1) that skillful intentions tend to lead to good results, and unskillful intentions to bad;
>
> (2) that past actions provide the raw material for shaping the present moment, but that your present intentions are potentially free to shape that material into an actual experience of the present;
>
> (3) that you can learn to take even bad raw materials and shape them in such a way that you don't have to suffer from them (AN 3:101); and
>
> (4) that if you abandon all intentions in the present, the present moment disbands and you can experience the deathless (SN 12:2; MN 26).

Just this much is enough to affirm the power of action to bring suffering to an end.

However, given that the path is ultimately abandoned on reaching the deathless—in the same way that you get off a chariot that has delivered you

to your destination (MN 24)—even the Buddha's sketch of a worldview gets put aside on reaching awakening and going beyond the world. But in putting it aside, the Buddha didn't throw it away. He used it to teach others so that they could get on the chariot and drive it to the right destination, too.

So when we look carefully at how the Buddha regarded worldviews in general—as subservient to the desire to find the way to the deathless and to teach that way to others—we can see that he didn't submit to the worldviews of his time when they provided no room for an unconditioned happiness. This means that it's hard to imagine him submitting to the worldviews of our time when they want to squeeze the Dhamma into a box and lop off the parts that don't fit—especially when those parts include the whole point of his message.

It's much easier to envision him searching out the people who insist that we're incapable of experiencing an unconditioned happiness, and chastising them for leaving their listeners trapped in their culture, bewildered and unprotected in the face of suffering. If they were to insist on the truth of their worldviews, he might respond that they hadn't yet pushed back strongly enough against the world with the right desires or in the right way.

# *The Desire for Awakening*

When the Buddha lists the various forms of suffering under the first noble truth, one of them is "not getting what is wanted." If you read just that much, and you remember that the Buddha also said that craving is the cause of suffering, you might think that the cure for that form of suffering is simply not to want anything: When you don't want anything, you won't be disappointed when you don't get anything. You won't suffer.

It's from this line of reasoning that people have drawn the conclusion that if the key to the goal of not suffering is not to want anything, then the path there should also involve not wanting anything, either. From that, it follows that a path of not wanting would have to be a path of not doing, and to be truly not doing anything, you can't assume that you're doing the path —or that there's even anyone there to do the path to begin with. The path simply unfolds as you get your "self" out of the way.

But if you read the Buddha's explanation of what he means by "not getting what is wanted," and if you view that explanation in light of his own quest for awakening, you realize that the path to ending that form of suffering is more subtle and strategic. It involves wanting and doing, and you have to take responsibility for making sure it gets done.

He explains "not getting what is wanted" like this:

> "And what is the stress of *not getting what is wanted?* In beings subject to birth, the wish arises, 'O, may we not be subject to birth, and may birth not come to us.' But this is not to be achieved by wishing. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted. In beings subject to aging… illness… death… sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, the wish arises, 'O, may we not be subject to aging… illness… death… sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair, and may aging… illness… death… sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair not come to us.' But this is not to be achieved by wishing. This is the stress of not getting what is wanted."
> — *DN 22*

This explanation complicates the picture because the desire not to be subject to birth, aging, illness, death, and all the rest was precisely the desire that motivated the Bodhisatta—the Buddha-to-be—in his search for awakening.

> "I, too, monks, before my self-awakening, when I was still just an unawakened Bodhisatta … the thought occurred to me, 'Why do I, being subject myself to birth, seek what is likewise subject to birth? Being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, why do I seek what is likewise subject to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement? What if I, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, were to seek the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding? What if I, being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, were to seek the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding?'" — *MN 26*

The desire that motivated him to search for awakening differed from the more generic desire to put an end to aging, etc., in that he recognized that the ending of the more everyday forms of not getting what you want—such as freedom from sorrow, lamentation, and despair—required something radical: total freedom from birth and death. That, in turn, would require a dedicated search. He called that search the noble search, in contrast to the ignoble search that looked for happiness in things subject to birth, aging, illness, and death, such as relationships and possessions (MN 26).

Now, it wasn't the case that his desire to go beyond birth, etc., was limited to just the beginning of his path. His continued desire to find the deathless explains why he wasn't satisfied with the first two knowledges on the night of his awakening: knowing his previous lives and knowing how beings throughout the cosmos die and are reborn in line with their actions. Only when he found the deathless through the third knowledge—knowing that he had mastered the duties of the four noble truths—did he end his search.

> "Then, monks, being subject myself to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, seeking the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding, I reached the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding. Being subject myself to aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, seeing the drawbacks of aging… illness… death… sorrow… defilement, seeking the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding, I reached the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: unbinding. Knowledge & vision arose in me: 'Unprovoked is my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.'" — *MN 26*

He then taught his students to give rise to the same desire for the deathless, and—rather than simply wishing for the deathless, or abandoning that desire and resting content with things subject to death—to focus their desires on the path to the deathless and to follow through with it until they had reached the goal.

This is why the Buddha noted that one of the secrets to his awakening was "discontent with skillful qualities" (AN 2:5). As he described his quest for awakening, when he followed a path of practice and found that it didn't lead all the way to the deathless, he abandoned it "in search of what is skillful" (MN 36). He kept trying to raise the level of his skill until it yielded the results he wanted. Only when he reached the deathless was he content.

He illustrated this principle with an analogy: If a person has need of the heartwood of a tree, he shouldn't content himself with the leaves and twigs, the bark, or the sapwood. He has to keep searching until he finds the heartwood that will serve his purposes (MN 29).

So the desire for the deathless is not the problem. The problem is in wanting to attain the deathless simply through wishing it to be so. This is why the Buddha taught that the duty with regard to suffering is not to abandon the desire for the deathless, but to comprehend it. When you comprehend the problem, you'll comprehend the solution, and you can focus your desires there.

The Buddha makes this point in more abstract terms in an interesting variant on dependent co-arising, his list of the causes that lead to suffering and stress. Most versions of the list end with suffering, but one version takes suffering as the jumping-off point for a series of factors beginning with conviction: When you comprehend the suffering of not getting what you want and can actually pinpoint the problem, that's your motivation for placing conviction in the Buddha's path and desiring to follow it. When you do, you give rise to joy, to the rapture, pleasure, and calm of concentration, and to the discernment that inspires dispassion, leading to total release (SN 12:23). When you focus your desires on following the right path of action, you'll get what you want.

Ven. Ānanda used an analogy to illustrate the role of desire on the path and in attaining the goal.

Once, when he was staying in a park, a brahman came and asked him what the goal of his practice was. Ānanda replied that the goal was to abandon desire.

The brahman then asked whether there was a path of practice leading to the abandoning of desire, and Ānanda replied that there was. He then described the path in terms of a teaching called the four bases of power: mental power endowed with concentration based on one of four things—desire, persistence, intent, and analysis—along with the fabrications of exertion, or right effort.

The brahman then replied that the path would have to be an endless path, because there's no way you could abandon desire by means of desire.

Ānanda responded with his analogy: Before the brahman came to the park, didn't he have a desire to come? Didn't he make an effort to act on that desire? And when he arrived, wasn't that desire, along with the effort, allayed?

The brahman admitted that that was the case.

In the same way, Ānanda continued, when a person has attained total awakening, whatever desire he or she had for awakening, whatever effort he or she made for awakening, is allayed (SN 51:15).

What he implies here is that you need desire to get on the path and stick with it to the end. And as he also implies, it's not the case that, in the higher

stages of the path, you attain the goal by abandoning the desire to get there. You abandon the desire because you've arrived.

Now, the path and the goal are two different things. The goal is unfabricated, which means that it doesn't depend on any conditions. It's not something you *do*. The path, though, is fabricated. It doesn't cause the unfabricated, but the act of following the path can take you there.

And it is a path of doing. The important thing is that you do it right. You can't clone awakening by abandoning all efforts in imitation of what you've read about the goal. We can illustrate this point with another of the Buddha's analogies. Suppose you want milk from a cow. If you try to get it by twisting the cow's horn, you won't get any milk no matter how much you want it. But if you pull the udder, you'll get the milk (MN 126).

All too many people try getting milk by twisting the horn and then, when they don't get any, they stop twisting the horn. They notice that not twisting the horn is more peaceful than twisting it, so they decide that peace is to be found, not by doing anything to the cow, but by embracing your innate cow awareness. They even suggest that that's what the Buddha meant by "milk."

Now, cow awareness may bring you peace and relief after years of twisting the horn, but it still leaves you thirsty because it's no way to get any milk. It would be a shame to content yourself with being thirsty, because the milk is still potentially available. What you have to realize is that you originally took the wrong approach, and that you'll have to make the effort to find the right approach. Even though the act of pulling the udder is very different from the act of drinking milk, and it's not as peaceful as simply being aware of the cow, still, when you pull the udder, you'll get the milk. You can end your thirst. That's why it's the right approach.

As the Buddha says in that sutta, the right approach to awakening is the noble eightfold path. And as he states in a famous verse from the Dhammapada, it's up to you to follow the path.

*Just this*
*is the path*
*—there is no other—*
*to purify vision.*

*Follow it,*
*and that will be Mara's*
*bewilderment....*
*It's for you to strive*
*ardently.*
*Tathāgatas simply*
*point out the way.*
*Those who practice,*
*absorbed in jhāna:*
*From Māra's bonds*
*they'll be freed.* — *Dhp 274*, *276*

Here the Buddha's not simply taking poetic license in saying that it's for you to strive. Again and again, throughout the Canon, when he describes how you should talk to yourself as you take on different aspects of the path, he advises you to use your sense of "I" to emphasize the fact that you're making the choice to practice properly, and you're going to have to accept responsibility for carrying through with that choice. Even though you'll eventually need to abandon the sense of "I am" as you approach the final stages of the path—just as you'll have to abandon desire and striving—you won't arrive at those final stages unless you first put that "I am" to good use all along the way. Only then, when the time comes, can you abandon it in a way that's healthy and effective.

The Buddha himself, when describing his quest for awakening, said again and again, in effect, that "I did this":

> "Quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, I entered & remained in the first jhāna… With the abandoning of pleasure & pain… I entered & remained in the fourth jhāna … When the mind was thus concentrated … I directed it to the knowledge of the ending of the mental effluents." — *MN 36*

A prime example of how he taught the skillful use of "I" to others is found in his instructions to his son, Rāhula, when Rāhula was still a young boy. The Buddha tells him to reflect on his actions before doing them, while doing them, and after they're done, to make sure that he doesn't intend any harm and that his actions actually succeed in avoiding harm. In each case,

the reflection involves taking responsibility for his actions: "This action I want to do…" "This action I am doing…" "This action I have done…" Only when Rāhula takes responsibility for his actions in this way can he purify them. This, the Buddha says, is how all those in the past, present, and future who purify their actions have acted, are acting, and will act.

And this skillful use of "I" applies not only on the beginning levels of the practice, but also on more advanced stages. Here, for instance, is how the Buddha recommends making mindfulness the governing principle with regard to developing discernment and releasing the mind:

> "And how is mindfulness the governing principle? … The mindfulness that 'I will scrutinize with discernment any Dhamma that is not yet scrutinized, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been scrutinized' is well established right within. The mindfulness that 'I will touch through release any Dhamma that is not yet touched, or I will protect with discernment any Dhamma that has been touched' is well established right within.
>
> "This is how mindfulness is the governing principle." — *AN 4:245*

This is how he recommended that Ānanda aim at attaining the highest form of emptiness:

> "Therefore, Ānanda, you should train yourselves: 'We will enter & remain in the emptiness that is pure, superior, & unsurpassed.'" — *MN 121*

*I, I, we:* These terms have their skillful uses. They remind you that you have to take responsibility for the path. No one else and nothing else can do it for you. If you try to throw away all notions of desire, striving, and your role in doing the path, the path won't get done. Only when it's done can you safely put these notions aside.

You may have heard of the simile of the raft: To get to the further shore, you use twigs, branches, and vines you find on this shore to put together a raft. This stands for the fact that the raft has to be made of things—like desire and your sense of "I"—found in the unawakened mind. And you have to put them together skillfully. You can't just dump them in the river and hope that they'll carry you across.

Once you've made the raft, then, holding on to it and making an effort with your hands and feet, you swim over to the other shore. At that point, you can put the raft down and go on your way. But you don't put it down until it's done its job, and you *do* put it down with a sense of appreciation:

> "How useful this raft has been to me! For it was in dependence on this raft that, making an effort with my hands & feet, I have crossed over to safety on the further shore." — *MN 22*

In the same way, you don't put aside your desire for awakening or your sense of yourself as responsible for the path until the path has done its job. And when you put them down skillfully, you'll do it with an appreciative sense of the good they have done.

# *The Kamma of Goodwill*

Mettā—goodwill—is a wish for happiness that you can extend to yourself or to others. One of the Buddha's most basic meditation practices is to take goodwill—which in its natural, human state tends to be partial to those you like—and to extend it to all beings everywhere. He calls this unlimited state of goodwill a *brahmavihāra*, a sublime attitude, in which human goodwill is lifted to the immeasurable level of goodwill as felt by Brahmās, the highest level of heavenly beings.

This takes effort. After all, ill will—the opposite of goodwill—is no less natural in the human heart. It's just as natural to feel ill will for those who have betrayed you as it is to feel goodwill for those who behave in ways you like.

Because training your goodwill to be unlimited takes effort, it's a type of kamma. This means that to do it skillfully, you have to understand both the kamma of happiness and the kamma of developing mind states in general: *what* you're wishing for others, and *how* to best go about it.

As the Buddha notes, happiness comes from acting on skillful intentions. And all skillful intentions start with heedfulness, the recognition that there are dangers in life, but that your actions can determine whether you'll succumb to those dangers or not. This attitude contains a rudimentary understanding of kamma—that your actions will decide whether you suffer or not—and a measure of goodwill for yourself: You want to keep yourself safe.

To stay safe, you always have to act in harmless ways, which means that you always have to act with goodwill toward all beings. This requires developing goodwill for all, regardless of how they have treated you, and regardless of whether they "deserve" to be happy. Remember the example of the Buddha, who taught the way to the end of suffering to all beings, regardless of whether they "deserved" to suffer or not.

Then you reflect on how other living beings will have to act to be truly happy: Like you, they'll have to create the causes for true happiness. So when you extend thoughts of goodwill to others, you're not thinking, "May

you be happy doing whatever you're doing." You're thinking, "May you understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." This attitude you can extend to all beings, without hypocrisy, regardless of how they've behaved in the past.

Now, in cases where people have been particularly cruel, this may be hard. You might want to see them suffer first before they change their ways. But you have to remind yourself that people rarely see the connection between their misbehavior and their suffering, so wishing for them to suffer—even when it seems to serve the cause of justice—rarely fosters the causes for true happiness in the world. It's better to wish that people come to their senses and have a voluntary change of heart, and that you be willing to aid in that process in whatever way you can. After all, wouldn't you prefer to come to your senses without having to be punished first for *your* past wrongdoings? Allow others the same measure of grace.

Of course, there will be those who are misbehaving and refuse to change their ways, and there's nothing—at least at the moment—that you can do about it. This is why unlimited equanimity is also a necessary part of brahmavihāra practice. You reflect that beings are free to choose their actions, and you're in no position to guarantee that everyone will choose to be skillful. Not even the Buddha could do that. So to keep your attitude always skillful, you have to develop equanimity in cases where other people are beyond your ability to influence in a skillful direction.

This thought focuses on the inner work that needs to be done to develop the brahmavihāras in a skillful way. This is where the kamma of developing a mind state comes into play.

Mind states are primarily shaped by two types of *saṅkhāra*, or fabrication*:*

- the way you talk to yourself in phrases and sentences, and
- the labels you place on things, either as images or individual words.

The Buddha recommends using both types of fabrication to give rise to universal goodwill and to keep it in the mind at all times.

Here's an example for how to phrase thoughts of goodwill:

> "May these beings be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble, and may they look after themselves with ease!" — *MN 41*

Notice how this sentence ends with a wish that all beings will be able to depend on themselves in their search for happiness. Mature goodwill accords dignity to others, recognizing that they are the agents responsible for their happiness. Your role is to wish them well in that pursuit, and to influence them, wherever appropriate, to choose their actions wisely. That's how your goodwill can be most effective.

Of course, you can express goodwill in your own words, the important point being that you always keep in mind how goodwill relates to kamma: your own kamma and the kamma of everyone else.

The discourses offer further reflections for extending goodwill to all. For example, when someone does something unskillful that you find displeasing, you can avoid giving in to anger or ill will for that person by remembering skillful things that the person has done in the past. This makes it easier to foster thoughts of goodwill even in difficult cases.

In addition to phrases, the Buddha recommends images to keep in mind to strengthen your goodwill.

The most striking images stress the importance of protecting your goodwill in the face of difficulties. For instance, just as a mother with an only child would protect that child with her life, in the same way, you should protect your goodwill for all beings no matter what they do. In one of his more graphic images, the Buddha says that even if bandits have overpowered you and are cutting you up into little pieces with a two-handled saw, you should develop thoughts of goodwill starting with them and then extending to the entire cosmos. Better that you die protecting your goodwill than that you die with a heart of ill will, for ill will would take you to a bad destination. As the Buddha adds, it's good to keep this image always in mind, so that when people mistreat you in ways that are less drastic, it'll be easier to respond with goodwill.

Other analogies that aid in strengthening goodwill emphasize the fact that as you make it vast, you also make it powerful, impervious to other people's misbehavior. Perceive it as being like the Earth: A man can come

and try to make the Earth be without earth by digging here and there, spitting here and there, urinating here and there, but he'll never succeed, because the Earth is so much larger than his puny actions.

Or you can perceive your goodwill as being like space: People can try to write words in space, but the words don't stick, because space has no surface for them to stick to. In the same way, you can make your mind so vast and spacious that other people's hurtful words have no place to adhere.

The Buddha also recommends perceiving goodwill as a form of wealth. He expands on this analogy with a comparison: Just as a wealthy person is hardly affected by a small fine, in the same way, if your mind has been made expansive by universal goodwill, you're hardly affected by the results of past bad actions.

And you can expand further on the analogy yourself: Because you can produce goodwill simply by thinking it, you can make this inner wealth as abundant as you like. It's like having your own press for printing money with an unlimited stock of paper and ink. Unlike worldly currencies—where the more money is printed, the lower its value—the currency of universal goodwill keeps on growing in value the more you produce and share all around.

# *All about Acceptance*

When the Dhamma gets sound-bitten, one of the most common bites is that the Buddha's teachings are all about acceptance. Depending on the person biting off that piece of the Dhamma, this can mean any number of things. One common denominator among Buddhist teachers is the idea that we have to accept the existence of unskillful qualities in our minds if we want to overcome them. In this case, acceptance means the opposite of denial. And there's nothing controversial about this point.

But some teachers take the idea of acceptance much further. For them, it means adopting a non-judging attitude. They go on to say that we suffer because we don't accept ourselves, others, or the world around us, but we can end our sufferings by learning to embrace reality in its totality with deep, non-judging affirmation.

So it can come as a surprise to look into the Pāli Canon—the oldest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—and to find that, aside from accepting invitations, the Buddha mentions the word *accept (adhivāseti)* in only three contexts:

- accepting the fact of harsh or untruthful speech,
- accepting the fact of physical pain, and
- accepting the fact that a loved one has died and that you have to move on with your life.

But even in these three cases, the Buddha and his disciples don't counsel mere acceptance. They also recommend tools for minimizing the suffering that can come from these facts.

Even more important, there's a very large range of things that the Buddha says *not* to accept, an area directly related to one of his most categorical teachings: the need to abandon unskillful mind states. As he says, if any of these mind states should arise, you should not accept it, and instead should "abandon it, destroy it, dispel it, & wipe it out of existence" (MN 2).

Equally important, we have to note the Buddha never uses the words *acceptance* or *non-acceptance* in connection with the area where they're most commonly used by many Buddhist teachers at present: accepting yourself, accepting other people, or accepting the world at large.

So the idea of acceptance played a fairly limited role in the early teachings, circumscribed by the strong directives on what not to accept and the areas where the issue of acceptance or non-acceptance plays no role at all.

This means that there's a huge contrast between the early and modern teachings on the role of acceptance. Part of this contrast comes from the fact that the word *acceptance* means one thing in the modern context and something else in the Canon. The modern idea of acceptance carries two clusters of meanings, centered on the opposite of denial on the one hand and the opposite of rejection on the other. This second cluster of meanings covers a wide range, from an attitude of non-judging and non-contention to one of actively embracing. This wide range can sometimes lead to confusion, as when a person talking can mean one thing by the word *acceptance*, but a person listening hears something else.

In the Canon, though, *acceptance* covers a narrower range: tolerating. This means that the most fruitful way to compare modern ideas of acceptance with those in the Canon is to see how the Canon uses a different vocabulary to treat the issues covered by the modern idea of acceptance. That way, we can see to what extent the modern sense of the word is in harmony with what the Canon teaches, and whether it adds something new and potentially useful to what might be lacking in the early teachings.

The best way to answer this question is to look in more detail at:

- how the idea of acceptance is explained in the modern context,
- how well these explanations correspond to the way the Canon treats the same issues with a different vocabulary, and
- how it describes the ideal way to relate to yourself and others for the sake of putting an end to suffering.

When we answer these questions, we can decide if the Buddha would have accepted the modern concept of acceptance as a useful addition to his vocabulary and to the strategies in his repertoire, or if he would have

rejected it. Having settled these issues, we can then look more clearly at what his own teachings on acceptance have to offer us.

## *Part One : Global Acceptance*

We have to note at the outset that not all the modern teachers who advocate acceptance as a central Buddhist teaching are equally global in their claims. Most will admit that acceptance, meaning non-denial, is at most a first step in dealing with the unskillful behavior that leads to suffering: You have to accept the fact that you're acting or thinking unskillfully before you can work to abandon that unskillful behavior. Others, though, advocate acceptance in a more global and all-encompassing way, claiming that acceptance is *the* central Buddhist teaching, that—in and of itself—it strikes at the root of the cause of suffering and is the main tool for bringing suffering to an end. These more global claims are the ones we'll focus on first.

There are two major ways in which these claims are made. Both see that the primary cause of suffering lies in reactivity toward negative self-judgment. They differ in how they explain their approaches in Buddhist-sounding terms.

1) The first approach draws on the idea that, by nature, we're interconnected with all of reality, and that we suffer when we feel cut off from that interconnectedness. Why do we feel cut off? Because we feel cut off from parts of ourselves, parts over which we feel ashamed, to the point of denying that they even exist. We're afraid that if we acknowledge them, to say nothing of embracing them, we'll feel unworthy of love. And why is that? Because we engage in negative reactive self-judgments. These then cause us to be negative about the world as well, cutting ourselves off from it.

Acceptance solves this problem by embracing our shortcomings, admitting their existence without judging them and affirming they don't diminish our self worth. Embracing our inner wholeness in this way allows us to find an even more expansive wholeness in embracing the world at large.

2) The second approach draws on the idea that conditioned reality is by nature impermanent, stressful, and not fully under our control. This means that we can't find perfection in it, either because (a) conditioned things are inherently imperfect, (b) we can't influence present-moment conditions anyway, in that they're already fully determined by past causes and conditions, or (c) both. We, however, lose sight of these facts and try to find happiness and perfection in those realities. In doing so, we assume a contentious attitude toward conditions, demanding from them something they cannot provide. This causes us to suffer because we can never achieve our ideals for happiness and perfection. Why does this make us suffer? Because we judge ourselves to be failures. These negative self-judgments are then compounded when we reactively judge ourselves negatively for being so negative and reactive.

Here, acceptance solves this problem by affirming that our ideals are unrealistic, and that imperfections in our lives are not our fault. This allows us to rest at peace with our imperfections and those of others, greeting the world in a non-contentious way, content with whatever imperfect happiness it has to offer.

The means for nurturing acceptance in all of these instances is said to be *mindfulness*, which is explained in many ways. In some cases, it's defined as an unresisting openness to the flow of phenomena—kind, non-contentious, and non-reactive. In others, it's defined as unconditioned intuitive awareness of the present, a reality that places no conditions on anything that it knows, and that doesn't have to be developed but always and already simply is. In all cases, though, a defining feature of mindfulness is that it doesn't pass judgment on the things it's aware of, but simply accepts them for what they are.

These explanations sound Buddhist because they use terminology made popular by Buddhist teachers, medieval and modern. Actually, though, they have very little to do with what the Canon tells us about what the Buddha taught.

With regard to the first approach, the Buddha never extols interconnectedness. The closest he comes to the idea of interconnectedness is in his teaching on dependent co-arising, which deals, not with our connections to one another, but with the connections among events in the

mind as it processes and shapes experience. And he never suggests that these connections should be embraced. In fact, quite the opposite: He saw interdependent phenomena as inherently unstable, and thus the source of suffering rather than a consoling sense of wholeness. So embracing your imperfections, even if it makes you feel more connected with others, won't put an end to your suffering.

With regard to the second approach, the Buddha did state that unconditioned happiness can't be found in conditioned realities, but he also affirmed that conditioned realities can be mastered to form a path that leads to the unconditioned happiness of unbinding, or nibbāna. In other words, he was less interested in what conditions *are,* and more interested in how they *can be made to function* so as to lead to the unconditioned. So the path of wisdom doesn't consist of accepting whatever limited happiness can be found within the confines of conditions. It consists of mastering conditions as a path to the unlimited happiness that lies beyond them.

As for the idea that the present moment is entirely determined by past causes and conditions, the Buddha went out of his way to attack this idea in no uncertain terms (AN 3:62; AN 3:101; MN 101). If the present moment were totally pre-determined, he said, there would be no way to practice for the complete ending of suffering and stress. Even though past actions play a role in influencing the present moment, our present-moment choices and intentions play a larger role in shaping those influences into what we actually do and experience in the present. So instead of denying the possibility of choice in the present moment, we should instead learn how to realize its full potential more skillfully.

And as for mindfulness, the Buddha never defined it as an accepting, non-judging awareness. He defined it as a faculty of active memory and compared it to a gatekeeper to a frontier fortress, wise in recognizing who's an enemy and who's a foe, judging who to let into the fortress and who to keep out (SN 48:10; AN 7:64). The purpose of mindfulness is not simply to be open, without resistance, to the flow of phenomena. Instead, it allows you to recognize and judge skillful and unskillful qualities as they arise in the mind, and to remember how to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop and maintain skillful ones for the sake of developing all the factors of the path (MN 117; AN 4:245).

And it's not unconditioned. Mindfulness, as part of the path, is something to be developed. Present-moment awareness isn't unconditioned, either. It's simply part of the aggregate of consciousness, which, like all aggregates, is conditioned by the aggregate of fabrication and by the objects of which it's aware, which can include the perception of infinite consciousness itself (MN 38; MN 52; SN 22:79; SN 35:93).

What the advocates of global acceptance generally describe as mindfulness corresponds to the Canon's definition, not of mindfulness, but of equanimity. And although the Buddha does note that some causes of suffering will disappear when you look on them with equanimity, there are others that won't. Those require a more concerted effort—what he calls *the exertion of a fabrication*—to create the conditions in the mind that will allow you to let them go through dispassion (MN 101). Now, even equanimity is a fabricated mind state, which means that when the Buddha contrasts equanimity to the exertion of a fabrication, he's apparently referring to cases where the exertion required to fabricate equanimity isn't conscious. This further means that the ability to get rid of the causes of suffering always requires the conditioned activity of fabrication to at least some extent.

So, although those who recommend global acceptance clothe their ideas in what sounds like Buddhist rhetoric, their rhetoric actually deviates from what the Buddha taught. When it's stripped off, there's not much left: just the idea that people suffer because of negative self-judgments. Compared to the way the Buddha described the sufferings he saw in the world, this analysis of the problem of suffering seems pretty shallow and lame. When, in the second watch of the night of his awakening, the Buddha saw the beings of the cosmos dying and being reborn, the lowest level of the cosmos wasn't that of human beings suffering from negative self-judgments. It was deep, horrendous levels of hell that lasted for many eons (MN 4). When, soon after his awakening, he surveyed the world, he wasn't struck by the number of people with wounded self-image who were blaming themselves for being failures. Instead, he saw the beings of the world "burning with the many fevers and aflame with the many fires born of passion, aversion, and delusion" (Ud 3:10). His response to seeing beings in hell and on fire wasn't to accept them. It was to have goodwill and

compassion for them. He decided to teach so that the beings of the world would know how to escape from hell and to put those fires out. Suffering, he saw, was caused by passion and desire in all forms, and not just shame and fear of being judged. To put an end to all varieties of suffering would be a far-reaching and radical task.

Because beings suffered from their own actions, his teachings had to focus on how his listeners could act skillfully, creating the causes for happiness, so that they could actually bring their sufferings to an end. This is why goodwill, in the context of the power of kamma, is not the same as non-judging acceptance. To give full expression to his goodwill, the Buddha had to give his students clear standards for judging which actions should and shouldn't be done (AN 3:62).

So the idea that global acceptance of oneself and others would count as the central Buddhist teaching pales in comparison to the mission the Buddha set for himself in teaching the Dhamma and, in the course of his lifetime, fulfilled.

### On Self-acceptance

The question remains, though, that even though global acceptance doesn't represent the heart of the Buddha's teachings, isn't there at least some role for self-acceptance in the practice of taking those teachings on? In other words, would the Buddha have judged modern ideas of self-acceptance to be a useful addition to his own conception of acceptance?

To answer these questions, we have to remember two points we've already made.

The first point is one we just mentioned: the Buddha's realization that genuine goodwill for others means teaching them how to judge their actions so that they can recognize their unskillful actions as mistakes and learn not to repeat them. This means that goodwill for yourself carries the same implication: You have to learn how to be skillful in judging your actions. As the Buddha said, you should be your own prosecutor and cross-examiner, pointing out your faults so that you can learn from them (Dhp 379).

An important feature of this examination is that you pass judgment, not on yourself as a person, but on the actions you choose to do. As the Canon

notes, the ideas "I am good" and "I am bad" are craving verbalizations that ensnare people (AN 4:199). These ideas are best abandoned so that they don't interfere with seeing that goodness and badness lie in specific acts of intention, and not in your very being, where they would be harder to train. You accept agency, but you judge, not the agent, but the acts the agent does.

Now, the Buddha wouldn't have you stop simply with passing judgment on your actions. He also taught how to use those judgments to avoid repeating any mistakes you've made: to recognize that the action was wrong, to be ashamed of it—in the healthy sense of not being shameless—to realize that it was beneath you, and to desire not to repeat it. You talk it over with someone more advanced on the path, and then you spread thoughts of goodwill for all beings. You extend goodwill to yourself to keep from being crippled with remorse and to remember what goodwill for yourself means: that you be firm in your determination to learn from your mistakes and not to do harm. You extend goodwill to all others to keep that determination in mind in your dealings with everyone (MN 61; SN 42:8).

On the other hand, when you see that your actions *haven't* caused harm, you should take joy in that fact and determine to keep on training. In other words, you find happiness in being harmless, but you don't rest satisfied with your skills until you've completed the path to the end of suffering (MN 61; AN 2:5). In fact, you take joy in not resting satisfied (AN 6:78). That's when your goodwill for yourself and others is truly wise.

Now, it's obvious that this approach to the practice involves that you not deny your past failings. Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to learn from them. At the same time, you don't cripple yourself with the thought that you don't deserve to follow the path to true happiness. So on these points, the Buddha's approach is in line with that of modern self-acceptance.

But this is where a second point we've already made becomes relevant: the fact that the modern idea of acceptance carries so many meanings that it obscures the distinctions that Buddha made in his understanding of what goodwill implies. If we try to apply the modern approach to self-acceptance to the practice, it could actually get in the way of following through with his instructions.

- To apply acceptance as a non-judging mind state would blur the distinction between what should be judged and what shouldn't, along with the distinction between what's skillful and what's not. As the Buddha said, when you can sense the foolishness of your unskillful actions, you are to that extent wise (Dhp 63). If you won't pass judgment on your foolish acts, past or present, you abort that first step in gaining wisdom.
- Acceptance as non-contention and non-resistance would interfere with the need to be defiant in doing battle with any unskillful intentions that prove difficult to abandon.
- The concern with self-image would overshadow the need (1) to focus your powers of judgment on your actions, rather than yourself, and (2) to see, objectively, what effect your actions had on your own long-term happiness and that of others. Genuine goodwill for yourself means, not painting a good self-image, but doing whatever you can to become more skillful in what you actually do, say, and think.

So, instead of teaching self-acceptance to his listeners, the Buddha had them focus more on the goal that could be attained—and the dangers that could be avoided—by taking on the path. Instead of having them focus on the past, he had them focus on what they could do right now for the sake of a bright future, encouraging their fighting spirit to be up for the challenge. This approach requires that they develop goodwill for themselves, and that an important part of that goodwill is learning to judge their actions as skillful or unskillful. To try to add the vocabulary of modern self-acceptance to the Buddha's vocabulary of goodwill and skillful action would simply muddy the waters with imprecise concepts, and in some cases—as in extolling a non-judging, non-resistant, non-contentious state of mind—actually get in the way.

### On Accepting Others

The other side of modern ideas of acceptance deals with offering acceptance for all. Here again, there is some overlap between modern ideas and the Buddha's recommendations for how to treat others, but there are

also areas where the two approaches diverge, and where his vocabulary for dealing with the subtleties of this issue is more useful and precise.

The overlap is in the area of the general attitude you should have toward everyone. The Buddha advocates developing a heart and a mind of goodwill toward all, wishing that they "be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble, and may they look after themselves with ease" (AN 10:165). He recommended cultivating not only the wish that beings be happy, but also the wish that they create, through their own actions, the causes for happiness. For example, he suggested thoughts like these:

> *May all beings be happy at heart.*
> *Let no one deceive another*
> *or despise anyone anywhere,*
> *or, through anger or resistance-perception,*
> *wish for another to suffer.* — *Sn 1:8*

Yet even though the Buddha himself extended unlimited goodwill to all, there were some limits on who he would accept to teach. Here again, the relationship between goodwill on the one hand and the need to judge actions on the other comes in.

We can assume that everyone the Buddha taught had bad kamma in their past to at least some extent. The lepers (Ud 5:3); the outcastes (Thag 12:2); Aṅgulimāla, the mass murderer (MN 86); and King Ajātasattu, the patricide (DN 2) are just a few of the most obvious examples. The question of whether they deserved to suffer from their past actions was, for him, a non-issue. His purpose was to help people change their actions to become more skillful, regardless of how badly they had acted in the past. If their present kamma was such that they genuinely desired to end their suffering, he was willing to teach them. By focusing on that desire—and not on who they were or had been—he was teaching them to train their focus there, too.

But if people were not willing to accept his advice, he wouldn't even discuss Dhamma with them (MN 18; Sn 4:8). If a deceitful person came into the monkhood, he would have him expelled (Ud 5:5). If a student didn't respond either to gentle or to harsh training, he would "kill" him, in the sense that he would stop training him (AN 4:111).

So the Buddha didn't practice blanket acceptance for everyone he met.

And he taught his students that even though they should extend goodwill to all, they, too, shouldn't accept everyone as friends. Goodwill for others doesn't mean sacrificing goodwill for yourself. You should be careful to accept as your close friends only those people who will have a good influence on you.

This point is so important that when the Buddha listed the steps for progressing in the Dhamma, he would often begin the list with the act of looking for friends of the right kind (MN 95; AN 9:1; AN 10:61). As he saw in the second knowledge on the night of his awakening, your choice of friends influences your views and actions, leading potentially to rebirth on either the highest or the lowest realms of the cosmos.

He advocated friends of two types: those who were loyal—who had your well-being at heart—and those who were admirable, people of integrity who set good examples for you to follow.

*Loyal friends* he defined as having four characteristics: They're helpful, they share in your sorrows and joys, they point you to activities that will be for your benefit, and they treat you with kindness. Friends like this should be cherished in the way that a mother would cherish her only child.

Disloyal friends are those who make friends in order to cheat them, who are good only in word, who flatter and cajole, and who are companions in ruinous activities, such as gambling and drinking. Friends of this sort are actually enemies, and should be avoided like a dangerous road (DN 31).

*Admirable friends* are marked by four qualities: conviction (in the Buddha's awakening), virtue, generosity, and discernment. To enter into an admirable friendship means not only looking for friends of this sort but also trying to emulate their good qualities, so that you can become an admirable friend to yourself and to others as well (AN 8:54). A friendship of this sort, the Buddha said, is the most important external aid in gaining the first level of awakening (Iti 17).

The Buddha also recommended being very careful in choosing a teacher, which he treated as an aspect of choosing admirable friends. He recommended devoting time to noticing if the teacher would advise people to do things that were not in their best interest, or if he or she would claim

to know things he or she didn't know. In other words, you had to check to see if the teacher was compassionate and truthful (MN 95). You also had to take time and be observant to notice if the teacher was virtuous, pure, and endowed with endurance and discernment (Ud 6:2). And to be a judge of a teacher's integrity, you had to have some integrity yourself (MN 110).

So the Buddha—by his example and by his words—didn't recommend a blanket non-judging acceptance of others. He made a clear distinction between friendliness as an attitude to be cultivated in all cases, and specific friendships that should be cultivated or allowed to end. A similar distinction applied to a teacher's attitude in accepting the responsibility of taking on a student.

To keep this distinction clear, it would be a mistake to characterize his attitude toward others as one of all-around acceptance. His goodwill *required* that he be selective in who he accepted to teach. He didn't want to waste time by accepting all comers. That way, he could focus on accepting as students those he could actually help. As the standard description of his qualities states, he was the unexcelled trainer, not of everyone, but of those fit to be tamed (SN 11:3). And if, out of goodwill for yourself, you aspire to be fit to be tamed, you should be equally judicious in your choice of friends.

### *Part Two : The Buddha's Acceptance*

This leaves us with two questions: If the Buddha wouldn't have found the modern concept of acceptance useful in his teaching, where *did* he find the words *acceptance* and *non-acceptance* useful? And how would he advise you to treat the things you should and shouldn't accept?

As we noted, the Buddha uses the word *acceptance* to mean tolerating. When he advises acceptance, it's to show you how not to suffer from things over whose existence you don't have total control. When he advises non-acceptance, it's to show you how not to suffer from things over which you do have some control.

So his use of these concepts is another part of his larger strategy in teaching how to extend goodwill to yourself in the context of the principles of skillful kamma. This strategy is based on two points that we've already

mentioned. The first explains *why* this strategy can possibly work; the second explains *how* it's done.

1) Your experience of the present moment is not totally determined by your past kamma. It's also shaped by present kamma, which is potentially free to fashion the raw material coming from past kamma in skillful or unskillful ways.

2) The causes of suffering come in two sorts: those that go away when you simply look at them with equanimity, and those that go away only when you make an effort to abandon them. This effort the Buddha described as "exerting a fabrication," and it refers to three types of fabrication: bodily, verbal, and mental.

- Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe in and out.
- Verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself. The Buddha divides this into two activities: directed thought, in which you focus on a topic; and evaluation, in which you ask questions, analyze, and make comments on the topic.
- Mental fabrication is composed of two types of mental activities. The first is perception, in which you apply mental labels to things, identifying what they are, what they mean, and how important they are. As when you see a red traffic light: You perceive the color as "red," you perceive that it means "stop," and you perceive that you should obey it. These perceptions can take the form of words or visual images. The second type of mental fabrication consists of feelings: feeling tones of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.

As we've already noted, even the act of looking on with equanimity is a fabricated activity, which means that every instance of abandoning a cause of suffering will require fabrication to at least some extent.

These two points—the fact that the present moment is partly shaped by present kamma and the fact that the causes of suffering require the exertion of fabrications, conscious or not—are related in the sense that the three types of fabrication are the present-moment kamma that shapes, from the results of past kamma, your experience of the present moment, in the same way that a cook prepares raw ingredients to make a meal.

The Buddha teaches skillful versions of these cooking skills to help make sure that you don't suffer even from past bad kamma, but their impact doesn't end there. The fact that you're not suffering puts you in a better position to clearly see the negative situation in which you find yourself and to think of actions that would change it in a genuinely beneficial way.

One more point: There's a discourse—AN 3:101—in which the Buddha lists the ways in which you can minimize the bad impact of past unskillful actions on the present moment. All of his specific instructions scattered throughout the discourses for how not to suffer from the things he has you accept fall under the general instructions given in that discourse:

- You foster an expansive mind state, as when developing the unlimited attitudes of the brahma-vihāras;
- you develop your virtue and discernment; and
- you train the mind so that it's not easily overcome by pleasure or pain (MN 36).

The image the Buddha gives for this expansive mind state is of a broad river as opposed to a small cup of water. If you put a large salt crystal into the small cup of water, you can't drink the water because it's too salty. But if you put the same salt crystal into a large, clean river, the water would still be fit to drink. In the same way, when you follow the Buddha's instructions for dealing with the things you have to accept, your mind becomes so expansive that the difficulties of life seem small in comparison.

This is a good perception to keep in mind.

### The Nature of Things

In all the cases where the Buddha advises acceptance, he has you start with a perception of reality: This is the nature of things.

It's the nature of human speech that people will say things that are timely or untimely, true or false, affectionate or harsh, beneficial or unbeneficial, spoken out of goodwill or inner hate.

It's the nature of the body that it'll have pains and be exposed to physical attacks.

It's the nature of everything that is born to die.

The purpose of these reflections is to remind you that when you encounter these things, it's nothing out of the ordinary. The universe isn't dumping on you alone. Everyone is subject to these facts of the human realm. That thought should get you out of the confining narrative of your own suffering and inspire some broader compassion in you, as you reflect on the sufferings of all the beings all over the world who are subject to the same kinds of things. And because these things are ordinary, if you're exposed to untimely, false, unfriendly speech or to physical attacks, it doesn't give you extraordinary rights to break the precepts in retaliation. It's precisely in cases like this that you should hold to the precepts as your only trustworthy guidelines for avoiding suffering.

Once you've accepted these general principles, you can move on to the specifics for how to deal with the various instances of what you should accept.

### Unwelcome Speech

If you're subjected to what the Buddha calls unwelcome speech, the Canon recommends depersonalizing it with the following reflection: "A painful feeling, born of ear-contact, has arisen within me. And that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact" (MN 28). The implication here is that you should leave it at the contact at the ear, let it end when the contact ends, and not to drag it in to reverberate in your mind. This makes sense, but how many times have you ever thought in that way? And what gets in the way of thinking that way? The unskillful verbal and mental fabrications that spring up in response to the contact—thoughts like: "Why is she treating me with such disrespect?" "Doesn't he appreciate all that I've done for him?"

This is one of the reasons why we try to develop mindfulness, which, as we've noted, is the ability to keep things in mind. In this case, you try to keep in mind the perception that if you're feeling oppressed by someone else's words, it's because you've dragged them into your mind when you could have just dropped them at the ear. To see yourself as responsible here isn't meant to lay blame on you. It simply means that you can change the situation: If you let things stop at the contact, you can stop suffering. That's an empowering perception.

At the same time, you have to bring goodwill to the situation in a way that makes you strong. This, too, will require fostering some skillful perceptions. If someone harasses you with his or her speech, you can think of your goodwill as being as large as the Earth. The person harassing you is like a puny man who comes along with a hoe and a basket with the aim of making the Earth be without earth. He digs here and digs there, spits here and spits there, urinates here and urinates there, saying, "Be without earth, be without earth." But of course, his efforts seem laughable because the Earth is so immense.

The Buddha also recommends perceiving your goodwill as large and cool, like the River Ganges. If someone were to come along with a torch to set it on fire, he wouldn't succeed. Or you can perceive your goodwill as being like space: If people were to try to write words on space, there would be nothing for their words to stick to. You want to think of your awareness as being cool and unflammable, as offering no surface onto which anything can stick, in just the same way (MN 21).

So even though we have to accept the fact that unwelcome speech will be directed at us, we can perceive the situation in such a way that we don't put ourselves in the line of fire. We won't have to suffer from it. And when you're not causing yourself pain over that person's words, you're less likely to want to retaliate and cause pain to that person. You can think more clearly about the most appropriate way to respond to the situation: whatever will lead to true well-being in the long term.

### Physical Pain

As for physical pain, the Buddha says that it's perfectly fine to use medical treatments to deal with it, but he also notes that there are plenty of cases where the pain won't respond (AN 3:22). In any event, the aim when confronted with pain, even when it remains in the body, is to make sure that it doesn't invade and remain in the mind (MN 36).

Now, the Buddha rarely talks specifically on the topic of how to endure pain. In fact, most of his recommendations on dealing with pain come in his discussions of feelings in general. This may be because if you don't understand feelings in all their forms—pleasant, painful, and neutral—you'll open the door to let pleasures invade your mind, leaving the door open for pains to invade as well.

One perception the Buddha recommends is to perceive feelings as like the bubbles that appear on the surface of a body of water when it rains (SN 22:95). They come and go in a flash. In the same way, when you're faced with an ongoing pain, you should see it not as a solid block of pain, but as discrete moments of pain arising and passing away. Past bubbles are gone, future bubbles haven't happened yet. There are just the ephemeral bubbles disappearing even as they appear in the present. This perception makes the pain much easier to take.

Similarly, when you focus on the topic of feeling while doing breath meditation, you should focus on giving rise to feelings of refreshment and pleasure, to notice how feelings and perceptions play a role in shaping the mind, and then cultivate feelings and perceptions that have a calming effect on the mind (MN 118). Applied specifically to feelings of pain, this means that you first look for parts of the body that you can make comfortable and refreshing by the way you breathe, and then, coming from a position of strength, you can investigate the perceptions you have around the pain, trying to find ones that have a calming effect.

Here the Buddha offers a perception to apply to perceptions themselves: They're like mirages, without any substance (SN 22:95). This thought encourages you to let go of any perceptions that aggravate the pain, no matter how true they may seem, to replace them with perceptions that are equally true but have a better effect on the mind.

Over the centuries, Buddhist practice traditions have taken the hints provided by these instructions to develop further perceptions and thought fabrications as techniques for dealing with pain. Some examples include: If the mind is weighed down by thoughts of how long the pain has already lasted—and how much longer it may continue to last—remind yourself that past pain is gone, future pain hasn't yet arrived, so pay attention only to the pain in the present. If you're able to see the pain as discrete moments, ask yourself: Are those moments coming at you, or are they going away from you even as they appear?

It's in ways like this that you can take the Buddha's general instructions on feelings and use your ingenuity in applying them to the experience of pain in such a way that the mind doesn't have to suffer from it.

If you can train your mind so that pain can't invade it or remain, you can approach the physical dangers of the world with a lot less fear. There's even a passage in the suttas where a monk reflects in a way that shows how acceptance of pain, combined with the proper mental skills, can lead to fearlessness:

> "So my persistence will be aroused & untiring, my mindfulness established & unconfused, my body calm & unaroused, my mind centered & unified. And now let contact with fists come to this body, let contact with stones, with sticks, with knives come to this body, for this is how the Buddha's bidding is done." — MN 28

If malicious people harass or beat you, the Buddha would expand on the above instructions to remind you that you should extend goodwill to those people so that you don't drag your own mind down with thoughts of rage and revenge. Although he allows his monks to defend themselves when attacked, their acts of self-defense have to be measured, never aiming at breaking the precept against killing. Even then, though, you should have goodwill for your attackers.

Here the Buddha provides another perception: Even if bandits were to saw you into little pieces with a two-handled saw, you should develop thoughts of goodwill, starting with them, and then extending from them to infuse the entire cosmos. You may have to lose this body, but you can still protect and lift the quality of your mind. That's where your true wealth lies (MN 21).

This, by the way, is the meaning of the Buddha's image comparing universal goodwill to a mother's attitude toward her only child. He's not saying that you should love all beings as a mother would love her child. That's impossible. He's saying that you should protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child, even if it meant risking her life (Sn 1:8). Better to lose your life than to lose your goodwill.

### Loss

As for the grief that comes from losing a loved one: When the Buddha tells you to reflect on the fact that all those who are born will have to die, he does it not only to lessen the sense that the universe is dumping on you alone. He also wants you to open your heart to feel compassion for all those

who have been suffering in this way and who will continue to do so as long as birth keeps happening. That thought helps to take the "me and mine" out of the grief, which the Canon identifies as one of the major sources of suffering in your sense of loss: the hurt that comes when you focus on the sense that a part of yourself has been ripped away (SN 21:2).

However, the Buddha does allow room for recognizing the particulars of your suffering. He says that as long as you see the benefit of "eulogies, chants, good sayings, donations, and family customs," to honor the dead and to show the living that the goodness of those who have passed away is deeply appreciated, you should follow those customs diligently.

But then you have to accept the fact that you still have work to do, to attain whatever aims you may have in terms of the world or the Dhamma. Then you focus on returning to that work (AN 5:49). This reflection is aimed at counteracting one of the most debilitating aspects of grief: the sense that, with the loss of a loved one, life has lost its meaning. You should reflect that as long as you're still breathing, there's still a lot of good you can do, especially in training your mind. As the Buddha notes, if you take seriously the fact that—no matter where you go in the cosmos—death and separation won't stop until you've uprooted the sources of birth in the mind, you'll make it your aim to give rise to the path to the end of suffering (AN 5:57). Life needs a purpose, and in this way you give yourself a good purpose for however much life is left in you.

### The Mind Like a River

It's easy to see that in all the cases where the Buddha encourages you to practice acceptance, he doesn't leave you to suffer from outrageous misfortunes. He has you develop your discernment to keep your situation in the proper perspective, and to foster perceptions and ways of talking to yourself that save your mind from being overcome by pleasure or pain. You develop your virtue to make sure that you don't respond to unvirtuous people in unvirtuous ways. And you expand your mind with the brahma-vihāras, seeing things in the context of the cosmos as a whole, so that the difficulties of life seem small in comparison. You make your mind like a broad, clear river: You accept the salt of your past kamma, but you pay more attention to expanding the river, developing the present kamma that, as we noted above, protects you from having to suffer in the here-and-now.

## What Not to Accept

As for what not to accept: It's because of the power of present kamma that the Buddha trains you not to accept any unskillful states that arise in the mind. While it's good to be able to protect yourself from the ravages of past bad kamma, it's better to focus on not creating any new bad kamma to begin with. That helps free the mind to work more directly on training itself to put an end to suffering entirely.

Here again, goodwill for yourself—and for others—requires that you learn how to judge your actions as skillful or unskillful as quickly and effectively as you can.

When the Buddha discusses what not to accept, he covers the whole range of any unskillful fabrications arising in the present, but he focuses attention on three: thoughts of sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. These thoughts he labels as wrong resolves in that they directly get in the way of the practice of right concentration (MN 2; SN 45:8).

He has you fight these thoughts off in two ways. The first is through developing their opposite attitudes: resolve on renunciation, goodwill, and harmlessness (or compassion). You do that by engaging in verbal fabrication—the way you talk to yourself—to convince yourself of the value of these positive attitudes in comparison to the drawbacks of their negative counterparts. By focusing on the positive attitudes, you make it easier for the mind to be at peace with itself and to settle into the pleasure and clarity of good, strong states of mental stability.

Then, building on that clarity and stability, you can train yourself to gain freedom from unskillful mind states, not just through restraining them, but also, and more importantly, through understanding them. Here the Buddha provides a five-step framework for actively uprooting any attraction you might have for them.

In the first two steps, you try to see, when they arise, what other factors in the mind cause them to arise; then you try to see how, when those factors in the mind pass away, these unskillful attitudes pass away, too. This teaches you many lessons. Instead of focusing on the external triggers for thoughts, say, of lust or ill will, you look for the triggers in the mind. The mind is not a passive, innocent child, minding its own business until an attractive body or malicious gossip outside provokes it. It's usually actively

out looking for trouble on its own. When you try to detect what the Buddha calls the *origination* of these mind states inside, you turn your gaze inward and begin to get a sense of what drives the mind to keep prowling around outside.

Trying to detect how these unskillful mind states pass away helps you separate yourself from them. The fact that you can see them passing away means they're not you. If they were you, you'd pass away along with them. But you don't. Seeing this is helpful in two ways.

First, you realize that in passing judgment on them, you're not passing judgment on yourself as a person. The fact that you can see they're unskillful is a sign that at least part of your mind is above them.

Also, seeing them pass away shows you that they're not as monolithic or powerful as they sometimes seem. You're not doomed to keep falling for them. They may tell you that if you don't give in to them, they'll just build and build until you're ready to explode. But when you see them come and go, you realize that the idea of their steadily growing intensity is a ruse based simply on the fact that you've been playing along with them—through the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions and feelings you focus on. If you're really intent on gaining freedom from unskillful states, you're free to fabricate the present moment in other ways.

These first two steps focus on seeing the *reality* of these mind states: how, why, and when they're actually fabricated. These steps depend on the stability and clarity of concentration for you to be able to detect these things.

The next two steps focus on their *value*. On the one hand, you look for the allure or gratification of these mind states: What does the mind—or what do your many minds—find appealing about them? On the other hand, you look for their drawbacks: What damage do they do to your long-term well-being and happiness when you give in to them?

Both of these steps require a grounding in the well-being that comes from concentration. When you're coming from a state of steady pleasure and refreshment, you're less likely to lie to yourself about the value of unskillful mind states, hiding their actual allure or underestimating their actual drawbacks.

It's in the context of contemplating drawbacks that the Buddha has you apply the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. These perceptions are meant to emphasize the fact that, whatever the allure of unskillful mind states, that allure is undependable: quick to pass away, turning rapidly from pleasure to stress, and ultimately lying beyond your control.

Then you can compare these drawbacks with the undying happiness the Buddha promises in the truth of the cessation of stress. When you do that, your sense that they have any value begins to fade.

On top of that, you see that you've been the one inflicting these drawbacks on yourself. That realization gives rise to dispassion at the thought of continuing to fabricate these states. And with that thought, you stop producing them and they fall away. This is the fifth step in the Buddha's program: escape through dispassion. That's when you're finally free from that unskillful mind state. You're that much closer to the end of suffering.

## The Power of Kamma

The Buddha's teachings on what to accept and what not to accept are best understood in light of his teachings on how to show goodwill for yourself in line with the principles of kamma. The things he would have you accept are all classed as past kamma and the results of past kamma. Those can't be changed. What you *can* change is your present kamma: both in the processes of fabrication that shape the raw material provided by past kamma into an actual present-moment experience, and in your intentional responses to that experience. If you're acting unskillfully here and now, you shouldn't simply accept that fact, and you certainly shouldn't refrain from passing judgment on your behavior. In passing judgment, you're not afflicting yourself. You're making good on your thoughts of goodwill for yourself and others as you open to the possibility that you can learn from your mistakes and can stop repeating them. Once you recognize that you're creating unnecessary bad kamma, you can learn the skills for expanding your perspective and enlarging your heart, skills that allow you not to suffer from past bad kamma and not to respond to past bad kamma in ways that create even more bad kamma, along with more suffering, now or into the future.

You have the potential power not to suffer. Make the most of it.

And if you want a sound bite to quickly convey the Buddha's message, that would be a good one to keep in mind.

# *In the Same Way*

## The Buddha's Similes for Explaining the Path

The Buddha used a large number of similes and analogies when teaching, both to make his teachings more vivid and memorable, and also to explain points of doctrine. In fact, similes play such a prominent role in his teachings that it's customary, when publishing translations of the Pali Canon, to provide indexes not only to subjects and proper names, but to the similes as well.

However, the Buddha never articulated a theory of the uses and potential abuses of similes and analogies, aside from saying that arguments based on analogies are not necessarily reliable guides for determining what's true (AN 3:66).

Still, his students must have noted how useful his similes were in helping them to understand his teachings, because when they themselves started teaching, they would often introduce similes into their instructions with the following explanation:

> "So then, my friend, I will give you a simile, for there are cases where it's through similes that observant people can understand the meaning of what's being said." — *MN 24*

In other words, the Buddha's students had seen from their own experience in listening to him that similes didn't have to be merely decorative. They were useful in establishing context to explain obscure or seemingly contradictory points of Dhamma. That's how the Buddha used them, and that's how they wanted to use them as well.

So there's a lot to be learned from looking at the similes the Buddha used to explain the practice of the Dhamma. When we do, we find that they can clear up many important misunderstandings about what Dhamma practice entails.

Some of the similes indicate that there is room for relaxation in the practice: A man deciding that he would rather lie down than walk illustrates

the principle that if your mind is making an effort to create unskillful thoughts, you can relax that effort (MN 20). A cowherd resting under a tree during the season when his cows are in no danger of eating the rice crop stands for the fact that you can rest mindfully when no unskillful mental qualities invade the mind (MN 19).

Similes of this sort, though, occur in the context of a much larger number of similes focusing on the need for effort and exertion in the practice: soldiers in battle, people searching for things of value, craftspeople trying to master skills. Although wise effort knows when to relax, that relaxation is in the service of providing you with the energy needed to sustain persistent effort over time.

Of the similes of effort, the most interesting ones are those related to skills, because they show the ways in which Dhamma practice requires more than brute exertion or bravery. It also requires thinking strategically and using your powers of observation to get the desired results from your actions.

Or, to use the terms the Buddha employs in AN 10:73, the Dhamma is nourished through commitment *(anuyoga)* and reflection *(paccavekkhaṇā)*. You commit to doing it as best you can, and then reflect on the results of what you've done so that you can do it better the next time around. These are precisely the qualities of mind needed to master a skill.

So if we look at how the Buddha explains the practice of the Dhamma through similes concerning skills, we can begin to understand how best to master the skill leading to the end of suffering, which is the most advanced skill of all.

The Buddha himself makes this point in a dialog with his attendant, Ven. Ānanda:

> "What do you think, Ānanda? Which is harder to do, harder to master—to shoot arrows through a tiny keyhole without missing, one right after the other, or to take a horsehair split into seven strands and pierce tip with a tip?"
>
> "This, lord, is harder to do, harder to master—to take a horsehair split into seven strands and pierce tip with a tip."

"And they, Ānanda, pierce what is even harder to pierce, those who pierce, as it has come to be, that 'This is stress'; who pierce, as it has come to be, that 'This is the origination of stress' … 'This is the cessation of stress' … 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.'

"Therefore, Ānanda, your duty is the contemplation, 'This is stress … This is the origination of stress … This is the cessation of stress.' Your duty is the contemplation, 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.'" — *SN 56:45*

As we look at some of the similes the Buddha used to illustrate the path of practice, we first have to note that the word "path" contains an implicit simile in itself: You're doing the practice to attain results that you haven't yet achieved, in the same way that you follow a path to go from where you are to where you want to be. The Buddha, contrary to some teachers, never equated the path with the goal. That would have made the image of the path a bad one to begin with. And he explicitly denied the idea that the path would lead you back to an innocent, child-like place you have been earlier but had somehow lost or forgotten (MN 78). As he said, the beginning point of the ignorance that causes suffering can't be discerned (AN 10:61). As far as we might be able to see back through our many lifetimes, there has always been ignorance. This is why the Buddha repeatedly noted that the path he taught led to a goal, that the goal was something you had never achieved before (AN 5:26; AN 5:57), and that it was where you wanted to be.

It's also worth noting that the Buddha's image of the path is actually a mixed metaphor: Although he used the Pali word for "purpose" or "goal"—*attha*—in connection with the Dhamma, he more frequently said that the path led to a fruit: the fruits of the noble attainments. Now, the word for "fruit" in Pali—*phala*—was used generally to mean reward, in the same way that we say that rewarding activities are fruitful, but the association of "path" with "fruit" doesn't appear to be idiomatic.

However, DN 2 hints at a possible reason for why the Buddha made this association. In it, a king—noting that other occupations bear fruit for those who follow them, fruits they can enjoy—wants to know what fruits a person who follows the contemplative life as taught by the Buddha can

expect to enjoy. The Buddha replies with a wide range of fruits enjoyed by a monk who follows his instructions, all the way to the attainment of total release. So it would appear that the message conveyed by combining "path" with "fruit" is that even though the path may be difficult at times, you'll enjoy the results of following it when they come.

> *Those who, devoted, firm-minded,*
> *apply themselves to Gotama's message,*
> *on attaining the goal, plunge into the deathless,*
> *freely enjoying the liberation they've gained.* — *Sn 2:1*

In constructing images of the skills required to produce those fruits, the Buddha made reference sometimes to very basic skills, and sometimes to more advanced ones. Two of the most basic skills appear in similes dealing with the noble eightfold path as a whole. The main thrust of each simile deals with a search—a man seeking milk and another man seeking the safety of the far shore of a river—but in each case, the man in question needs a skill to get what he's looking for. And the way the Buddha treats the skill makes some important points about what's involved in Dhamma practice.

- The first skill comes in MN 126:

> *A man seeking milk twists the horn of a newly calved cow, but doesn't get any milk, regardless of whether he does or doesn't make a wish to get milk. In the same way, if you follow a wrong path—wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration—you won't get results, regardless of whether you do or don't articulate a wish for results. Why? Because it's an inappropriate way of getting results.*
>
> *Another man pulls the cow's udder and gets the milk he's looking for —again, regardless of whether he has or hasn't articulated a wish to get milk. In the same way, if you follow the right path—right view, etc.—you will get results, regardless of whether you do or don't articulate a wish for results. Why is that? Because it's the appropriate way of getting results.*

The skill here is so basic—getting milk out of a cow—that for anyone in a culture like the Buddha's, so centered on cattle, the idea of getting it wrong would be laughable. This means that there's a satirical edge to the points the simile makes. They're so basic that it would seem to go without saying that they're true. Yet centuries of Buddhist history have shown that it's still possible to get them wrong.

The mains points are three:

1) There is a right way and there are many wrong ways to practice. The Buddha is unabashedly clear on this point. The doors leading to the Dhamma are not infinite.

2) The wish to gain results has no effect on whether you get them. In other words, if you follow the path incorrectly, no amount of wishing will get you the results you want. If you follow the path correctly, the wish to gain awakening won't prevent your awakening if you use it wisely.

3) If you've been putting an effort into the practice but haven't gotten results, the problem is not that you've exerted effort. It's that you've exerted effort in the wrong way. The Buddha's advice to the first man would not be to stop making an effort, to forget about milk, and to content himself with being effortlessly aware of the cow. After all, the man needs milk, and there's milk in the cow. The Buddha's advice would be to stop twisting the horn, to search for the udder, and to apply effort there.

• The second simile illustrating the path through a skill appears in two discourses, MN 22 and SN 35:197:

*A man comes to a wide river. The shore on which he's standing is risky; the other shore is safe, but there's no bridge over the river, nor is there a ferry to take him across. He gathers grass, twigs, branches, and leaves on this side of the river, and binds them into a raft. Then, depending on the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he crosses the wide river. Once he reaches the other shore, he feels a strong sense of appreciation for the raft, but he's wise enough not to carry it on his head or his back as he goes on his way. Instead, he drags it onto dry*

*land or sinks it in the water and then is free to go, unencumbered, wherever he wants.*

MN 22 focuses on the final point of the simile: The raft stands for the Dhamma, and the point is that the Dhamma is not to be held on to when it has served its purpose. Instead, it's to be let go.

The message here is that you practice, not for the sake of arriving at right view, right concentration, or any of the other factors of the path. Instead, you use those factors to arrive at the goal, and then you put them down so that your release can be complete.

SN 35:197 fills in more details in the simile that help in drawing further lessons from it. The risky side of the river stands for self-identity, the mind's habit of using any of the five aggregates—form, feelings, perceptions, thought-fabrications, or consciousness—to create a sense of self. The river stands for the fourfold flood of sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance, which means that it, too, is risky. You could easily drown in these things. The far shore stands for unbinding *(nibbāna)*. The raft stands for the noble eightfold path. Making an effort with hands and feet stands for arousing your energy and persistence.

This interpretation of the simile carries a number of implications that are not emphasized in MN 22. It centers on two skills.

1) The first is the skill of making the raft. The fact that the man makes a raft out of things found on this shore points to the fact that nibbāna is not coming to get you, and it doesn't form the ground of your practice. Instead, you have to fashion the path out of things that you've been identifying with: the five aggregates. AN 9:36 makes this point explicit: Right concentration is composed of the five aggregates; AN 10:60 shows how right view has to make use of perceptions; and it's possible to figure out how the other factors of the path have to use the aggregates as well.

2) The second skill is getting across the river. Even though you eventually have to let go of the raft, you don't get across the river by letting go of it. You have to hold on to right view and all the other factors of the path until you reach safety. It's worth noting that, while the river stands for the flood of views, letting go of all views won't get you across. You have to hold on to right view strategically in order to get to unbinding. In fact, right

view is the only view that contains the seeds for its own transcendence in this way (see AN 10:93).

At the same time, it's important to note that you have to be responsible for making an effort. The raft won't get you across the river unless you do. In other words, it's no mistake to see that you're the one developing the path. If you don't develop it, wisdom and discernment, acting independently of you, won't develop it for you. It's your responsibility to develop the qualities of the path yourself.

When the Buddha moves from similes for the path as a whole to similes illustrating the practice of meditation, the skills mentioned in the similes grow more advanced. They're also based on a more fully articulated theory of what's involved in mastering a skill.

That theory—the bases of power *(iddhipāda)*—takes the two principles of commitment and reflection that nourish the Dhamma, and divides them into four. It describes four bases for concentration: desire, persistence, intent, and analysis. Although the presentation makes it sound as if these are four different types of concentration, the fact that all these bases appear, explicitly or implicitly, in the factor of right effort leading up to right concentration, means that all four are present in every state of concentration. The difference between one type of concentration and another is simply one of emphasis.

In this light, we can see that commitment has been divided into three bases of power: You desire to get the mind into concentration, you're persistent in your efforts, and you're fully intent on what you're doing. Reflection here is represented by analysis—the Pali word, *vīmaṁsa,* means using your powers of discrimination in a skillful way—showing that reflection has to be active in trying to figure things out and also in holding to high standards for judging what works. If your efforts at getting the mind concentrated aren't working, why? Be ingenious in thinking up other approaches, and discriminating in deciding whether you're reading the situation properly or not.

With this background, we can understand the implications of some of the similes the Buddha used to help explain what happens in developing

the skills of meditation practice.

- The first of these similes comes in SN 47:8:

*A foolish cook, working for a king, doesn't pay attention to the way the king shows, consciously or unconsciously, which foods he likes. As a result, the cook doesn't get rewarded with extra wages or gifts.*

*In the same way, a foolish meditator, practicing mindfulness meditation, doesn't pay attention to what the mind likes or doesn't like. As a result, he doesn't get rewarded with concentration, nor does he abandon his defilements.*

*A wise cook, working for a king, pays close attention to the way the king shows, consciously or unconsciously, which foods he likes. As a result, this cook does get rewarded with extra wages or gifts.*

*In the same way, a wise meditator, practicing mindfulness meditation, pays close attention to what the mind likes or doesn't like. As a result, he gets rewarded with concentration and he abandons his defilements.*

Here the main points are two:

1) The purpose of mindfulness practice is both to get the mind into concentration and to rid the mind of defilements. The Buddha never treats mindfulness and concentration as two separate or mutually exclusive practices. MN 44 states that the four establishings of mindfulness are the themes of right concentration, while the standard definition of right concentration as the four jhānas, or states of absorption—as in SN 45:8—states that the fourth jhāna is where mindfulness is purified. MN 119 treats the jhānas under the heading of mindfulness of the body. MN 125 equates the first stage of mindfulness practice with the first jhāna. AN 8:70 shows that mindfulness practice leads ideally to all four levels of jhāna.

2) Once you realize this, then if you're wise when practicing mindfulness, you should pay attention to which mindfulness topic the mind likes so that it will be willing to settle down with that topic with a sense of ease and satisfaction, and enter the jhānas. In other words, you devote your desire, persistence, and intent to testing a potential meditation topic. Then

you reflect on the results. If focusing on the topic doesn't yield concentration, you analyze your actions to figure out why. If you've been approaching the topic in the wrong way, you try a different approach. If the mind refuses to settle down with the topic, you try other topics until you find one that works. That's how you'll attain concentration.

• Once you've achieved a sense of well-being in your concentration, MN 119 gives a brief simile for what you should do with it. The simile is based on the skills of a bathman in a public bath. In the Buddha's day, they didn't have bars of soap. Instead, the bathman would take a powdered soap mixture and mix it with water to make a ball of soap paste, in the same way that you'd mix water with flour and then knead the water through the flour to make a thoroughly moistened ball of dough.

> *A bathman mixes bath powder with water in such a way that all the powder is moistened, but the resulting ball of soap paste doesn't drip.*
>
> *In the same way, a meditator enters the first jhāna: rapture and pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation. He allows that rapture and pleasure to pervade the body so that no part of the body is unpervaded by rapture and pleasure.*p>

This is one of a series of four similes for the four jhānas. The similes have two points in common: movement stands for rapture—the Pali term, *pīti,* can also mean refreshment—while water stands for pleasure. All the similes speak of jhāna as a full-body experience, but this is the only simile containing a conscious agent doing something. Because directed thought and evaluation occur only in the first jhāna, that must be what the bathman stands for: directed thought and evaluation. So the lessons here are these:

1) Jhāna is a full-body experience, and not merely one-pointed. It has been argued that the Buddha doesn't really mean "body" when he gives these similes, and in fact, there is no awareness of the physical body in the jhānas at all. But that's tantamount to saying that the Buddha, in his use of similes, was either clumsy and thoughtless or else devious, if he would use similes that were so easily mis-read. A better way to read the similes is to take them at face value, seeing them as honest, straightforward, and

accurate in making their points: They describe a full-body awareness, all the way from the first jhāna to the fourth.

2) Directed thought and evaluation are said to be "verbal fabrications" (MN 44). In other words, they're the mind's inner conversation with itself, as it chooses a topic to focus on and then engages in comments and questions about the topic.

Given the simile of the bathman, this would indicate that your inner conversation plays an important role in the first jhāna, as it figures out how to take the rapture and pleasure that come from secluding the mind from unskillful thoughts and works that rapture and pleasure throughout the body.

Anyone who has had experience sitting in meditation will realize that this will require dealing with pains and patterns of tension in different parts of the body. It takes some active thought to understand how to allow rapture and pleasure to relax or dissolve those obstacles away.

In the simile for the second jhāna, the water of a cool spring spreads to fill a lake. In the simile for the third, lotuses grow totally immersed in a lake, saturated with water from the tips of their roots to the tips of their flowers. In these cases, the water spreads naturally, with no human effort involved. That suggests that the work of directed thought and evaluation in the first jhāna is to open the breath channels permeating the body (MN 28; MN 140), letting the rapture and pleasure seep throughout the body, in preparation for the remaining jhānas where the rapture and pleasure of the second jhāna, and the pleasure of the third, spread through the body without effort. This allows you to put directed thought and evaluation aside, and to plunge into the unification of awareness that characterizes the higher jhānas.

- AN 3:103 explains some important points about meditation practice with reference to the skills of a goldsmith.

> *A goldsmith puts gold into a smelter. Periodically he blows on it to stir up the fire, periodically he sprinkles water on it to cool it down, periodically he examines it carefully. If he were simply to blow on it, the gold would burn up. If he were simply to sprinkle water on it, it would*

*grow cold. If he were simply to examine it, it wouldn't come to perfection.*

*In the same way, as a meditator, you must periodically attend to the theme of uplifted energy, to the theme of concentration, and to the theme of equanimity. If you attend solely to the theme of uplifted energy, the mind will grow restless. If you attend solely to the theme of concentration, the mind will grow lazy. If you attend solely to the theme of equanimity, the mind won't be rightly concentrated for the ending of the mental effluents—the defilements that keep it bound to the cycle of rebirth.*

Uplifted energy here means engaging in right effort to abandon unskillful mental qualities and to develop skillful ones. Concentration means the practice of centering the mind on a single object, such as the breath. Equanimity means watching steadily what's happening in the mind.

The simile makes two points:

1) For the training of the mind to get the best results, it has to involve all three of these activities. If you simply keep trying to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones without allowing the mind to rest in concentration, restlessness will take over and the mind won't be able to rest to gain strength. If you simply rest in concentration, you get to the point where you don't want to do the work required to develop the discernment that will free the mind from its effluents. If you simply watch the mind with non-judging awareness, you can't even get it into concentration.

But when you combine these skills, they reinforce one another. Equanimity can spot subtle defilements even in the concentrated mind, and uplifted energy can try to figure them out so as to remove them. Concentration, in turn, provides a place of rest and respite when the energy in your effort and discernment begins to flag.

2) You need to know not only a full range of approaches to training the mind. You also need to gain a sense of which approach to use at which time, in the same way that the goldsmith knows, from experience, when to heat up the gold, when to cool it down, and when to simply keep watching it. This sense of which approach to use at which time comes from

commitment and reflection, and from applying the four bases of success to your practice.

- AN 9:36 illustrates the way in which discernment can be based on jhāna practice by using the simile of a skilled archer. When visualizing this image, it's important to remember that the Buddha is talking about archery as used in war, with enormous bows that required great strength to use. As the simile indicates, though, the fact that these bows were used in battle also required great agility.

> *Just as a skilled archer can shoot great distances, fire shots in rapid succession, and pierce great masses, a meditator enters any of the jhānas or formless attainments based on the fourth jhāna, all the way up to the dimension of nothingness. Then, in the words of the simile:*
>
> > "He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena and, having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.'
> >
> > "Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters, [self-identification views, grasping at habits and practices, doubt, sensual passion, and irritation], he is due to arise spontaneously [in the Pure Abodes], there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world."

This passage makes several important points:

1) As we noted under the simile of the raft, the path is composed of the five aggregates. In this case, the four jhānas are composed of all five aggregates, while the aggregates of perception and thought-fabrication can

do the work of discernment to develop dispassion even for the most refined experiences of the aggregates.

2) It's possible to examine a state of concentration while in it, up through the formless dimension of nothingness. You can use that examination to develop the discernment that leads to full release. AN 5:28 illustrates this point with another simile:

> *A person standing reflects on a person sitting down, or a person sitting down reflects on a person lying down. In the same way, a meditator has the theme of his concentration well in hand.*

This ability to step back slightly from your concentration to observe what you're doing to keep the mind concentrated—what modern psychology calls "metacognition"—is crucial to using jhāna as a basis for liberating insight.

3) If you grasp at any sense of passion or delight arising in connection with the experience of the deathless, it'll keep you from gaining full awakening. In other words, if you cling to any craving that arises in response to that experience, it's a sign that you haven't fully comprehended clinging or abandoned craving. This means that you will attain a lower level of awakening, and will have to practice further, to deepen your reflective discernment in order to ferret out these subtle levels of defilement. Still, your eventual full awakening is guaranteed.

There's one problem with this simile in AN 9:36, which is that, aside from indicating that the ability to master concentration and contemplate it in this way is an advanced skill, it doesn't indicate how the specific skills of an archer correspond to the skills of the advanced meditator.

However, another sutta, AN 4:181, does precisely that.

> *Just as an archer can shoot great distances, a meditator sees that all instances of the five aggregates—past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near—are to be seen as, "This is not mine, this is not my self, this is not what I am."*
>
> *Just as an archer can fire shots in rapid succession, a meditator sees that "This is stress," "This is the origination of stress," "This is the cessation of stress," "This is the path of practice leading to the cessation*

*of stress." In other words, you quickly recognize events in terms of the four noble truths as they arise.*

*Just as an archer can pierce great masses, a meditator pierces right through the great mass of ignorance.*

These points illuminate the meditator's skills described in AN 9:36.

1) When seeing the aggregates as not-self, it's important to apply that perception not only to aggregates in the present moment, but also to extend it to all possible aggregates in space—"near or far"—and time—"past, future, or present." This is what it means for a meditator to shoot great distances. If you apply the perceptions of not-self, etc., only to the aggregates you're experiencing here and now, the mind might latch on to a nostalgic memory of past aggregates or an anticipation of satisfactory aggregates in the future. That leaves plenty of opportunity for continued craving and clinging to grow.

2) When experiencing the deathless, your reactions can happen very quickly. It's important to recognize right away if any passion or delight arises in the mind, and to abandon it immediately. In other words, you have to see right away that you've strayed from the path—the fourth noble truth—and stumbled into the second and first noble truths. You have to immediately comprehend that fact and abandon the craving expressed in the passion and delight. Otherwise, they'll get in the way of full awakening. This is what it means for a meditator to fire shots in rapid succession.

3) Ignorance—not seeing events in terms of the four noble truths—basically means not seeing what you're doing as you create suffering, stress, or disturbance in the mind. Seeing through this ignorance requires ardent alertness—committed and reflective—detecting what you're doing while you're doing it. That's how you pierce it. And it's precisely this combination of ardent alertness, commitment, and reflection that allows the meditator in AN 9:36 to detect the aggregates involved in creating a state of jhāna while he's doing it. The same holds true even more so when he can detect and abandon any Dhamma-passion or Dhamma-delight before they get in the way of full awakening. This is what it means for a meditator to pierce great masses.

* * *

These are just a few examples of how the Buddha uses images of skills to explain aspects of the practice. Taken together, they make the larger point that learning the Dhamma is not simply a matter of mastering concepts. It requires using those concepts appropriately in mastering the all-around skill of training the mind.

They also make an important point for understanding the Buddha's teaching method as a whole. He had seen, through his own awakening, that verbal and mental fabrications—the way you talk to yourself and the perceptions and feelings you focus your attention on—can have a huge impact on the mind. If done in ignorance, these fabrications lead to suffering. If done in knowledge, they can form part of the path to the end of suffering.

This insight showed him not only how the mind works in general, but also how it works when gaining new knowledge. As a result, it influenced both *what* he taught to others and *how* he taught it. He saw that his listeners had to think in the right paradigms—visualizing what he was saying in the right terms—if they were going to understand him.

This is why he used similes so frequently when explaining points of Dhamma: He wanted to ensure that his listeners were perceiving the issue at hand in the right frame of reference, so that their inner conversation about the issue, directing their present and future actions, would be less likely to go astray.

For this reason, it's important to know and understand the similes the Buddha used when teaching. They give us the framework for understanding the concepts, which means that they're an integral part of those concepts and their role on the path. We're fortunate that the Buddha's immediate disciples understood this point. In addition to leaving behind lists of terms and definitions, they also recorded dialogues in which the Buddha showed, through his use of similes, the proper way of perceiving and framing those terms, so that we can understand how to use them for enjoying the best results.

# *To Feed Is to Suffer*

To understand an abstract teaching, it's often useful to focus on the analogies used to explain it. Abstractions come from concrete experiences and insights, and the analogies with which they're explained often provide a hint as to what those initial experiences and insights were. This in turn gives you an indication of how the teachings can be best understood and where best applied.

This point is especially important in understanding dependent co-arising, the Buddha's explanation of the sequence of causes by which suffering arises, because it's among his most abstract and complex teachings. Over the centuries, the Buddhist tradition has come up with analogies and images for explaining it, images that have accompanied the teachings as they move West. But these images, because they're later, misrepresent the original message.

Medieval Indian Buddhists interpreted dependent co-arising as a circular wheel, an image that doesn't do justice to the complexity of the original teaching. In particular, it misses the feedback loops contained in the sequence that come from the fact that factors like feeling and perception appear at several points in the lineup. Also, the image is mechanical and deterministic. It seems to imply that once you're on the wheel, you can't use the spokes of the wheel itself to get off. In other words, it obscures the fact that factors like feelings and perceptions actually play a role in putting suffering to an end.

Another distortion is in the tendency, first articulated in medieval China, to depict the inter-relations of the factors of dependent co-arising through another image of a circle: light reflecting from mirrors arranged in a circle around a lamp. Each mirror contains not only a reflection of the lamp, but also the reflections of the other mirrors in the circle. Although this image conveys an idea of the complex interplay of conditions in dependent co-arising, it's essentially static, as the pattern of light never changes. In fact, in the original formulation of this image, it wasn't *meant* to change. The causal

interplay was intentionally portrayed as innocuous and even beautiful—something to be celebrated and admired, and never to end.

But rather than going by these analogies from the later tradition, it seems more sensible to look at the early texts to see what images the Buddha used himself. There we find that he depicted the interplay of conditions in dependent co-arising in another manner entirely. When introducing the topic of causality to young novices, he illustrated it with the act of eating—a process that's inherently stressful not only for those fed upon, but also for those who, through the disease of hunger (Dhp 203), keep needing to feed.

> "What is one?—All beings subsist on nutriment." — *Khp 4*

In making this statement, the Buddha was drawing on a long tradition of speculation on the topic of food that dated back to early Vedic times in India and that continued to excite new theories in the Upaniṣads that were composed around his own time. This speculation was prompted by the fact that the Vedic ritual—in which animals were slaughtered and offered into the fire—was meant as an offering of food to the gods and to one's dead ancestors, as well as a stock-piling of food for one's own future use in the life after death.

As the Upaniṣadic seers contemplated the deeper meaning of this ritual, they focused on the importance of food for all life. This became the underlying image for all of their thinking. In this, they differed radically from modern Western philosophy, whose underlying image is the act of seeing and identifying an object. Of the physical senses, the visual sense requires the most active participation of the brain to interpret its sensory data. The eyes simply provide patches of colors, while the brain has to point the eyes in different directions, focus them at different depths, and then interpret the color patches, together with the movements of the eye muscles, to perceive objects in three-dimensional space. The primary questions that arise in this context are: How much can we trust our internal representations of reality "out there"? And how can we best test them? These are the questions that have provoked most philosophical thought in the Western tradition for many centuries.

The central activity that provoked the thought of the Upaniṣadic seers, though, was the act of ingesting food. The essential questions in this context are: Given that we have to eat in order to survive, how do we distinguish what's good to eat from what's bad to eat? And how do we insure a continuing source of good food? This line of thinking provided the paradigm for a more general contemplation of how to find a basis for true happiness, and how that basis for happiness can be maintained.

Although the different Upaniṣadic seers explored this topic in different ways, a summary of some of their conclusions shows the general drift of their speculation.

In the original emanation of the cosmos, Being gave rise to fire, which gave rise to water, which gave rise to food. Only then were individual beings able to come into existence (ChU VI.2.4). Food was thus the eldest among beings (TU II.2.1): in some cases identified as a god (BAU III.9.8; ChU I.11.9), in others identified with Brahman, the great cosmic principle itself (TU III.2.1). Some thinkers stated the food was one's true self (MaiU VI.11-13).

Upaniṣadic thought is marked by a strong tendency to internalize the Vedic ritual, claiming that knowledge of the inner meaning of the ritual or of the true nature of Brahman and the self can provide rewards that far surpass those of the physical performance of the ritual. This same tendency appears in Upaniṣadic thought about food. The reward of understanding the esoteric meaning of the Sāma Veda, for example, is ample food in this life and the next (ChU I.13.4). Knowledge of the true nature of the self supplies you with food in all possible worlds (ChU V.18.1). You attain immortality through the ability to keep producing food in this way again and again (BAU I.5.2).

The basic assumption of this speculation is that your continued survival as a being is an unquestioned good. The ability to produce and consume an unlimited supply of food is an even greater good. So this mode of speculation conceives of a cosmos created with the express purpose of providing food. The act of eating is given value as an expression of the way things were meant to be.

The most succinct expression of these ideas is stated in Taittiriya Upaniṣad II.2.1, a passage that bears comparing with the above passage

from Khp 4: "From food, indeed, are produced those creatures that dwell on earth. Furthermore, solely through food do they live, and then also into it they pass at the end." Because food is sometimes equated with Brahman and sometimes with the self, the pattern of this image parallels the larger pattern of much Upaniṣadic thought: that the self comes from Brahman, eventually returns to Brahman, and is sustained by Brahman in the interim. In fact, this larger pattern may derive from the more concrete experience of food and feeding as depicted in this passage.

Although the Buddha drew on the image of feeding to illustrate his teachings, he made a number of changes on the theme. The most important was that he called into question how desirable it was to feed for eternity. He agreed that the attainment of an ultimate happiness was the ultimate goal of all human thought and endeavor, but because he had found a happiness that was totally unconditioned, attained only through abandoning his identity as a "being" of any sort—either as self or Brahman—he was able to look past the supposed goodness of the act of eating to see the suffering and stress it inevitably involved. One of the marks of unbinding *(nibbāna)* as a superior goal was that it freed you from the need to feed, at the same time freeing other beings from being subject to your hunger. Because your attachment to food derives from your attachment to your identity as a being—you need to eat in order to continue being a being—the Buddha would often find ways of calling that identity into question and encouraging his followers to do their best to abandon it.

In SN 23:2 he defined what you are as a being, saying that when you're caught up in any desire, passion, delight, or craving for any of the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, or consciousness, you're said to be a being.

This is actually equivalent to saying that you're defined by what you eat. The word for craving, *taṇhā,* can also mean thirst. Passion and delight for the five aggregates is the definition of clinging, *upādāna,* which can also mean sustenance: the food that provides sustenance and the act of taking sustenance from food.

The connection between clinging and the act of eating is further underlined in MN 9. In its list of the factors leading to suffering, it includes "nutriment" in the place normally occupied by clinging. And it defines

nutriment in terms showing that it refers not only to physical food, but also to food for consciousness: contact at the senses, intellectual intentions, and consciousness itself.

This is why the Buddha, unlike the authors of the Upaniṣads, saw the act of feeding and continued identity as a being in a negative light. Craving, he discovered on the night of his awakening, is the cause of suffering. Suffering itself is clinging to the aggregates. In other words, you suffer because of thirst and you suffer in the act of trying to assuage that thirst. To find the happiness of unbinding, you have to train the mind so that it no longer feels any thirst and no longer needs to feed. You do this by developing disenchantment—*nibbidā*—for the factors that lead to craving and clinging.

Here again, the feeding analogy lies behind the words: *Nibbidā* is a term indicating disgust, revulsion, or distaste for a particular kind of food. So the abandoning attachment to the sources of craving is similar to that of overcoming an addiction to food of a particular sort.

Now, you can't overcome your addiction to eating simply by stopping to eat. The Buddha learned this lesson painfully from his six years of austerities. If he had continued down that path any further, he would have died of starvation without having gained any superior state.

He realized that the problem of feeding had to be attacked more strategically. The insight that got him past his impasse was that the way to the deathless required the practice of strong concentration (MN 36). This, he came to realize, was the food that the mind needed to stay on the path. In his image, the practice of the path is like the job of defending a fortress on the frontier. You need the gatekeeper of right mindfulness to keep the enemy out, and the soldiers of right effort to fight anyone who attacks. Both the gatekeeper and the soldiers need the food of the four jhānas—states of intensely pleasurable or equanimous strong concentration—to keep up their strength. For example:

> "Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of tonics—ghee, fresh butter, oil, honey, molasses, & salt—for the delight, convenience, & comfort of those within, and to ward off those without; in the same way the disciple of the noble ones, with the

> abandoning of pleasure & pain, as with the earlier disappearance of joys & distresses, enters & remains in the fourth jhāna—purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to alight on unbinding." — *AN 7:63*

At the same time, concentration needs to be fed, both physically and mentally. You feed it physically be adopting the right attitude toward food:

> *Ven. Ānanda is speaking to a nun:* "'This body, sister, comes into being through food. And yet it is by relying on food that food is to be abandoned.' Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk, considering it thoughtfully, takes food—not playfully, nor for intoxication, nor for putting on bulk, nor for beautification—but simply for the survival & continuance of this body, for ending its afflictions, for the support of the holy life, (thinking,) 'Thus will I destroy old feelings [of hunger] and not create new feelings [from overeating]. I will maintain myself, be blameless, & live in comfort.' Then, at a later time, he abandons food, having relied on food. 'This body, sister, comes into being through food. And yet it is by relying on food that food is to be abandoned.' Thus it was said, and in reference to this was it said." — *AN 4:159*

You feed concentration mentally by feeding the seven factors for awakening that promote concentration, and starving the five hindrances that stand in its way. For example, you feed the factor of awakening called "analysis of qualities" by paying appropriate attention to skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind, seeing for yourself that the skillful qualities really do promote happiness, while the unskillful qualities really do lead to suffering and stress. When you practice in this way, you're at the same time starving the hindrance of doubt (SN 46:51).

Right concentration provides you with the strength you need to overcome many of the mind's worst addictions in terms of greed, aversion, and delusion. However, there comes a point when you realize that it, too, involves stress, in the constant need to maintain it as your nourishment. The mind begins to incline toward something even more peaceful.

This is where the Buddha recommends seeing that all states of concentration are composed of subtle forms of the aggregates, and that even these subtle aggregates have their drawbacks.

> "Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk… enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.'" — *AN 9:36*

Even though the Buddha uses a martial simile to explain this contemplation, many of the similes he recommends for actually inducing a state of disenchantment with concentration use feeding analogies. Two of the most vivid make the point that the things you try to feed on are actually chewing you up.

> "And how is the nutriment of contact to be regarded? Suppose a flayed cow were to stand leaning against a wall. The creatures living in the wall would chew on it. If it were to stand leaning against a tree, the creatures living in the tree would chew on it. If it were to stand exposed to water, the creatures living in the water would chew on it. If it were to stand exposed to the air, the creatures living in the air would chew on it. For wherever the flayed cow were to stand exposed, the creatures living there would chew on it. In the same way, I tell you, is the nutriment of contact to be regarded. When the nutriment of contact is comprehended, the three feelings [pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain] are comprehended. When the three feelings are

comprehended, I tell you, there is nothing further for a disciple of the noble ones to do." — *SN 12:63*

"Thus an instructed disciple of the noble ones reflects in this way: 'I am now being chewed up by form. But in the past I was also chewed up by form in the same way I am now being chewed up by present form. And if I delight in future form, then in the future I will be chewed up by form in the same way I am now being chewed up by present form.' Having reflected in this way, he becomes indifferent to past form, does not delight in future form, and is practicing for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion, and cessation with regard to present form. [And similarly with the remaining aggregates.]" — *SN 22:79*

When these perceptions make you dispassionate toward all aggregates—blatant and subtle, past, present, and future—the mind is freed from clinging. And when it no longer clings, it's no longer measured or defined by anything (SN 22:36). You're no longer confined to the identity of a "being," and are freed from any felt need to feed.

This doesn't mean you go out of existence, simply that you're now no longer defined—something infinitely more mind-blowing. There's no way of pinpointing what you are, but there is the hightest happiness. This may be why "the amazing" and "the astounding" are two of the Buddha's alternative names for unbinding.

Perhaps to counteract the common fear that unbinding is a type of starvation, Khp 6 depicts it as a form of feeding in which your food is totally free—freely available, free from debt, and free from suffering.

*Those who, devoted, firm-minded,*
*apply themselves to Gotama's message,*
*on attaining the goal, plunge into the deathless,*
*freely eating the liberation they've gained.* — *Khp 6*

More generally, though, verses in the Pali Canon depict unbinding as a dimension in which there's simply no more need to feed in any way. You're freed from limitations and from hunger because nothing is lacking at all.

*With the stilling of consciousness, the monk*
*free from hunger*
*is totally unbound.…*
*While those who comprehend contact,*
*delighting in stilling through discernment,*
*they, by breaking through contact,*
*free from hunger,*
*are totally unbound.* — *Sn 3:12*

*Not hoarding,*
*having understood food,*
*their pasture—emptiness*
*& freedom without sign:*
*Their trail,*
*like that of birds through space,*
*can't be traced.*
*Effluents ended,*
*independent of nutriment,*
*their pasture—emptiness*
*& freedom without sign:*
*Their trail,*
*like that of birds through space,*
*can't be traced.* — *Dhp 92–93*

# *The Desire to Make a Difference*

## The Role of Right Resolve

Concentration and discernment play a reciprocal role on the path to the end of suffering. Each needs the other to complete its work. The Buddha states this fact in the Dhammapada:

> *There's no jhāna*
> *for one with no discernment,*
> *no discernment*
> *for one with no jhāna.*
> *But one with both jhāna*
> *& discernment:*
> *he's on the verge*
> *of unbinding.* — *Dhp 372*

"Jhāna," here, stands for the four stages of right concentration. "Discernment" in this case is usually interpreted as meaning right view. And it's easy to see why: Right view, expressed in terms of the four noble truths and dependent co-arising, provides a map for how states of mind are fabricated in the present moment. This helps you to understand what needs to be done to fabricate a present-moment state of concentration.

Reciprocally, the stillness of right concentration allows you to see events in the mind most clearly—both as you use the processes of fabrication to get the mind into jhāna, and as the mind remains still and alert all around once it's there. That enables you to perform the duties appropriate to the four noble truths as explained in right view on very refined levels and ultimately to attain awakening (AN 9:36).

However, in terms of the noble eightfold path, "discernment" covers more than just right view. It also includes right resolve (MN 44), and there's a lot to be learned by exploring the role that right resolve plays relative to right view, to right concentration, and to the interplay between the two.

• With regard to right view, right resolve shows that discernment isn't fully discerning until it wills to act on the knowledge that right view provides. If you're really wise, you can't just read and contemplate the four noble truths about suffering. You have to will to abandon any mind states that get in the way of the path that brings suffering to an end. At the same time, the Buddha sometimes teaches the values of right resolve to prepare his listeners to accept the principles of right view in the first place. So there's a reciprocal relationship between the two.

• With regard to right concentration, right resolve articulates the values needed to clear the mind so that it can settle down rightly. Right concentration then transcends right resolve when it has absorbed those values and no longer needs to have them articulated.

That's where right view can do its more advanced work, whether taking the mind into deeper states of concentration or abandoning the causes of suffering altogether. When it abandons all those causes, all the factors of the path get abandoned as well, and the mind is totally unbound.

So even though right resolve doesn't perform the final work of the path, it gets you started on the path and makes the final work possible. That means it's a crucial factor to learn and to develop as a skill.

### *Right Resolve*

The Pali term for "resolve," *saṅkappa*, is sometimes translated as "thought" or "intention," and although both translations capture part of the meaning of *saṅkappa*, neither captures the whole. "Thought" is partly right in that, as we'll see, *saṅkappa* involves directed thought and evaluation, the Canon's terms for your inner conversation when you talk to yourself in complete sentences (MN 117). However, "thought" doesn't convey the fact that *saṅkappa* contains an element of will: what you aim for and plan. "Intention" captures the willed side of *saṅkappa* but Pali has another term for intention, *cetanā*, which plays a role in states of concentration where the mind is talking to itself in full sentences as well as states in which it's not (MN 111). *Saṅkappa*, however, appears only in states of concentration where the mind is talking to itself in full sentences (MN 78).

For these reasons, "resolve" seems the best equivalent for the word.

Three resolves count as "right": resolve on renunciation, resolve on non-ill will, and resolve on harmlessness. These terms are best understood with reference to their opposites, wrong resolves.

*Renunciation* is the opposite of sensuality. The Buddha defines sensuality, not as sensual pleasures, but as the mind's fascination with its sensual fantasies.

> *The passion for his resolves is a man's sensuality,*
> *not the beautiful sensual pleasures*
> *found in the world.*
> *The passion for his resolves is a man's sensuality.*
> *The beauties remain as they are in the world,*
> *while, in this regard,*
> *the enlightened*
> *subdue their desire.* — *AN 6:63*

This means that, to resolve on renunciation, you aim at a happiness that doesn't involve fantasies about pleasures of the senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations—and you look for higher pleasures instead. Those higher pleasures would include the pleasures of form—the body as felt from within when the mind is in a state of jhāna—or the pleasures of the formless states of concentration, such as those focused on perceptions of infinite space or infinite consciousness.

Non-ill will—the Pali term, *abyāpāda,* can also mean non-affliction—is the opposite of ill will, in which you wish to see either yourself or others suffer. To aim at developing attitudes of goodwill or equanimity, with the desire to act on those attitudes, would count as being resolved on non-ill will.

Harmlessness is the opposite of harmfulness, in which, even without ill will, you act in ways that cause people to suffer. This would cover cases in which you're careless and callous, thinking that the sufferings of others—or your own sufferings that would come from bad karma—don't really matter. You simply don't care. To aim at an attitude of compassion, both for yourself and for others, with the desire to act on that compassion, would count as being resolved on harmlessness.

## *Right Resolve & Right View*

The Buddha stated repeatedly that right resolve grows naturally out of right view. It's an extension of the wisdom of right view in that it sees that right view is not just a statement of facts. It focuses on a specific issue—suffering and the end of suffering—and contains a value judgment: that it's better not to suffer than to suffer. The first noble truth defines what suffering is, the third describes what constitutes its cessation. The second noble truth describes the actions that lead to suffering, whereas the fourth noble truth describes those that lead to the cessation of suffering.

The truths as a whole have a purpose. They aim at helping you realize the third truth, the cessation of suffering, and they show that you have a choice: You can continue to cause suffering by following the second truth, or you can bring about the end of suffering by following the fourth. In other words, you can make a difference by choosing which course of action to follow.

Right resolve is the articulate act of will that wants to make that difference. To do so, it realizes that you have to take responsibility for following through with that desire. The path to the end of suffering isn't going to happen on its own. You have to choose to do it. In other words, the description of the path provided by right view is true, but on its own it can't make that truth a reality. For the path to become a reality depends on you. You have to abandon within yourself any unskillful mind states that would get in the way of your following the path.

As the Buddha says in the Dhammapada:

> *I have taught you this path…*
> *It's for you to strive*
> *ardently.*
> *Tathāgatas [Buddhas] simply*
> *point out the way.* — *Dhp 275–276*

The wisdom of right view is like a map. As with all maps, it focuses on some aspects of reality and ignores others because it's drawn with a purpose, just as a geological map is meant to serve the purposes of those

looking for minerals, or a road map is meant to show you which routes you can take to get to your destination. The first map doesn't need to show you the roads. The second map doesn't need to show you where gold or silver can be found. As long as the purpose of the map is wise and it accurately provides all the details needed to serve that purpose, it's a good map.

In the same way, the map of right view focuses on what you need to know to put an end to suffering. That's its purpose. Other aspects of reality, unrelated to that purpose, won't be found on the map.

The wisdom of right resolve sees that it's not enough to gaze at the map provided by right view. If you're really wise, you'll do whatever is needed to follow it.

This, though, raises a question. Right view, in the second noble truth, states that suffering is caused by three types of craving: for sensuality, for becoming—the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience—and for non-becoming: the annihilation of your identity or the world in which it functions. However, right resolve focuses on only one of these forms of craving—for sensuality—and makes no mention of the other two. So why doesn't it focus directly on abandoning all three forms of craving that cause suffering?

The answer can be found by looking at the context in which the Buddha taught the four noble truths. This is a point that's all too often overlooked when people discuss his teachings. If you want to understand what he taught, you have to take into account his understanding of the act of teaching: how the Dhamma should be taught and how it should be listened to so as to attain the proximate goals and the ultimate goal at which it aims.

As we look into this issue, we find that the values of right resolve play an important role in preparing the mind to accept and act on right view in the first place. They also serve to take the mind only as far as the first level of right concentration. When we discuss right concentration below, we'll see why.

In AN 5:151 the Buddha sets out five conditions for the ideal way to listen to a Dhamma talk—ideal in that they allow for people to gain their first taste of awakening while listening to the talk. That's what he's trying to do as he teaches. He's not simply describing reality. He wants to make a

difference: to effect a change for the better in the minds of those who are listening to what he says.

The five ideal conditions are these:

> "You don't hold the talk in contempt.
>
> "You don't hold the speaker in contempt.
>
> "You don't hold yourself in contempt.
>
> "You listen to the Dhamma with an unscattered mind, a mind gathered into one *[ek'agga-citto]*.
>
> "You attend appropriately."

When the Buddha introduced the four noble truths to laypeople, he tried to create these five conditions in his listeners so that they would benefit most from what he had to say.

Instead of starting right in with the four truths, he would preface them with what's called a gradual or graduated discourse. We don't have the full text of any of these discourses, probably because the Buddha tailored each one to the needs and backgrounds of his listeners—they ranged all the way from lepers and hired killers to wealthy householders and kings—but we do have the overall outline he followed in every case.

He started with discussions of giving, virtue, and heaven. He proclaimed the drawbacks of, degradation in, and defilement in sensuality, and the rewards of renunciation. Then, when he saw that his listeners were "of ready mind, malleable mind, unhindered mind, exultant mind, confident mind," he taught them the four noble truths (MN 56).

There's a logic to the order in which the Buddha covered these topics. By affirming the value of giving and virtue, he showed his listeners that he was a principled teacher, unlike many of the teachers of his day who taught that giving and virtue were fruitless conventions and a waste of time. If his listeners had any sense of integrity—even hired killers can have a sense of right and wrong—they would recognize that the Buddha was affirming values worthy of respect. This would help to keep them from regarding the Buddha with contempt. If they themselves were already practicing giving and virtue, the affirmation that these activities were rewarded in heaven would encourage them not to regard themselves with contempt. In fact, it

would gladden their hearts and minds: They were engaging in activities worthy of praise and worthy of reward. On hearing this, they would be unlikely to regard the Buddha's talk with contempt. This would fulfill the first three of the five conditions.

But then the Buddha would try to persuade them to aim at higher rewards. By pointing out the drawbacks and degradation in the sensual pleasures of heaven, the Buddha was preparing the listeners to look favorably on states of mind devoid of sensuality—in other words, states of right concentration. When the listeners could gather their minds into oneness—this is the Canon's standard definition for concentration (MN 44)—they were ready for the four noble truths. Then, in applying the questions informed by the four noble truths to their own minds, they would be engaging in appropriate attention (MN 2).

This covers all five conditions for the ideal way to listen to the Dhamma. So it's easy to see why the Buddha was able to lead many of his listeners to their first taste of awakening when he introduced the four noble truths in this way.

Here it's worth noting that, in taking this approach, the Buddha was teaching the principles of right resolve to his listeners even before he mentioned the four noble truths. The teachings on giving and virtue encouraged attitudes of non-ill will and harmlessness. The teachings on the drawbacks of sensuality encouraged a favorable attitude to renunciation. This means that right resolve doesn't just follow on right view. The attitudes of right resolve, in seed form, also precede right view in preparing the mind to accept it.

Why the Buddha would focus on encouraging these specific attitudes through the graduated discourse relates to the fact that he was trying to get his listeners' minds into a state of right concentration as they were listening. Only then would they be in the right frame of mind to accept and use the four noble truths in the most effective way. And to get their minds into this state, they had to will it. They couldn't listen to the graduated discourse simply as an interesting parade of ideas and information. If they were to fully experience the truth of the four noble truths—and that would include at least a glimpse of the cessation of suffering—they had to will the path into being, all the way to the path's last factor: right concentration. The

three types of right resolve were just what they needed to exert that act of will.

### *Right Resolve & Right Concentration*

The close connection between right resolve and right concentration is reflected in the standard description of how to enter the first of the four jhānas: Your mind has to be "secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities" (SN 45:8). The word "secluded" here means that you don't have to fully uproot sensuality or other unskillful qualities at this stage. You simply have to be careful to stay away from them. Sensual desire is listed as one of the hindrances to right concentration, as is ill will (DN 2). This means that two of the principles of right resolve—renunciation and non-ill will—are explicitly mentioned as necessary for entering the first jhāna.

As for the third principle, harmfulness, it's not listed explicitly as a hindrance to right concentration, but because purified virtue acts as a basis for right mindfulness and right concentration (SN 47:16), and because purified virtue is the embodiment of harmlessness, the need to put aside thoughts of harm can be implicitly understood as a basis for right concentration as well.

Here it's important to note that, in abandoning the pleasures of sensuality, the mind isn't deprived of pleasure. The first two jhānas are characterized by physical and mental pleasure and rapture; in the third jhāna, you experience equanimity of mind while sensing pleasure with the body. In all three of these levels, you're said to suffuse these feelings throughout the body, so that no part of the body is unpervaded by them (DN 2; MN 117).

The physical pleasure here, however, is not sensual. An example would the pleasure associated with mindfulness of in-and-out breathing (MN 118). The Buddha classifies the in-and-out breath, not as a tactile sensation at the nose or skin, but as part of the "wind property" that permeates the entire body as felt from within—what we at present call proprioception (MN 28; MN 140). As the Buddha notes, even though you may have insight into the drawbacks of sensuality, it's only when you can experience

the non-sensual pleasures attained in this way that you can resist the pull of sensuality (MN 14). You've got an alternative pleasure to keep the mind's desire for pleasure well-fed.

This is an example of how the practice of right concentration puts the principles of right resolve on a firm foundation. Sensuality and ill will aren't fully abandoned until the attainment of non-return, the third of the four levels of awakening, but that's also the level at which the practice of right concentration is fully mastered (AN 3:87).

The connection between right resolve and the first jhāna is so close that your resolves become totally right only when you enter the first jhāna.

> "And what are unskillful resolves? Being resolved on sensuality, on ill will, on harmfulness.… And where do unskillful resolves cease without trace? Their cessation, too, has been stated: There is the case where a monk, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation." — *MN 78*

In fact, when the Buddha describes the highest level of right resolve, it's equivalent to the mental activities that get the mind into the first jhāna and keep it there:

> "And what is the right resolve that is noble, without effluents, transcendent, a factor of the path? The thinking, directed thinking, resolve, mental fixity, mental transfixion, focused awareness, & verbal fabrications [directed thought & evaluation] in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is without effluents, who is fully possessed of the noble path." — *MN 117*

Of the various levels of right concentration, the first jhāna is the only one that contains the verbal fabrications of directed thought and evaluation. This means that, as right resolve succeeds in getting the mind into the first jhāna, it becomes part of that jhāna. And because, for some people, the first jhāna is a sufficient basis for the discernment that leads to awakening (AN 9:36), right resolve can fulfill its purpose in taking the mind that far.

What's interesting to note is that it goes no further. It doesn't lead to any of the higher levels of jhāna, nor does it get involved in the work of discernment based on the jhānas.

Starting with the second jhāna, directed thought and evaluation are abandoned because they're no longer needed to keep the mind in place. In fact, it's only when they're abandoned that the mind can experience the assurance and unification of awareness characteristic of the second jhāna.

MN 125 shows this clearly:

> "Then the Tathāgata [the Buddha] trains the monk further: 'Come, monk, remain focused on the body in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with the body. Remain focused on feelings in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with feelings. Remain focused on the mind in & of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with mind. Remain focused on mental qualities in & of themselves, but do not think any thoughts connected with mental qualities.' With the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, he enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance."

At this stage, meditators don't engage in any full-sentence thoughts even about the topic of their meditation—much less anything else—although their concentration is still anchored with perceptions, intentions, and acts of attention (MN 111). This is why even skillful resolves, which are expressed in acts of directed thought and evaluation, have to be transcended on reaching this stage.

> "And what are skillful resolves? Being resolved on renunciation, on non-ill will, on harmlessness.… And where do skillful resolves cease without trace? Their cessation, too, has been stated: There is the case where a monk, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, enters & remains in the second jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance. This is where skillful resolves cease without trace." — *MN 78*

The values of right resolve are still present as background attitudes in the mind, but they no longer have to be articulated as resolves as long as the mind is in states of concentration higher than the first. That's because the focal issues of right resolve—sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness—are far away from these higher states, so there's no need to resolve on their opposites. And the reason that right resolve doesn't aim higher—say, at abandoning the rapture and pleasure of form in the higher jhānas—is because the work of getting the mind into higher states of concentration or of using discernment to abandon the causes of suffering is so refined and delicate that the Buddha calls it "attention," "reflection," and "inclining the mind," rather than "thinking." This means that any act of will expressed in the full sentences needed by right resolve would get in the way. This is why resolves, even when they're skillful and right, can go no further than the first jhāna.

The fact that right resolve can go only so far also explains why it doesn't focus directly on renouncing all three types of craving. The jhānas themselves are states of becoming needed on the path: You, as a meditator, fully inhabit the world of your body. To master any of these jhānas requires that you disband any states of becoming—any thought worlds—that would distract you from their focus. So the practice of the jhānas, for those who aren't fully awakened, involves both becoming and non-becoming. If right resolve aimed at rooting out craving for becoming and non-becoming, it would abort states of right concentration before they could fulfill their function. Only when those states are mastered can they be put aside through dispassion. The ability to develop that dispassion is the work of right view, expressed in the activity of appropriate attention.

For its part, right resolve focuses on setting the stage for this work, fulfilling the factors of the path all the way to the first level of right concentration. If it didn't do this preparatory work, right view would remain on the level of a map—interesting, but inert; easy to fold up and lose. Right resolve is what gets you started on your journey along the path, so that eventually you can fulfill the compassionate purpose that the map was meant to serve.

# *Things as They Can Be*

## What Happens in Awakening

There are instances in the Canon where the Buddha teaches his listeners to analyze experience into the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrication, and consciousness, and to view those aggregates in terms of what Buddhist tradition has termed the three characteristics, or what the Buddha himself called "perceptions" or "labels"— *(saññā):* the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. There are other instances in which he teaches his listeners to apply the same perceptions to the six sense media: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect. In both cases, his listeners, on adopting these perceptions, often gain awakening: either their first glimpse of awakening, called the arising of the Dhamma eye (SN 35:74), or the total awakening that brings about, once and for all, the end of birth, death, and the total mass of suffering and stress (SN 22:59; MN 109).

Frequently, the arising of the Dhamma eye is expressed as a realization often translated as, "Whatever is subject to arising is all subject to passing away." This sounds like an affirmation of the perception of inconstancy: You see that, yes, all things that arise pass away.

This interpretation of what's seen by the Dhamma eye is reinforced by a compound often used to describe all the different stages of awakening: *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*. This compound is typically translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are." Here again, this sounds as if awakening comes when you affirm, based on your own vision and knowledge, that the three perceptions really are true.

The question is, if this interpretation is correct, then what kind of experience would count as a valid affirmation of the three perceptions? After all, everyone can see that things in general are impermanent. What's so special about the Dhamma eye? And why would the Canon say that it has a huge impact on the mind of the person to whom it arises?

On top of that, is the statement about "whatever is subject to arising" really a valid generalization? No one has seen everything that arises, so how can they make a legitimate statement about everything subject to arising? Sometimes we're told that the Dhamma eye comes as a result of deep reflection on the implications of the three perceptions, but what kind of reflection? And how deep? And does this description fit in with the Buddha's own standards of what counts as a valid affirmation of the truth?

There are two reasons to think not.

The first is based on the Buddha's own statements about the truth of perceptions: They're insubstantial, he says, like mirages (SN 22:95). They show, at best, only partial view of what they reflect. Perceptions are representations, and no representation can give all the details of what it represents. It's true only to the extent that the partial view it gives can adequately serve our purposes.

In addition, perceptions are fabricated through intentions, and we know how unreliable intentions can be (SN 22:79). The Buddha himself noted that even though the three perceptions are always true (AN 3:137), they're not always beneficial (MN 109; MN 136). In other words, there are times when holding to them can interfere with the path to the end of suffering. And the perception of stress, for one, doesn't tell the whole story about the aggregates, because the aggregates have their pleasant side as well (SN 22:60). If it weren't for that pleasant side, the Buddha tells us, we wouldn't fall for them, as we do again and again.

So it would seem as of awakening, at least by the Buddha's standards, should not be seen as an act of assenting to the truth of perceptions, inasmuch as even the most enlightening perceptions are only partial representations of the truth. The unreliability of perceptions in general means that the knowledge and vision that constitutes awakening can't be mediated by perceptions, but that raises a further question: What kind of knowledge and vision would that be? Everything known through the senses involves labels and perceptions.

Then there's the second reason for thinking that awakening, viewed as the affirmation of the truth of the three perceptions, wouldn't meet the Buddha's own standards for what counts as a reliable way of arriving at the truth. This reason is based on his discussions of the invalid ways in which

people commonly become convinced of the truth of a particular view or teaching. These ways include:

> *logic*—reasoning deductively from general principles,
>
> *inference*—reasoning inductively from individual experiences to general principles,
>
> *analogies*—seeing how something unfamiliar has parallels with something familiar, and
>
> what the Buddha termed *"agreement through pondering views"*—thinking seriously about a teaching until you decide that it makes sense, in that it fits in with your experience or what you already believe.

None of these ways of arriving at the truth, the Buddha states, is really trustworthy. As he notes, beliefs supported by these reasons could turn out to be true or they could be false (AN 3:66; MN 95), which means that, on their own, they can't serve as reliable methods for ascertaining the truth.

Now, if awakening meant assenting to the truth of the three perceptions, it would fall either under inference or agreement through pondering views—or both: You ponder until you infer from your limited range of personal experience that all things that arise pass away. But again: If this is awakening, it wouldn't meet the Buddha's standards for what counts as a reliable basis for affirming the truth. The texts say that one of the attributes of people who have gained the Dhamma eye is that their confidence in the Dhamma has been verified (AN 10:92), but this type of "awakening," from his point of view, would verify nothing.

The question is, did the Buddha think that awakening happened in this way, that it meant affirming the truth of the three perceptions? In other words, did he hold to a picture of awakening that, unbeknownst to him, didn't meet his own standards for what's a reliable guide to the truth?

His words as reported in the Canon suggest two main reasons for why the answer is No. These reasons have to with (1) the larger context of how he describes awakening in the rest of the discourses and (2) questions of translation. The view that awakening means affirming the truth of the three perceptions is based on taking a few passages out of context and on mistranslating some key terms: what is seen by the Dhamma eye and what

kind of knowledge and vision constitutes awakening. Because the correct translation of these terms becomes clear when taken in the larger context, we have to look at the context first.

### *Context*

Admittedly, it's true that the Buddha uses logic, inference, and analogy in presenting the Dhamma to others, and he does advise his listeners to ponder the teaching until they agree that it makes enough sense for them to want to put it into practice. But those are just preliminary steps before actually getting on the path. You arrive at awakening only when you exert right effort based on what you've learned (MN 95). In other words, awakening is based, not on what you agree to as right, but on what you *do* and what you experience as a result of what you do.

This point is shown clearly by the Buddha's description of the event on which all other descriptions of awakening are based: his own experience of awakening. In none of his autobiographical accounts of the awakening experience does he mention the three perceptions. Instead, all of his accounts center on either of two themes:

- understanding and fulfilling the duties of the *four noble truths* or
- understanding cause and effect as they play out in the steps of *dependent co-arising* leading to suffering, and then using that knowledge to put an end to those steps.

In both cases, these themes focus not just on things as they are, but more primarily on things as they function: how, through the principles of cause and effect, they have the potential to lead either to suffering or to the end of suffering. We can call this, "things as they can be."

Take the duties of the four noble truths. The four truths are the truths of suffering, its origination *(samudaya)*, its cessation *(nirodha)*, and the path to its cessation. Each truth has its own duty: (1) You have to *comprehend* that suffering is the act of clinging—with desire and passion—to the five aggregates. (2) You have to *abandon*, through dispassion, the origination of that clinging, which is craving. (3) You have to *realize* the cessation of

suffering through dispassion for craving. (4) And to arrive at that dispassion, you have to *develop* the eight factors of the noble path.

The Buddha often describes the first glimpse of awakening as seeing, in your immediate experience, that "This is suffering," "This is the origination of suffering," "This is the cessation of suffering," and "This is the path to the cessation of suffering" (AN 3:12; AN 3:74). The way these statements are phrased, with the repeated emphasis on "this," "this," "this," suggests that the Buddha is talking about a direct experience of these things. In other words, you've done some of the work. You've developed the path enough to have a glimpse of the cessation of suffering.

The suggestion that this experience includes direct knowledge of the path is confirmed by the fact that the other main term for the arising of the Dhamma eye—entry into the stream—defines the stream as all eight factors of the noble eightfold path (SN 55:5). You've seen all the factors, from right view through right concentration, come together in the mind.

The suggestion that this experience includes direct knowledge of cessation is confirmed by several passages in the Canon. MN 48 notes that one of the prerequisites for verifying that you've had your first glimpse of awakening is when you can answer Yes to this question: "When I cultivate, develop, and pursue this view, do I personally obtain tranquility, do I personally obtain unbinding *(nibbāna)?*" MN 1 adds that those who have attained the Dhamma eye—in its terminology, those who have become "learners"—have directly known unbinding. When Sāriputta, after the arising of the Dhamma eye, was asked by his friend Moggallāna if he had reached the deathless, he replied, "Yes, I have" (Mv 1.23.5).

It's this direct experience—beyond the six senses and unmediated by perceptions or any mental fabrications—that can actually verify your conviction in the Dhamma.

So there's more going on in awakening than just assenting to right view. You have to follow through with the duties assigned by right view until you've reached a level of dispassion strong enough to bring about a glimpse of unbinding. Instead of simply affirming that things arise and pass away, you make the right path arise and you make the wrong path pass away, and in doing so you don't just affirm the principle of inconstancy. You discover that some inconstant things have the potential to lead you to something

you've never experienced before: a permanent dimension (SN 43) that lies entirely beyond inconstancy.

It lies even beyond the path. After all, the path is composed of aggregates, and so it, too, is inconstant (AN 9:36). This is why SN 48:3 notes that those who have gained the Dhamma eye have seen the escape from the factors of the path as expressed under the five faculties of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. It's also why Anāthapiṇḍika, a lay follower who had gained the Dhamma eye, said that by pursuing right view he saw the escape from it (AN 10:93).

So gaining the Dhamma eye is not just a matter of affirming the perceptions that go into right view. It means using those perceptions as tools, and then putting them aside when they've done their work in showing not just things as they are, but as they can be made to be. You've discovered the potentials within those things, if you use them right, to lead beyond themselves.

This is precisely how the three perceptions—and perceptions in general—function in the Buddha's descriptions of awakening.

Here we have to remember the Buddha's own standards for what he would teach. For him to make a statement, it had to be not only true but also beneficial (MN 58). The same standards applied to the perceptions he would have you apply to your experiences. As he noted when stating that the aggregates have both their pleasant and their unpleasant side, if you get obsessed with perceiving them as pleasant, it leads to infatuation, captivation, and defilement. In other words, even though the perception of pleasure may be true in some contexts, it's not beneficial when viewed in the context of the duties of the four noble truths. Instead of getting you to abandon passion, it leads you to develop more passion, and to cause more suffering.

If, however, you focus on the unpleasant side of the aggregates—as when you apply the three perceptions to them—it leads to disenchantment, dispassion, and purification (SN 22:60). This would be in line with the duties of the four noble truths—to induce dispassion—so the result will lead to the end of suffering.

This corresponds to how the Buddha explicitly describes how the three perceptions function in leading to awakening: When a listener sees in line

with these perceptions that all aggregates—past, present, future; near or far; blatant or subtle—are inconstant, stressful, and not-self—the Buddha doesn't say that the listener simply agrees with those perceptions. He says that the listener grows disenchanted with the aggregates, and so becomes dispassionate (SN 22:59). From that dispassion comes release: in other words, a direct experience of the third noble truth.

So, here again, these perceptions are used not only because they're true representations of the truth, but also because they perform: They have a liberating effect on the mind.

That's how the role of the three perceptions in leading to awakening should be understood: They function as aids in performing the duties appropriate to the four noble truths. Like all perceptions, they're fabricated for a purpose (SN 22:79). Here their purpose is the highest one possible: bringing about the dispassion that brings total release.

Given that that's the context for understanding how the three perceptions actually function in the steps leading to awakening, we can see that awakening, as the Buddha describes it, is not simply a matter of assenting to the truth of these perceptions.

### *Translation*

As for questions of translation: When we look carefully at the original Pali version of the statement expressing what's seen by the Dhamma eye, we can see that to translate it as, "Whatever is subject to arising is all subject to passing away," is clearly a mistake. And when we look at the phrase, "knowledge and vision of things as they are," in the larger context of the discourses, we can see that while that may be a possible translation of the term *yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana*, it misses many of the implications contained in that larger context. In other words, the translations used to support the idea that awakening is simply a matter of affirming the truth of right view are not accurate representations of what the discourses have to say about awakening.

First, the Dhamma eye: The correct translation is, "Whatever is subject to origination *(samudaya-dhamma)* is all subject to cessation *(nirodha-dhamma)*." Now, as we've seen in the context of the four noble truths,

origination is not just a matter of arising. It's a matter of causation. And in almost every case where the discourses use the word "origination," it denotes causes coming from within the mind. In the context of the four noble truths, that's always the case.

Similarly with cessation: It doesn't mean just "passing away." It means total ending. And in the context of the four noble truths, it means ending through dispassion.

So what the sentence is actually saying is that anything that arises through acts of the mind can all be brought to cessation through dispassion. Because the aggregates and sense media are all experienced through acts of the mind—as the Buddha said, all phenomena are rooted in desire—then when there's thorough dispassion for them, there's nothing to keep them going. So they all cease. That's when unbinding is experienced, inasmuch as unbinding is the end of all phenomena (AN 10:58). What's revealed at that point is consciousness "without surface," limitless, reflecting off of no object, totally independent of the six senses, unmediated by any perceptions or thought constructs at all (MN 49).

It's in this way that the expression of what's seen by the Dhamma eye is entirely in line with the fact that those who have gained the Dhamma eye have seen unbinding. That expression is not a mere description of things as they exist on their own, affirming the principle of inconstancy. It's a statement of possibilities: things as they can be. If you practice properly, putting the aggregates into the form of the correct path, you can bring about the dispassion that leads to release.

As for the compound, "knowledge and vision of things as they are" *(yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa-dassana)*, this has a similar meaning. The key word in the compound is *bhūta*. This word can either be a noun meaning "truth" or "reality" on the one hand, or a past participle meaning "has come to be" or "has come into being" on the other. The first set of meanings yields the translation of the whole compound as "knowledge and vision of things as they are," indicating that you see things simply as they actually exist. The second set yields "knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be," indicating that you see the causal processes by which things come about. On their own, both renderings are plausible, but SN 12:31 gives preference to the second.

There the Buddha asks Ven. Sāriputta, "Do you see, 'This *bhūta?*" Sāriputta answers, not with a description of the three perceptions, but with an account of how things come into being based on "nutriment": another way of saying how they arise and subsist based on causes.

He notes that both a learner—one who has gained the Dhamma eye—and the fully awakened arahant see that "this" comes into being based on nutriment, and that it is subject to cessation based on the cessation of that nutriment. MN 9 indicates that "this," here, denotes suffering and any of the factors of the four noble truths and dependent co-arising that lead to suffering. In fact, these statements about nutriment are a shorthand version of the four noble truths. "This" would be the truth of suffering, nutriment would be the truth of the origination of suffering. The cessation of "this" and its nutriment would be the truth of the cessation of suffering, and MN 9 indicates that the practice that leads to the cessation of the nutriment would be the truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering: the noble eightfold path.

Where the learner differs from the arahant is that the learner—having seen how the nutriment is, in turn, nurtured by passion—practices to develop more dispassion for its total cessation. In other words, the learner sees not only the principle of causality at work here, but also the fact that that principle is generated through mental acts: Our experience of these things comes from our passion for them. That's why dispassion can bring about total cessation.

As for arahants, they don't have to work any further at dispassion. They've already developed enough dispassion for these things so as to be totally released from them.

So this is what's meant by "knowledge and vision of things as they've come to be": You've gained enough mastery of cause and effect to undo those causes, bringing about at least a glimpse of the cessation of suffering in the experience of unbinding. That way, you've directly seen that all results subject to origination are, in fact, subject to cessation. You've seen them being originated, you've seen them cease, and when they've ceased, you've seen what isn't originated and doesn't cease.

This is how both of the terms normally used to support the idea of awakening as assenting to the three perceptions—"Whatever is subject to

origination is all subject to cessation" and "knowledge and vision of things as they've come to be"—actually support a totally different view of awakening when they're correctly translated. The Buddha recommended the three perceptions, not simply to gain the assent of his listeners, but to have an effect on their minds. In the context of the four noble truths, these perceptions are used not just to indicate how things are, but also as part of a larger program, using knowledge of how things have come to be in order to reveal an unexpected aspect of how things *can* be: how inconstant and stressful fabrications can be turned into a path of virtue, concentration, and discernment in order to develop dispassion for all the mind's activities, resulting in the unending freedom of the deathless.

When the reality of this possibility appears in the heart, it has a much greater impact than a mere act of assent or affirmation. Having stepped outside of the six senses, you now view all the events in the six senses in a radically new light. This upends many of your old preconceived notions of what's possible and what's not.

No wonder, then, that when the Buddha fully awakened to the total release provided by this truth, the earth shook. And no wonder that when he was able to teach his first noble disciple to gain a glimpse of that same truth, the earth shook again.

# *A Beam of Light that Doesn't Land*

SN 43 contains a list of 33 names for nibbāna. One of them is *anidassana*, which *A Dictionary of Pali* defines as *invisible* and *not accessible to sight*. However, most of the citations the dictionary gives for this definition are drawn from the Abhidhamma and later texts. If we want to know what it means in the context of the suttas, we have to look exclusively there. And it turns out that the term appears in only three other sutta passages: once as a standard attribute of space, and twice as an attribute of a special kind of consciousness.

It's obvious that in calling nibbāna *anidassana*, the suttas are not saying that nibbāna is identical to space, but the reference to space as *anidassana*, in MN 21, gives a clear picture of what the word might mean:

> "Suppose, monks, that a man were to come along carrying lac, yellow orpiment, indigo, or crimson, saying, 'I will draw pictures in space, I will make pictures appear.' Now, what do you think? Would he draw pictures in space & make pictures appear?"
>
> "No, lord. Why is that? Because space is formless & *anidassana*. It's not easy to draw pictures there and to make them appear. The man would reap only a share of weariness & disappointment."

Now, the reason why you can't draw pictures in space is not because it's invisible or not accessible to sight. It's because space doesn't have a surface. So in this case, *anidassana* would mean, "without surface."

But as I noted above, the term *anidassana* is also used to describe a type of consciousness. This raises a question: What would it mean for consciousness to be without surface? The answer is suggested by a pair of similes in SN 12:64. There the Buddha is describing the difference between consciousness that has passion for the four nutriments of consciousness, and consciousness that has no passion for those nutriments.

The simile for passionate consciousness picks up MN 21's image of painting pictures, although here there is a surface:

"Just as—when there is dye, lac, yellow orpiment, indigo, or crimson—a dyer or painter would paint the picture of a woman or a man, complete in all its parts, on a well-polished panel or wall or on a piece of cloth; in the same way, where there is passion, delight, & craving for the nutriment of physical food… contact… intellectual intention… consciousness, consciousness lands there and increases. Where consciousness lands and increases, there is the alighting of name-&-form. Where there is the alighting of name-&-form, there is the growth of fabrications. Where there is the growth of fabrications, there is the production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is the production of renewed becoming in the future, there is future birth, aging, & death, together, I tell you, with sorrow, affliction, & despair."

The simile for consciousness without passion for the four forms of nutriment—awakened consciousness—removes the wall:

"Just as if there were a roofed house or a roofed hall having windows on the north, the south, or the east. When the sun rises, and a ray has entered by way of the window, where does it land?"

"On the western wall, lord."

"And if there is no western wall, where does it land?"

"On the ground, lord."

"And if there is no ground, where does it land?"

"On the water, lord."

"And if there is no water, where does it land?"

"It doesn't land, lord."

"In the same way, where there is no passion for the nutriment of physical food… contact… intellectual intention… consciousness, where there is no delight, no craving, then consciousness does not land there or increase. Where consciousness does not land or increase, there is no alighting of name-&-form. Where there is no alighting of name-&-form, there is no growth of fabrications. Where there is no growth of fabrications, there is no production of renewed becoming in the future. Where there is no production of renewed

becoming in the future, there is no future birth, aging, & death. That, I tell you, has no sorrow, affliction, or despair."

The fact that this is a simile for awakened consciousness is reinforced by the word the Buddha uses here for "not landing": *appatiṭṭhita*, literally, "unestablished." This is an adjective used in several suttas to describe the consciousness of an awakened one. For example:

> Then the Blessed One went with a large number of monks to the Black Rock on the slope of Isigili. From afar he saw Ven. Vakkali lying dead on a couch. Now, at that time a smokiness, a darkness was moving to the east, moving to the west, moving to the north, the south, above, below, moving to the intermediate directions. The Blessed One said, "Monks, do you see that smokiness, that darkness…?"
>
> "Yes, lord."
>
> "That's Māra, the Evil One. He's searching for the consciousness of Vakkali the clansman: 'Where is the consciousness of Vakkali the clansman established?' But, monks, through unestablished consciousness, Vakkali the clansman has attained total nibbāna." — *SN 22:87*

> "If a monk abandons passion for the property of form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness, then owing to the abandoning of passion, the support is cut off, and there is no establishing of consciousness. Consciousness, thus unestablished, not increasing, not concocting, is released. Owing to release, it is steady. Owing to steadiness, it is contented. Owing to contentment, it is not agitated. Not agitated, he (the monk) totally unbinds right within. He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'
>
> "For one knowing in this way, seeing in this way, monk, there is the immediate ending of effluents." — *SN 22:55*

So the image of consciousness without surface would appear to be the same as unestablished consciousness, i.e., the consciousness of an

awakened one. One of the two references in the suttas to consciousness without surface seems to bear this out:

> [The Buddha is reporting a conversation with Baka Brahmā:]
> "'Having directly known the all as the all, and having directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, I wasn't the all, I wasn't in the all, I wasn't coming forth from the all, I wasn't "The all is mine." I didn't affirm the all. Thus I am not your mere equal in terms of direct knowing, brahmā, so how could I be inferior? I am actually superior to you.'
>
> "'If, good sir, you have directly known the extent of what has not been experienced through the allness of the all, may it not turn out to be actually vain and void for you.'
>
> *"'Consciousness without surface,*
> *without end, luminous all around,*
> *has not been experienced through… the allness of the all.'"*
> — *MN 49*

The word "all" in this passage has to be understood in line with how it's defined in SN 35:23:

> "What is the all? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, monks, is called the all. Anyone who would say, 'Repudiating this all, I will describe another,' if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain and, furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range."

This means that consciousness without surface is not known through any of the six internal or external sense media that constitute the "all." Although nothing beyond this "all" can properly be described, MN 49 makes it clear that what is not experienced through this "all" can be directly known. In fact, it's this direct knowledge that makes the Buddha—and by extension, all those who are fully awakened—superior to the Brahmās. This fact has to be kept in mind when reading other passages in the suttas that

allude to this direct knowledge, because translators who don't believe in this possibility have tended to render these passages in ways that deny it. Take, for instance, SN 35:117:

> "Therefore, monks, that dimension should be experienced where the eye ceases and the perception of form fades. That dimension should be experienced where the ear ceases and the perception of sound fades. That dimension should be experienced where the nose ceases and the perception of aroma fades. That dimension should be experienced where the tongue ceases and the perception of flavor fades. That dimension should be experienced where the body ceases and the perception of tactile sensation fades. That dimension should be experienced where the intellect ceases and the perception of idea fades. That dimension should be experienced." — *SN 35:117*

Here I've rendered the word *veditabbe* as "to be experienced." Some translators, believing that nothing can be experienced outside of the six sense media, have rendered *veditabbe* as "to be understood" or "to be inferred." But this verb is more normally translated as "to be known" or "to be experienced." And because (1) the Buddha is obviously talking about nibbāna in this passage, and the duty with regard to nibbāna is to realize it, not just to understand or infer it; and (2) as we have seen, this dimension can be directly known, then "to be experienced" seems to be the proper translation here. The Buddha didn't simply infer or understand nibbāna. He directly knew it. In fact, even those who have attained just the first level of awakening, achieving the level of one in training, have directly known it as well (MN 1).

Another example of a similar type of mistranslation deals with the following sentence from MN 38:

> "Worthless man, haven't I, in many ways, said of dependently co-arisen consciousness, 'Apart from a requisite condition, there is no coming-into-play of consciousness'?"

The Pali here is:

> *"Nanu mayā moghapurisa anekapariyāyena paṭiccasamuppannaṁ viññāṇaṁ vuttaṁ, 'Aññatra paccayā n'atthi viññāṇassa sambhavoti'?"*

The way I've translated this sentence, with the Buddha modifying "consciousness" *(viññāṇaṁ)* with the adjective "dependently co-arisen" *(paṭiccasamuppannaṁ),* leaves open the possibility that there might be a consciousness that is not dependently co-arisen, in the same way as modifying the word "guitar" with the adjective "acoustic" leaves open the possibility that there are other types of guitars aside from acoustic ones. Modifying "consciousness" in this way would leave room for a consciousness, such as consciousness without surface, that's not dependent on conditions.

However, translators who don't believe in the existence of such a consciousness translate the passage in such a way as to rule out that possibility altogether. For instance, here is one such rendering:

> "Misguided man, have I not stated in many ways consciousness to be dependently arisen since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness?"

But as I have pointed out in a footnote to my translation of MN 38, this rendering doesn't do justice to the syntax of the Pali. The discussion in that footnote is technical, and repeating it here would weigh down the current discussion. If you're interested in the details, you can consult the footnote. Here we can simply note that if the Buddha meant to leave open the possibility that there could be a consciousness not dependent on conditions, he would have done so in other parts of the Canon as well.

And when we check the standard way he defines the consciousness aggregate—i.e., consciousness dependent on conditions—we find that he does just that, many, many times throughout the suttas.

Here's the definition:

> "Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: All *[sabbaṁ]* consciousness is to be seen as it has come to be with right discernment as: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'" — *SN 22:59*

The word, "all," as we have seen, is limited to the range of the six sense media. Because the consciousness aggregate is limited to "all"

consciousness, that means that consciousness without surface, which is *not* experienced through the all, would lie outside the range of the consciousness aggregate.

Further, because the definition of the consciousness aggregate covers all consciousness in space and time—"far or near," "past, future, or present"—consciousness without surface would have to lie outside of the dimensions of space and time. And several descriptions of the dimension where the "all" ceases show that it's a dimension in which the basic defining factors of space and time, in fact, do not appear.

For instance, a passage in Ud 8:1 states that this dimension contains none of the activities that define the experience of time, such as coming, going, or staying in place.

> "And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [or: object]." — *Ud 8:1*

A passage in Ud 8:4, which is repeated in MN 144 and SN 35:87, adds that this dimension also lacks the coordinates that define space—"here," "there," or "between-the-two":

> "There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor a between-the-two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

The fact that this dimension lacks any of the features that define any experience of space and time may explain the fact that even though the Canon often makes the point that nibbāna is unchanging (SN 43), it never describes it as "eternal" *(sassata)*. After all, eternity is a measure of time, so it wouldn't properly apply to anything outside of space and time.

Now, because this dimension is unconditioned and lies outside of space and time, it can't arise or pass away. That means it possesses the characteristics of the unfabricated:

> "Now, these three are unfabricated characteristics of what is unfabricated. Which three? No arising is discernible, no passing away is discernible, no alteration while staying is discernible." — *AN 3:48*

The passages cited here, taken together, don't merely leave open the possibility that there are two types of consciousness—(1) that contained in the consciousness aggregate, and (2) that not contained in the consciousness aggregate—they actually flesh out the picture of what that second kind of consciousness would be like: without surface—i.e., free from objects, free from passion—outside of space and time, unconditioned, unestablished, and unchanging.

These considerations provide the background for understanding the second of the two passages in the Canon that make reference to consciousness without surface. In this passage, the Buddha poses two questions and then provides a three-sentence answer to both:

> *"'Where do water, earth, fire, & wind*
> *have no footing?*
> *Where are long & short,*
> *coarse & fine,*
> *fair & foul,*
> *—where are name & form—*
> *brought to a stop without trace?*
> *"'And the answer to that is:*
> *"'Consciousness without surface,*
> *without end,*
> *luminous all around:*
> *Here water, earth, fire, & wind*
> *have no footing.*
> *Here long & short,*
> *coarse & fine,*
> *fair & foul,*
> *here name & form*
> *are brought to a stop without trace.*
> *With the cessation of consciousness,*
> *each is here brought to a stop.'" — DN 11

The verses giving the answer here contain a paradox. On the one hand, they refer to consciousness without surface as the place where name and form—mental and physical phenomena—are brought to a stop. On the

other, they say that these phenomena are brought to a stop with the cessation of consciousness.

There have been some attempts at resolving this paradox based on the assumption that nibbāna is not a type of consciousness. Two in particular are worth discussing.

• The first assumes, in effect, that consciousness without surface is the answer to both of the questions posed by the Buddha. In other words, it's where the four physical properties of water, earth, fire, and wind find no footing, and it's also where name and form are brought to a stop. However, this interpretation goes on to assume that nibbāna is not a type of consciousness, so "consciousness without surface" must refer to the arahant's meditative experience of nibbāna, rather than to nibbāna itself. This, however, would make nibbāna an object of the sixth sense, the intellect *(manas)*. That means that it would come under the term, the "all." But as MN 49 makes clear, consciousness without surface is not experienced through the "all."

Also, because this interpretation assumes that consciousness without surface comes under the consciousness aggregate, it would have to end at death. But given that this consciousness is independent of the "all," and that the death of the arahant is simply described as, "this all grows cold right here," (Iti 44), then the growing cold of the "all" would have no effect on it.

So for these reasons, this first interpretation can't be accepted.

• The second interpretation asserts that consciousness without surface is the answer only to the Buddha's first question, and not to his second. Those who propose this interpretation argue that "consciousness without surface" refers to the level of concentration called the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, which is where the four physical properties have no footing. They go on to argue that name and form are brought to a stop only with the cessation of the aggregate of consciousness, which, according to them, covers consciousness both with and without surface.

This interpretation, however, doesn't make rhetorical sense, nor does it fit in with the context provided by MN 49.

To address the rhetorical issue first: This interpretation assumes that both mentions of the word "here" *(ettha)* at the beginning of both lines in

the second sentence of the Buddha's answer refer solely to the cessation of any possible form of consciousness, and not to the presence of consciousness without surface. In other words, they refer to a noun, "cessation," in the following sentence, and not to the noun in the sentence that precedes them.

However, *ettha* in Pali functions as a pronoun that usually refers to its antecedent. In the first sentence of his answer, the Buddha already used the word "here" clearly to refer to its antecedent, consciousness without surface. This established a precedent, leading any listener to assume that the repeated use of "here" in the second sentence would refer to the same antecedent as the "here" in the first. If had had meant for the word "here" in the second sentence to refer to something else—the cessation of any possible form of consciousness, mentioned only in the third sentence—he wouldn't have wanted to confuse his listeners by repeating it so emphatically at the beginning of each line immediately after using it to refer to consciousness without surface.

And we should note that there's nothing corresponding to the word "but" to separate the repeated "here's" in the second sentence from the "here" in the first.

Aside from rhetorical issues, though, there's the issue of context. Nowhere in the Canon is "consciousness without surface" used as a name for the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This state of concentration takes as its object the perception, "Infinite consciousness," which is known through the sixth sense medium, the intellect. However, as we have seen, MN 49 states that consciousness without surface is not experienced through any of the six sense media. Therefore it can't be identical with a state of consciousness known through any of those media.

So this second interpretation, too, has nothing to recommend it.

When we approach these verses with the understanding that consciousness without surface doesn't lie under the consciousness aggregate, then the Buddha's answer makes rhetorical sense: The "here's" in the second sentence refer the same antecedent as the "here" in the first sentence: Consciousness without surface is where name and form are brought to a stop without trace.

At the same time, the paradox contained in the answer, understood in this way, is easier to resolve. When the last lines mention the cessation of consciousness, they're referring to the cessation of the consciousness aggregate. But because consciousness without surface doesn't arise or cease, it's not affected by that cessation. In fact, it's what's uncovered when the consciousness aggregate is allowed to cease. Again, it's where name and form—along with all their inherent suffering and stress—are brought to a stop without trace.

This interpretation raises two questions.

• The first is, given that consciousness without surface lies outside the "all," how can it properly be described in the first place?

The answer, as best as I can see, is that the Buddha needed to describe the goal of the path he was teaching to at least some extent, so that (1) his listeners would feel motivated to follow the path, and (2) they could judge their meditative attainments to see whether they had actually reached the goal. To get around the fact that, strictly speaking, the goal lies beyond description, the Buddha would most often point at it in other ways, apart from straightforward description: through metaphors, paradoxes, and negative descriptions—i.e., saying what it's not or what it's devoid of, and rarely stating directly what it is.

One of the points he had to address so that his listeners would recognize the goal when they encountered it in their practice was whether it's characterized by consciousness or lack of consciousness. Had he said that the goal is devoid of consciousness, that would have counted as a description, too. Either way, this was an issue he had to address.

The terms he chose to use in this case—consciousness "without surface" that "doesn't land" or "isn't established"—are, like the term "nibbāna" itself, metaphorical. Without defining what "surface" he's talking about, the term "consciousness without surface" calls to mind the simile of the light beam in SN 12:64 and it serves the positive purpose of showing that nibbāna is not a state of unconsciousness or total blanking out. These metaphors are supported by the many instances in which the Buddha and his disciples use images of light, awakening, and absence of darkness (SN 56:11; SN 1:7; Ud 1:10), knowing and seeing (DN 15; AN 10:96)—rather than images of darkness, sleep, or oblivion—to describe the attainment of the goal.

This point is important for all those who practice, because there are states of mind—corresponding to the state of the non-percipient beings—in which all consciousness and perception is blotted out (DN 1; DN 15). These states could easily be—and frequently have been—mistaken as noble states of cessation, although DN 1 makes clear that they're not related to the noble attainments at all and, in fact, can form the basis for serious wrong view. Any passion for the oblivion of such states would count as a form of craving for non-becoming, which, as the Buddha frequently pointed out, simply leads to more becoming (SN 56:11; MN 49). Knowing that nibbāna does involve a type of consciousness that doesn't fall under the consciousness aggregate can help to counteract this dangerous pitfall.

• The second question is, why would the Buddha have wanted to use a paradox in his answer in DN 11? Wouldn't his answer have been easier to understand without it?

Here, again, we can only guess at his reasons, but they seem to be related to an opposite misunderstanding. There are states of luminous, immeasurable, non-dual consciousness that nevertheless are fabricated (AN 10:29). These, too, would be easy to mistake for a noble attainment, even though they come under the consciousness aggregate. The result of such a misunderstanding would be that any lingering passion for this type of consciousness would get in the way of finding what's truly unfabricated. On reaching these states of concentration, meditators would fasten on them, through a subtle craving for becoming, and stop looking any further in their practice.

So when you gain an experience like that, you have to make sure that you have no passion for it at all. This requires a willingness to thoroughly abandon passion for any and all forms of consciousness—no matter how luminous or immeasurable—allowing them all to cease. So, in effect, the Buddha's paradox in DN 11 is alerting you to the fact that if you want to attain consciousness without surface, you have to—in the words of SN 23:2—"smash, scatter, & demolish consciousness and make it unfit for play. Practice for the ending of craving for consciousness—because the ending of craving is unbinding." Given that consciousness without surface can't cease and can't be destroyed, it'll stand up to rough treatment.

# *Deep like the Ocean*

The suttas tell of numerous occasions when the Buddha and his disciples were presented with a list of ten questions to see what the Buddha's position was on the hot philosophical topics of the day. Apparently, the list was meant to cover all the possible positions that could be taken on those topics, but in every case, the Buddha and his disciples stated that he didn't take any of the ten.

Four of the questions concerned the existence or non-existence of a Tathāgata—a fully awakened being, such as the Buddha or an arahant disciple—after death. These questions are called a tetralemma because they entertain four possible positions:

> *"The Tathāgata exists after death."*
> *"The Tathāgata doesn't exist after death."*
> *"The Tathāgata both exists and doesn't exist after death."*
> *"The Tathāgata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death."*

This would seem to cover all the possible positions that could be taken on this issue, but just for good measure, when a young monk told a group of sectarians that the Buddha taught that the Tathāgata after death could be described otherwise than by any of these four positions, the Buddha later rebuked him as well (SN 22:86).

Given the thoroughness with which the early suttas reject all possible ways of describing the Tathāgata after death, it's always something of a surprise when Buddhists maintain that a fully awakened person doesn't exist after death. Those who defend this position insist that their way of holding to it falls outside the tetralemma because, in their eyes, every position listed in the tetralemma assumes that the Tathāgata has a self. They, however—adopting the no-self version of the not-self teaching—insist that the Tathāgata never had a self to begin with, so their position isn't ruled out by the Buddha's rejection of those four positions.

In other words, the proponents of this position assume, in effect, that the word "exist" in the tetralemma means "continues to exist." So when the first

possibility says, "The Tathāgata exists after death," it's actually saying, "The Tathāgata continues to exist after death." When the second possibility says, "The Tathāgata doesn't exist after death," it's actually saying, "The Tathāgata doesn't continue to exist after death." This argument would reject both positions on the grounds that the Tathāgata doesn't exist prior to death, so there's nothing to continue or not continue.

However, the closest the Buddha gets to using an argument like this to reject all four possibilities in the tetralemma is in SN 44:7 and SN 44:8. In SN 44:7 he notes that wanderers of other sects would take any of these positions because they assume, with regard to any of the six sense spheres, that 'This is mine, this is my self, this is what I am.' In SN 44:8, he states that they take the positions because they assume a self identical to any of the five aggregates, possessing any of the five, in any of the five, or containing any of the five within it. He, however, doesn't make any of these assumptions, which is why he doesn't take any of these positions.

But this is not to say that he held to the view that there is no self. In MN 2, he lists the questions, "Do I exist?" and "Do I not exist?" as unworthy of attention. From there, he goes on to state that the views that come from trying to answer questions like these—including the view, "I have no self," along with the view, "I have a self"—are "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, & death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress."

So there's no reason to believe that the Buddha or his awakened disciples would have used the view that there is no self as their basis for rejecting the tetralemma.

And there are at least three other reasons for suspecting that neither he nor they would have approved of the argument for using the view that there is no self in this way.

• The first reason is that any attempt to describe the existence or non-existence of a Tathāgata after death has to fall under the tetralemma no matter how you define "exists." For example, even if, for the sake of argument, we were to accept the idea that "exists" in the tetralemma means "continues to exist," then if you reject the first two possibilities of the

tetralemma—on the grounds that there's nothing to continue existing or not—then your position would have to fall under the fourth possibility: "The Tathāgata neither continues to exist nor doesn't continue to exist after death." In other words, if you say your description is not *x* and not *not-x*, then it would be accurately described as *neither x nor not-x*.

What this means is that as soon as you try to describe the existence or non-existence of the Tathāgata after death, regardless of whether you assume or don't assume a self prior to death, you still have to fall into one of the four members of the tetralemma, all of which the Buddha refuses to affirm.

• Second, even if it were possible to define the first two members of the tetralemma in any other way to avoid the problem just noted, SN 22:86 rules out any ways of describing the Tathāgata after death that would fall outside the tetralemma. So they would have to be rejected, too.

• Third, if the Buddha meant to imply that the tetralemma is unacceptable because it's assuming a self that the Tathāgata never had, either before or after awakening, then the Buddha would have refused to adopt any of the alternatives of the tetralemma not only with regard to fully awakened beings, but also with regard to all beings, on the grounds that no one has ever had a self. But as the Buddha said in SN 44:9, he designated the birth—meaning rebirth—of one who has clinging, and not of one without clinging. And we can see many instances in the Canon where he describes the birth even of those who have gained any of the noble attainments but have not yet reached full awakening:

> "Monks, Suppabuddha the leper was wise.… With the destruction of the first three fetters, he is a stream-winner, not subject to states of deprivation, headed for self-awakening for sure… Having acquired conviction, virtue, learning, relinquishment, & discernment on encountering the Dhamma & Vinaya made known by the Tathāgata, now—on the break-up of the body, after death—he has reappeared in a good destination, a heavenly world, in company with the devas of the heaven of the Thirty-three. There he outshines the other devas both in beauty & in rank." — *Ud 5:3*

> "Monks, the clansman Pukkusāti was wise. He practiced the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma and did not pester me with issues related to the Dhamma. With the destruction of the five lower fetters, he has arisen spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world." — *MN 140*

It's also the case that the Buddha had no qualms about describing how beings get reborn in general. When, in SN 44:9, Vacchagotta asks him, "And at the moment when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, what do you designate as its sustenance then?" the Buddha didn't say that there was no being. He answered categorically, "Vaccha, when a being sets this body aside and is not yet reborn in another body, I designate it as craving-sustained, for craving is its sustenance at that time."

These passages indicate that the Buddha refused to describe Tathāgatas after death because of something that sets them apart from beings who are not fully awakened. And SN 44:9 tells us clearly what that is: They're without clinging, whereas beings are not. Why this would make Tathāgatas indescribable—and why all four members of the tetralemma thus don't apply to them—is related to the Buddha's discussions of how beings are defined.

> As he was sitting there Ven. Rādha said to the Blessed One: "'A being,' lord. 'A being,' it's said. To what extent is there said to be 'a being'?"
>
> "Attached to *[satta]*, caught up in *[visatta]* any desire, passion, delight, or craving for form, Rādha: 'A being *[satta],*' it is said.
>
> "Attached to, caught up in any desire, passion, delight, or craving for feeling… perception… fabrications…
>
> "Attached to, caught up in any desire, passion, delight, or craving for consciousness: 'A being,' it is said." — *SN 23:2*

The way the Buddha plays with the meanings of *"satta"* in this passage doesn't mean that he's "only" playing with words here. We have to remember that wordplay, in the context of his culture, was often used for very earnest purposes, to make one's teachings memorable. And the importance of the point he's making here is underscored by the fact that he

makes essentially the same point again in another sutta, this time without recourse to wordplay:

> "If one stays obsessed with form, monk, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.
>
> "If one stays obsessed with feeling.…
>
> "If one stays obsessed with perception.…
>
> "If one stays obsessed with fabrications.…
>
> "If one stays obsessed with consciousness, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.
>
> "But if one doesn't stay obsessed with form, monk, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified.
>
> "If one doesn't stay obsessed with feeling.…
>
> "If one doesn't stay obsessed with perception.…
>
> "If one doesn't stay obsessed with fabrications.…
>
> "If one doesn't stay obsessed with consciousness, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified." — *SN 22:36*

In other words, beings are defined by their clingings and attachments. When they let go of all their clingings and attachments, there's nothing by which they can be defined. When you can't define them, you can't describe them. After all, to describe something, you first have to pinpoint exactly what it is. It's for this reason that Buddhas and arahants, after death, can't be described by any of the four positions of the tetralemma, or by any other position at all, because they can't be defined as beings—or as anything else.

The Canon itself makes this connection in the reasons it gives for why the Buddha and his disciples would not take any of the four positions of the tetralemma. These reasons fall into two types—*formal* and *strategic*. The formal reasons are related to the basic rules of discussion: in this case, the rule that if you want to discuss whether something exists, you first have to define what it is you're talking about. The strategic reasons are related to

the actual impact the act of asking and answering a given question would have on the mind and, in particular, whether it would be helpful in putting an end to suffering and stress or actually get in the way.

The suttas' formal reasons for rejecting the tetralemma are based on the fact that, given that you can't measure or define the Tathāgata, it's not legitimate to describe him as existing, not existing, both, or neither after death.

> *Sister Khemā:* "What do you think, great king? Do you have an accountant or calculator or mathematician who can count the grains of sand in the river Ganges as 'so many grains of sand' or 'so many hundreds of grains of sand' or 'so many thousands of grains of sand' or 'so many hundreds of thousands of grains of sand'?"
>
> *King Pasenadi:* "No, lady."
>
> "Then do you have an accountant or calculator or mathematician who can count the water in the great ocean as 'so many buckets of water' or 'so many hundreds of buckets of water' or 'so many thousands of buckets of water' or 'so many hundreds of thousands of buckets of water'?"
>
> "No, lady. Why is that? The great ocean is deep, boundless, hard to fathom."
>
> "Even so, great king, any form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form… feeling… perception… fabrications… consciousness, great king, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the great ocean. 'The Tathāgata exists after death' doesn't apply. 'The Tathāgata doesn't exist after death' doesn't apply. 'The Tathāgata both exists and doesn't exist after death' doesn't apply. 'The Tathāgata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death' doesn't apply."
> — *SN 44:1*

> "In the same way, Vaccha, any form by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its

root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

"[Similarly with feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness.]" — *MN 72*

In fact, as SN 22:86 makes clear, fully awakened beings can't be defined even in this lifetime, even though they're obviously functioning and interacting with the world.

"What do you think, Anurādha? Do you regard form as the Tathāgata?"

"No, lord."

"Do you regard feeling as the Tathāgata?"

"No, lord."

"Do you regard perception as the Tathāgata?"

"No, lord."

"Do you regard fabrications as the Tathāgata?"

"No, lord."

"Do you regard consciousness as the Tathāgata?"

"No, lord."

"What do you think, Anurādha? Do you regard the Tathāgata as being in form? … Elsewhere than form? … In feeling? … Elsewhere than feeling? … In perception? … Elsewhere than perception? … In fabrications? … Elsewhere than fabrications? … In consciousness? … Elsewhere than consciousness?"

"No, lord."

"What do you think, Anurādha? Do you regard the Tathāgata as form-feeling-perception-fabrications-consciousness?"

"No, lord."

"Do you regard the Tathāgata as that which is without form, without feeling, without perception, without fabrications, without consciousness?"

"No, lord."

"And so, Anurādha—the Tathāgata not being pinned down by you as a truth or reality even in the present life—is it proper for you to declare, 'Friends, the Tathāgata—the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the superlative attainment—being described, is described otherwise than with these four positions: The Tathāgata exists after death, doesn't exist after death, both does & doesn't exist after death, neither exists nor doesn't exist after death'?"

"No, lord."

"Very good, Anurādha. Very good. Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress." — *SN 22:86*

The verb I have translated here as "not being pinned down"—*anupalabbhiyamāno*—can also be translated as "not apprehended" or "not ascertained." The preceding series of questions, in which Anurādha has been unable to define precisely what a Tathāgata is, even though he's conversing with one, suggests the translation I've adopted in this case. But however you translate the verb, the context provided by SN 23:2 and SN 22:36 makes clear that the sentence as a whole means that because the Tathāgata, devoid of clinging, can't be measured or defined even in this lifetime, there's no way that you can legitimately describe him after death in any of the terms of the tetralemma—or in any other way at all.

As for the suttas' *strategic* reasons for why the Buddha and his disciples wouldn't take any of the four positions, these fall into two subsets. The first subset states that the attempt to answer the question of whether the Tathāgata exists after death isn't relevant to the practice leading to the end of suffering, and actually can get in the way by entangling you in a snare of views.

"'A Tathāgata exists after death' I have taught & declared to be a not categorical teaching. 'A Tathāgata doesn't exist after death' … 'A Tathāgata both exists & doesn't exist after death' … 'A Tathāgata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death' I have taught & declared to be a not categorical teaching. And why have I taught & declared these teachings to be not categorical? Because they are not conducive

to the goal, are not conducive to the Dhamma, are not basic to the holy life. They don't lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding." — *DN 9*

"Vaccha, the position that 'The Tathāgata exists after death' … 'The Tathāgata doesn't exist after death' … ' The Tathāgata both exists & doesn't exist after death' … 'The Tathāgata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death' is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, & fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation; to calm, direct knowledge, self-awakening, unbinding." — *MN 72*

The second subset of strategic reasons derives from the fact that the desire to take any of these four positions is inspired by unskillful states of mind. To answer the questions would be to encourage these unskillful states, and thus get in the way of awakening. For instance:

"'The Tathāgata exists after death'—this craving-standpoint, this perception-standpoint, this product of conceiving, this product of elaboration, this clinging-standpoint: That's anguish. 'The Tathāgata doesn't exist after death': That's anguish. 'The Tathāgata both exists & doesn't exist after death': That's anguish. 'The Tathāgata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death': That's anguish.

"The uninstructed run-of-the-mill person doesn't discern anguish, doesn't discern the origination of anguish, doesn't discern the cessation of anguish, doesn't discern the path of practice leading to the cessation of anguish, and so for him that anguish grows. He is not freed from birth, aging, & death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress." — *AN 7:51*

"For one whose passion for form has not been removed, whose desire… affection… thirst… fever… craving for form has not been removed, there occurs the thought, 'The Tathāgata exists after death,' or 'The Tathāgata doesn't exist after death' or 'The Tathāgata both

exists & doesn't exist after death' or 'The Tathāgata neither exists nor doesn't exist after death'

"[Similarly with the other four aggregates.]" — *SN 44:5*

It's because of these formal and strategic reasons that, if we're serious about getting the most out of the Buddha's teachings, we should try to avoid taking any position on what a fully awakened person is—before or after death—and instead to follow the example of the suttas. This means two things.

First, we can gain motivation in the practice from its similes for why such persons are indescribable. They're hard to measure like the ocean, and they're freed from location like a fire released from its clinging/sustenance *(upādana)*.

"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 if 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 & timber as its sustenance *[upādāna].*'"

"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 if 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, Master Gotama. Any fire burning dependent on a sustenance of grass & timber, being unnourished—from having consumed that sustenance and not being offered any other—is classified simply as 'out' [unbound]."

"In the same way, Vaccha, any form by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the

conditions of development, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.

"[Similarly with feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness.]" — *MN 72*

*Gone to the beyond of becoming,*
*you let go of in front,*
*let go of behind,*
*let go of between.*
*With a heart everywhere released,*
*you don't come again to birth*
*& aging.* — *Dhp 348*

*Sister Subhā:*

*I—unimpassioned, unblemished,*
*with a mind everywhere released…*
*Knowing the unattractiveness*
*of fabricated things,*
*my heart adheres nowhere at all.* — *Thig 14*

*Ven. Revata (right before passing away):*

*So then, I'm about to*
*unbind.*
*I'm released*
*everywhere.* — *Thag 14:1*

*Ven. Anuruddha (on the Buddha's passing away):*

*Like a flame's unbinding*
*was the liberation*
*of awareness.* — *DN 16*

(*Cetas,* the word translated as "awareness" in this last verse, can also be translated as "mind.")

Second, we should focus not on what such persons *are*, but on the example provided by what they've *done*. This, after all, is the most important thing to know about them, so that we can get an idea of what we have to do to join their ranks.

> "[A]rahants, whose effluents are ended, who have reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden, attained the true goal, laid to waste the fetter of becoming, and who are released through right gnosis." — *MN 118*

> *Vacchagotta:* "'This contemplative Gotama… describes a disciple who has died and passed on in terms of places of rebirth: "That one is reborn there; that one is reborn there." But when the disciple is an ultimate person, a foremost person, attained to the foremost attainment, the contemplative Gotama doesn't describe him, when he has died and passed on, in terms of places of rebirth: "That one is reborn there; that one is reborn there." Instead, he describes him thus: "He has cut through craving, severed the fetter, and by rightly breaking through conceit has made an end of suffering & stress."'" — *SN 44:9*

# *Glossary*

*Abhidhamma:* (1) In the discourses of the Pali Canon, this term simply means "higher Dhamma," a systematic attempt to define the Buddha's teachings and understand their interrelationships. (2) A later collection of treatises collating lists of categories drawn from the teachings in the discourses, added to the Canon several centuries after the Buddha's life.

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

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

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

*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 terrestrial or celestial realms higher than the human.

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

*Gotama: The Buddha's clan name. Sanskrit form: Gautama.*

*Jhāna:* Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration, devoid of sensuality or unskillful thoughts, focused on a single physical sensation or mental notion which is then expanded to fill the whole range of one's

awareness. Jhāna is synonymous with right concentration, the eighth factor in the noble eightfold path. Sanskrit form: *Dhyāna.*

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

*Māra:* The personification of temptation and all forces, within and without, that create obstacles to release from the round of rebirth.

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

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

*Saṅkhāra:* Fabrication. The process by which the mind constructs its experiences, and the constructed experiences that result.

*Sutta:* Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra.*

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

*Vinaya:* The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text.

# *Abbreviations*

## *Pāli Texts*

| | |
|---|---|
| *AN* | *Aṅguttara Nikāya* |
| *Dhp* | *Dhammapada* |
| *DN* | *Dīgha Nikāya* |
| *Iti* | *Itivuttaka* |
| *Khp* | *Khuddakapāṭha* |
| *MN* | *Majjhima Nikāya* |
| *Mv* | *Mahāvagga* |
| *SN* | *Saṁyutta Nikāya* |
| *Sn* | *Sutta Nipāta* |
| *Thag* | *Theragāthā* |
| *Thig* | *Therīgāthā* |
| *Ud* | *Udāna* |

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

## *Upaniṣads*

| | |
|---|---|
| *BAU* | *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* |
| *ChU* | *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* |
| *MaiU* | *Maitrī Upaniṣad* |

*TU* *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*

*Citations and translations are based on the English and Sanskrit text in S. Radhakrishnan, The Principal Upaniṣads. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969.*

# Table of Contents